

# “Do You Believe in Miracles?”

Mark 1:40-46

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Do you remember, and I can tell by looking at most of you that you are old enough to remember, when the U.S. Hockey team played the Soviet Union in the Olympics? It is now, hard to believe, almost 30 years ago, in 1980. It was an upset, the USA won that game. As the final seconds ticked down in that game, do you remember what Al Michaels, the announcer, said at the end of the game? It is today's sermon title. “Do you believe in miracles?”

Our scripture today is a miracle story, the third healing story in the first Chapter of Mark. The healing of the leper is surely not as spectacular as the healing of blind Bartimaeus, not as impressive as Jesus calming the storm. I think for people in Oklahoma, that scripture should be one of our favorites. Can you imagine a storm, the kind we had in Oklahoma this past week, and in the midst of that storm Jesus coming and calming that storm? That's quite a story.

The healing of the leper is not as impressive as the raising of Lazarus. I wonder, though, if you were to ask the leper or his family how important it was to them what they might say. If it were your family member, you would be separated from them because lepers were forced to live together in leper colonies outside the city limits. If you were a leper you would know that anytime you were out in public and you met another person walking down the road, before you got close to them the law said you had shout out, “Unclean, unclean,” so that the person would be warned that you were coming.

In preparation for the sermon, I came across some interesting information that I had not known before about leprosy. There were two kinds of leprosy in those days.

The first kind of leprosy was known as *nodular* or *tubercular* leprosy. It began with an unaccountable lethargy and pain in the joints. Then there appeared on the body, especially on the back, symmetrical discolored patches. On them little nodules formed, at first pink, then turning brown. The skin was thickened. The nodules gathered especially in the folds of the cheek, the nose, the lips and the forehead. The whole appearance of the face was

changed until the patient lost his human appearance and looked like some kind of monster. The nodules grew larger and larger; they ulcerated and from them came a foul discharge. The eyebrows fell out; the eyes became staring; the voice became hoarse and the breath wheezing because of the ulceration of the vocal chords. The hands and the feet also ulcerated. Slowly the sufferer became a mass of ulcerated growths. The average course of the disease was nine years, and it ended in mental decay, coma and ultimately death. The sufferer became utterly repulsive both to himself and to others.

There was another kind of leprosy known as *anaesthetic* leprosy. The initial stage of that disease was the same; but the nerve trunks also were affected. The infected area lost all sensation. It would happen without the sufferer knowing that it had happened and he may not realize it had happened until after he suffered some burning or scalding and discovered there was no feeling whatsoever where pain should have been. As the disease developed, the injury to the nerves caused discolored patches and blisters, the muscles wasted away, the tendons contracted until the hands became like claws. There was disfigurement of the fingernails. There ensued chronic ulceration of the feet and of the hands and then the progressive loss of fingers and of toes, until in the end a whole hand or a whole foot might drop off. The duration of that disease was from 20 to 30 years.

William Barclay

If you asked this leper how important this healing was to him, what do you think he might say? There are different kinds of miracles. One definition of the word *miracle* is “an unusual event or occurrence.” That would describe what happened in 1980 when our hockey team won.

Another definition of a *miracle* is “a divinely natural phenomenon.” How many times have you heard someone say when they saw a newborn baby, “That’s a miracle.” Well, not really. That’s what nature does. It was a little baby, but we would call that a divinely natural phenomenon, the way we would see something in nature like the Rocky

Mountains, Niagara Falls or seeing the ocean for the first time. Something that is natural, but we would believe it was divinely created.

There is another category of a *miracle*; what is known as divine intervention in human affairs, the kind of miracle that happens in our scripture today. I want you to hear this caution. Be careful in attributing some kind of miracle to God that God might or might not have done. Think what happened a couple of weeks ago. A plane is taking off from an airport and it runs into some geese. The pilot loses power in both engines yet somehow glides the plane down on a river and everyone survives. What did we call it? The Miracle on the Hudson. We didn't call it the "Coincidence on the Hudson." Think how you would have felt if you had a family member on that plane. Did you hear some of the stories from the survivors about how they felt? They believed they had been given a second chance at life.

Before we attribute that as a miracle from God, think about what happened this past week with Flight 3407 that crashed in Buffalo. If God saved one plane, why didn't God save the second plane? If you have a loved one on Flight 3407, where was God for you and your loved one?

