

“Miracle Man”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
February 8, 2015

Mark 1: 29-39

On Tuesday, I witnessed a miracle. Or at least what many people would consider a miracle. One of the definitions I found for “miracle” is “a wonder or wonderful thing; such an event considered as a work of God” (Webster’s Unabridged Dictionary, © 1983). Based on that definition, I would say this counted as a miracle.

On Tuesday, I went to visit Jerry and Mary Carter. It had been about ten days since I had last seen them at home, and each time I have visited, Jerry has shown progress since the previous visit. However, each time I would go, Jerry would either be sitting in his recliner chair or in a wheelchair. Many times, it was a visit sandwiched in between one of the many therapists who visit, as they come regularly to work with him and his physical strengthening in many different ways.

Anyway, I knocked at the door, and Mary quickly came to let me in, saying, “You came just in time.” When I entered the foyer, I saw Jerry standing up with the help of a walker, and then the miracle occurred. Jerry took four to five steps forward for the first time in eight months. With the help of his therapist, he started the process of his legs communicating with his brain, and then being reassured that his body was handling this new activity without any adverse effects. After I left that afternoon, Mary shared in an email that Jerry repeated his walking two or three more times that afternoon.

To witness a man take his first steps – after enduring an 18-hour cardiac surgery; after spending almost three months in the intensive care unit; after surviving a second surgery to remove his colon due to infection; after being in a hospital or rehabilitation facility for over seven months – to witness that event was truly an event I considered a work of God. Whether you call it a miracle or not, it clearly was my reminder that God is very present and very real in my life, and it most certainly brought tears running down my cheeks that day.

Jesus’ identity is often tied directly to miracles. In the gospels, miracles are described as events that defy human explanation, and are definitely considered works of God. In our modern world, we will usually label an event as a miracle when we cannot explain it logically or scientifically. Or, we will ask God for a miracle, which will solve a specific problem we feel we have no control over, such as an illness, an economic crisis, or something else. And yet, as we will see in this passage from Mark, the miracle man we see in Jesus is not just about healing. The miracle occurs when we encounter face-to-face the one

God has sent to proclaim his message of grace, healing, and redemption.

Today's story from Mark follows on the heels of last week's story, when Jesus heals the man of the unclean spirit. In fact, the events described here are occurring during the same day as last week's story; we read, "As soon as they left the synagogue," referring to the place where Jesus had just taught and then healed the man. So, after being present with the people in worship and providing healing, Jesus now enters the home of two of his disciples, Simon and Andrew, with James and John joining the party, as well.

The space in which this healing takes place is significant. We have progressed from a space of worship – the synagogue – to a space of family and friends – the home. We have gone from a public space to a private space, where relationships are closer, more intimate, and very personal. Not only that, but for those early-Christians who would have been reading Mark's Gospel, they would have likely been doing so in home-church settings, the most common form of early-Christian gatherings. To hear their Savior offering healing and wholeness in a similar setting as theirs would have most certainly been encouraging and inspiring for those first-century Christians.

In comparison to the healing in the synagogue, this is a more personal concern: it is one of his disciple's relatives who is gravely ill. "Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told (Jesus) about her at once" (1:30). Jesus doesn't just say, "Be healed." He reaches out, takes her by the hand, "and lifted her up." The verb in Greek that is translated "lifted up" is the same verb used by Mark in describing Jesus' resurrection in chapter 16, when the angel announces "Jesus has been raised" (16:9). This healing occurs through Jesus' touch of the sick woman, and she is relieved of her ailment.

Did you notice how Simon's mother-in-law responds to this miracle? "Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them" (1:31). Her response to being restored to wholeness by God's love is to serve. In one commentator's words: This woman gets up and turns the Sabbath into a paschal day of service to others. Jesus does not command her. She is the one that assumes the initiative and awaits the consequences, discovering the value of mutual service above the sacredness of the Sabbath. Simon's mother-in-law interprets the gift that she has received; her service cannot be understood as a woman's menial work under the dominion of lazy males, but as a true messianic ministry, creator of Jesus' new family. (Ofelia Ortega, *Feasting on the Word, Year B*, Volume 1, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2008: 334).

