

God, Faith and Miracles

Mark 5:21-43

**A Sermon Preached by
Pastor Rob Fulton**

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Now, I don't know how it is with you, but I can't help but WONDER whether the miracle stories in the Bible don't do more HARM than GOOD. Oh, there are some SPECTACULAR miracle stories in the Bible...that's for sure. Whether it's the parting of the Red Sea or Jesus calming a storm on the Sea of Galilee...whether it's God sending manna from heaven or Jesus feeding the 5,000 with just five loaves and two fishes...whether it's the miraculous healings of the Old Testament or the miraculous healings of the New Testament – the miracles of the Bible remind us that there is a force at work in the world that is beyond anything we can even DARE to imagine. Whether it's Jesus raising Jairus' little daughter from her death bed...or calling forth Lazarus from the tomb...every miracle in the Bible is like a hole poked in the fabric of our earthly life – a sign...evidence...PROOF POSITIVE, if you will...that the Kingdom of God is breaking in around us...that the way things ARE is not always the way things WILL BE...that for one brief, shining moment, the Kingdom of God is here and we get to see how things really are in the mind and heart of God where there IS no more chaos...no more hunger...no more disease and sickness...no more death...and no more sorrow...for those former things have all passed away. That's what the Gospel of Mark...and the other Gospels as well...want us to know when they tell us time and time again about Jesus making the lame to walk...the blind to see...feeding the hungry masses and calming the raging sea. They want us to see and understand the POWER that is at hand in this one named Jesus, the Christ...the who came not only to PROCLAIM that the Kingdom of God was at hand...but came to be the very one in whom the Kingdom of God FINDS FULLFILLMENT.

But the PROBLEM with all those miracle stories, it seems to me, is that it's so awfully hard to WITNESS them without WANTING one of your own. All of us know someone who is suffering...someone who is hurting...someone who's hungry...someone who is looking death squarely in the face...someone who is being tossed about by the storms of life. Maybe that someone is some ELSE...or maybe it is the someone within ourselves. But in any case, ALL of us know SOMEONE who could use a miracle. But then, miracles aren't always so easy to come by, now are they? Oh, we tend to THINK they are...ESPECIALLY after reading the Gospels where it seems that Jesus is doing miracles all over the place...every time you turn around.

But Jesus isn't HERE anymore...at least not physically, anyway...and neither are his MIRACLES. Sometimes they're as scarce as hen's teeth. I often here people say that God worked a miracle in saving someone's life after a car accident...or in a miraculous healing after surgery. But where was the miracle Becky DeLair prayed for when her husband Ed had a massive heart attack this past Wednesday morning and despite her best attempts, she couldn't revive him? And where was the miracle when instead of being saved in the car accident, the 17 year old girl was killed because her boyfriend was driving too fast and couldn't make it around the bend in the road and smashed into a massive oak tree that still has the scars of that tragic non-miracle. Where was the miracle THEN? Did THOSE people not pray for one? Not everyone who PRAYS for a miracle GETS a miracle, now DO they? And meanwhile, there are people who GET them without seeming to ask for them at all.

And that's part of the PROBLEM with miracles, you see! We religious people can't STAND this apparent randomness. So we spend a great deal of time trying to figure out the formula for GETTING a miracle. Surely there's a FORMULA, isn't there?!?! Two parts prayer...three parts faith...one part good works. We comb the miracle stories in the Bible to find out who did what right and who did what wrong

so that we can learn from them...and there by DUPLICATE...their experience. We imitate their virtues and avoid their faults in hopes of becoming irresistible to God so that we can get our OWN miracle.

Only, most times, that's pretty hard to do, because God rarely does things the same way twice. Take this fifth chapter of Mark, which we read earlier, for instance. There we get two DIFFERENT miracles of healing layered together...like a sandwich. First the story of the raising of Jairus' daughter from the dead – one of three resurrections stories we read about in the gospels...not counting Jesus' own. (Jairus' daughter, the widow of Nain's son, and Lazarus) It's the BREAD, if you will, of the larger sandwich Mark has prepared for us. The inside of the sandwich is the story of the woman who has bled for twelve years...until, that is, she touches the hem of Jesus' garment and is healed...MIRACULOUSLY healed.