Now hear this, having faith does not mean having all the answers. There are several ordained ministers here this morning and I know they would tell you that nowhere in the Bible does it say if you have faith you have to have all of the answers and be able to explain everything that happens. In fact, faith is just the opposite. Faith is living without all the answers and still trusting God. Also, know this, if every once in a while when it seems everyone else believes a miracle has happened, you're a little skeptical, you have some doubts, don't be too hard on yourself. It doesn't mean you are a bad person. It doesn't mean your faith is weak. It doesn't mean you have some kind of character flaw. It doesn't mean you have lost all respect. Remember the comedian, Rodney Dangerfield, whom no one respected? Rodney Dangerfield was feeling bad one time. He went to see his doctor, the doctor asked Dangerfield what was wrong and Dangerfield said "I'm feeling bad. Every time I look in the mirror I throw up." The doctor said, "Look at it this way; your eyesight is perfect!"

Look at it this way; if you're a person of faith, just being a person of faith means that there is at least some room for a miracle in

your life. Just being a Christian means you believe in the miracle of God sending Christ to the world, of Christ living the life that Christ lived, of Christ going to the cross and dying, then living again.

As a community of faith, we're called not only to believe in miracles but to share miracles and in some sense be a miracle to others. Sadly, how often in the church we have offered just the opposite. Instead of compassion, we have often offered condemnation. Instead of encouragement we have offered discouragement by saying, "You should be ashamed by the kind of person you are." Instead of offering healing, we have offered hurt as we have been judgmental and negative."

The first step in being open to the possibility of miracles is to recognize the need in your own life for some kind of healing. I know every Sunday morning there is some person here who is in need of some kind of healing; physical, emotional, spiritual. Perhaps you have said or done something unkind and you are drowning in guilt.

Even better news, however, we are called through the living of our faith to share the miracle we have received. A man by the name of Peter Gomes is the chaplain at Yale University. Gomes has said, "You are not just witnesses of what God does. You *are* what God does. Think about this. This past week we came to the Chapel to honor the memory of Lois Newland. How many of you received some kind of card or phone call of encouragement from Lois Newland? What was she doing? Offering healing.

Beverly is offering healing to children. If Beverly asks you to help with that ministry, you have an opportunity to be a healer. Carol oversees outreach ministries that make the difference between life and death for some persons. When Carol asks for your help, you have an opportunity to become involved in a healing ministry. Jeremy is doing important things with young people, young people who are facing difficult challenges in their lives. When Jeremy asks for your help, you have an opportunity to become a healer.

In a few weeks we will begin the "Unbinding the Gospel" project as we learn how to witness and share our faith in new ways. If you will do that, you can become a healer.

Earlier, I said as a person of faith you might want to consider the possibility of believing in miracles. Let me give you this reason: you are a miracle. As you sit here this morning, no one has to say, "Lungs, I'm

running a little short on breath. Start breathing more.” Our lungs just do that. If you are feeling tired, you don’t have to say, “Heart, I need you to beat just a little faster.” If you ate the worse kind of junk food last night and you have an upset stomach today, you don’t have to say, “Guts, I need you to digest this.” It just does that for you.

This past week I saw a living miracle. I went to the hospital to visit Benjamin Hayes Hixon, Philip and Stacie Hixon’s little baby. I brought something with me to try and show you what a miracle it was. This is one of those neat screwdrivers where if you have a plastic pocket protector in your pocket for your ink pens; it has a clip on it so you can put it in there with all your ink pens. It’s from a place called Dawson Tire Company. It says, “You’re miles ahead with a Dawson retread.”

The reason I brought this is because perhaps you can see the handle. I don’t even know if you are able to see how little the shaft of that screwdriver is, this is about the size of Benjamin Hayes Hixon’s tiny fingers. As I looked at those hands, eight fingers, two thumbs, perfectly formed, and saw proud papa, Philip Hixon, I could hardly catch my breath as I realized, “I’m looking at a miracle.” Now if you doubt that, I wouldn’t say anything about those doubts to Philip Hixon. He might punch you in the mouth.

Let me ask you this, when does that baby stop being a miracle? How many times do you suppose everyone here has said, when seeing a newborn baby, “That is a miracle! That’s a miracle from God!” When does that baby stop being a miracle? Will it be one day when Philip and Stacie are changing a diaper for the 10<sup>th</sup> or 12<sup>th</sup> time? Will it be during the “terrible twos” when that baby causes them all kinds of grief? Will it be in grade school, middle school, or junior high school during adolescence? When will that baby stop being a miracle? Remember, we’ve all said, “It’s a miracle!” But when does it stop, because it does seem to stop.

In your own family when does your spouse stop being a miracle? Your children? Your parents? When did *you* stop being a miracle? When you were born, I promise you that someone said, “It’s a miracle.” When did you stop being a miracle? Maybe if you can’t believe in miracles, it means more than that you can’t believe in God, your spouse, your children, or your parents. It might mean that you just can’t believe in yourself.

This morning the Good News of the Gospel is this, you are a

miracle. . . a one-of-a-kind, only one in the world miracle from God, created to be an instrument of God's healing grace. There is no better time than today, this moment, to begin sharing that grace.

Amen