But now, after the healing in the synagogue and the healing of Simon's mother-in-law, the word is out. Once the Sabbath is over at sundown, everyone starts looking for this miracle man. "They brought to (Jesus) all who were sick or possessed with demons. And the whole

city was gathered around the door.” How would you like to be Simon or Andrew and have “the whole city” inside and surrounding your house? What a scene that must have been for all who were present. What must have been going through the minds of Simon, Andrew, James and John? How would any of us have responded?

There is no question about how Jesus responded. “And he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons; and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him” (1:34). Jesus was not overwhelmed by the crowds. Jesus was not annoyed with the inconvenience. Jesus simply acted with the compassion and love and care that embodied his very being, and cured all who were broken, so that they would be made whole.

The final scene of this miracle story is one that many of us can relate to. I can see Jesus sneaking out while everyone is sound asleep, before the sun rises on a new day, in order to find “a deserted place, and there he prayed” (1:35). After all that had transpired in the previous 24 hours, after all that he had done to teach and heal and love the children of God, Jesus needed to reconnect with his Father. He sought renewal, strength, and guidance, and so he went by himself and prayed.

Of course, it is Jesus’ disciples who bring to an end Jesus’ time of solitude. Like children anxiously wondering how to behave, “Simon and his companions hunted for (Jesus),” and “when they found him, they said to him, ‘Everyone is searching for you’” (1:37). In other words, “Where did you go? Why did you leave us with all these people? Fix it!”

Instead of admonishing them, Jesus speaks with compassion – both for the crowds and for his disciples. “He answered, ‘Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do’” (1:38). In that statement, Jesus’ mission is clear. He did not come to remain in one place – in a synagogue or a house – but to go to where the people are – “to the neighboring towns.” His healing of the sick or possessed is not distinct or separate from his teaching and preaching God’s Word to the masses. Jesus went – he did not stand still. And his preaching and teaching went hand-in-hand with his ability to restore wholeness to the broken all around him.

There are times when we are broken, and we seek God’s wholeness. Our bodies may be broken, and we are frustrated that we cannot do what we once did. Our minds may be broken, ravaged by worry and disease. Our hearts may be broken, wounded by personal attacks or betrayed by people we trusted. It is tempting in those moments to ask God to fix everything, and in saying that we expect miracles. It is tempting in those moments to look at the world only through the lens of human sight, rather than trusting in the sight of our Creator.

Miracles do not occur according to our expectations; they occur according to God's expectations. If we are only looking for miracles to take away all of our problems, then we will likely miss our Lord literally walking in our midst, lifting us up, and showing us what God's love is truly about. Jesus is not just a miracle man; Jesus is the man who God sent to proclaim a message that teaches, restores, and inspires all of us to witness God's presence in our midst.

In that vein, I witnessed another miracle on Thursday. Most people would not label it as a miracle, not when miracles are defined as "take away all our problems, God." No, this miracle was most definitely "a wonder or wonderful work, an event considered a work of God."

I witnessed a family facing a sudden death with honesty, emotion, and faith. I witnessed individuals grieving the death of a husband, father, son, and friend in real ways. They did not put on an act, seeking to keep up appearances for others, which would only bury deeper their anguish and pain. They spoke with love, joy, hurt, and sadness for their loved one who died unexpectedly, yet they took solace in the fact that he was no longer in pain.

It was truly holy ground to walk with Kit Swigart and her family on Thursday with the sudden death of her husband, Darryl. It was holy ground because God was present – in the words that were spoken, through the tears that were shed, in the embraces that were shared. It was holy ground because faith was reaffirmed, "that nothing in life or in death can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:39).

May we witness God's miracles in our midst, seeing Christ's wonderful works truly transforming the world in which we live. Thanks be to God. Amen.