Now, as he typically does, Mark inserts that second story inside the first for a reason...because bleeding women and dead little girls have something in common. They were both TABOO in Jewish society. They were both RITUALLY UNCLEAN. And by having anything to do with either one, Jesus made HIMSELF unclean as well. Which was no sin, in and of itself, you see, since women can't have babies, no one can care for the sick, and people can't bury the dead without becoming "unclean." Only Jesus wasn't a midwife, a nurse, or an undertaker. He was a HOLY MAN...a TEACHER of the Law...who was expected to steer clear of such defilement. And if it happened to him by mistake...through no fault of his own...as it did the moment the bleeding woman touched him...then, according to the law, he should have gone off to purify himself. Until he did, however, he was unclean...and therefore unfit for holy duty...or so the religious law of the Pharisees said!

But Jesus DIDN'T go off and purify himself. He simply sent the healed woman on her way and turned back to continue following Jairus home again – causing quite a scandal, I'm sure, when he stepped inside Jairus' house. Jairus was, after all, a LEADER of the synagogue...a respected ELDER in the community whose obedience to the law would have been BEYOND QUESTION. So for someone like Jairus to seek help from someone like Jesus would have been like Drs. Scott or Linda Costin driving right past Mary Rutan Hospital to go see the herb doctor who operates out of his garage out on Road 274 somewhere out past Rushsylvania.

So this is not just a story about Jesus or even about the little girl he raised from the dead. It is also and ESPECIALLY about Jairus, who broke every rule he knew in order to save his daughter's life. That's how DESPERATE he was. Can you imagine what it must have been like for him, a synagogue leader, to fall at Jesus' feet and BEG him for help in front of all those people? And then, for him to lead Jesus through the crowd, only to be stopped short by the woman with the flow of blood – whose condition was NOT life-threatening, after all (she'd had the condition for more than a dozen years) all the while Jairus knowing that his own child's life was quickly slipping away. And then, after all that, to be told that it was too late...that the child was already dead and there was no reason to trouble Jesus anymore? Can you IMAGINE what that would have been like for Jairus?

This is as bad as it gets...for a parent, that is. You beg on your knees for a miracle and it comes too late. You muster your courage...swallow your pride...and grab at one last straw...one last shred of hope...only to see it blow away in the fickle winds of fate. The darkness begins to close in on you and just before the sun is blotted out for good, you hear a voice...a voice which says: *"Do not fear; only believe."* But it sounds like a formula, doesn't it? If you will just BELIEVE hard enough, your prayers will be answered. If you just have FAITH enough, things will turn out all right. That's how it worked for Jairus, RIGHT? His daughter WAS saved. The Kingdom of God broke through right there in her bedroom and, though Mark doesn't say so, I'd be willing to bet a choir of heavenly angels sang *"Amen!"* in seven-part harmony!

But it just doesn't happen that way every time, now does it? You know it and I know it. No matter HOW hard we pray sometimes...no matter HOW much faith we have...no matter HOW desperately we plead...no matter how many bargains we try and make with God – sometimes, indeed OFTENTIMES the miracle simply doesn't happen. I KNOW! I've BEEN there! With my own FAMILY! As my mother lay DYING! I've PRAYED the prayers! I've DONE the begging! I've HAD the faith! I've BELIEVED! And I bet YOU have too! And STILL the miracle hasn't come. And STILL the miracle hasn't come. And one of the MEANEST, CRUELEST things religious people do is to BLAME that absence of a miracle on a lack of faith...as if it is something WE control.

I think I've probably told you about my friend Laurie, from Seminary days, before. Maybe I've told you about her a bunch of time. I don't know! The older I get the harder it is to remember what stories I've told you...or even which stories are true and which ones I make up. But Laurie's story is true. Laurie was a classmate of mine during Seminary and Laurie had Cerebral Palsy...caused by a lack of oxygen when she and her twin sister were born. Her sister was fine, but Laurie was not. Her facial features were distorted and her back was deformed and she walked humped over, leaning on her ever-present twin canes which she had to have or she'd fall down. But Laurie never let her disability...her OPPORTUNITY, she called it... hold her back.

As a teenager, she'd decided to give her life to God and pursue a career in ministry. So with a strong sense of faith and dedication, she'd gone to college where, quite naturally, she got involved with other "religious-minded" students, who, she later discovered, were very active in a ministry of "faith healing." And they made Laurie their "project." When they came to her and announced that they wanted to heal her crippled legs so she could walk again, she was, quite naturally, skeptical. Her religious faith had never taken her in that direction. Yet, the more they talked and prayed and read scripture, the more she became convinced they could indeed heal her. The group conducted prayer service after prayer service over her. They anointed her with oil time and time again. They called on the mighty name of Jesus over and over and over again to heal their sister Laurie. But alas! All efforts failed. And then, suddenly and abruptly, they rejected her...announcing to her that she hadn't been healed because her faith wasn't "strong enough"...that she hadn't been healed because she hadn't "believed enough." It was, in effect, HER fault that her curved spine and crippled legs were not healed.

Well, by this time, Laurie had become so brainwashed that she actually began to BELIEVE what they were telling her. She began to doubt her own faith...question what she believed...question God...even question her commitment to dedicate her life to ministry. She became bitter, angrily challenging God as to WHY she had been so afflicted...WHY God was punishing her...WHY God refused to hear her. In her own words, she came very close to not only giving up on God...but giving up on herself and on life as well. She didn't of course, but the whole experience made Laurie's life a "living hell" before she eventually found her way out of darkness and back into the light of Christ once again.

Now, it might surprise you to hear me say it, but, if I'm going to be honest with you, I've got to tell you that I believe those "faith healers" that Laurie got mixed up with were, in truth, well-intentioned people. But I also believe they got themselves caught up in what I believe is the whole PROBLEM with miracles. And that is that we sometimes...OFTENTIMES think they were something WE can control – that by just PRAYING hard enough...saying the right words OFTEN ENOUGH...reading the Bible FAITHFULLY ENOUGH...believing STRONGLY ENOUGH -- WE can control our own miracles...either for ourselves or for someone else on whose behalf we are seeking the miracle. In other words, if we're really STRONG ENOUGH IN OUR FAITH, then we can win the prize of a miracle. And if not, well then, we must not be good enough Christians and we'd best go back and work a little harder at believing.

Only, this is IDOLATRY, don't you know? It's just one more of our pitiful efforts to work things around so that WE are in control of our lives...or so we like to think...instead of owning up to the truth that every single thing ABOUT our lives is a GIFT from God...INCLUDING the miracles that may...or may NOT happen in our lives.

Let me say it as plainly and clearly as I know how: Faith simply does NOT work miracles. GOD works miracles. And in case you didn't hear me well, let me say it again: Faith does NOT work miracles. **GOD**, and God **ALONE** works miracles. To concentrate on the strength of our own faith in order to GET a miracle is to practice little more than magic. But to concentrate on the grace of GOD working in our lives ALWAYS, is to practice faith. And this isn't just a word game we're playing here. This is the difference between believing that our lives are in our OWN hands and believing they are finally and ultimately in GOD'S hands. GOD, not faith, works miracles!

Did Jairus' daughter have faith? I don't think so. She was on her deathbed, after all...on her way out of life. Did JAIROS himself have faith? Well, Mark never says so directly. SOMETHING, of course, lead him to seek out Jesus help. But in any case, the high point of the whole story was NOT when Jesus worked a miracle and raised Jairus' daughter from her death bed. No, the high point of the story came earlier when Jesus said to Jairus, "*Do not fear, only BELIEVE!*" Because if Jairus was able to do THAT, then he would have survived WHATEVER happened next...EVEN if Jesus had walked into his daughter's

room, sighed a sigh of sadness, and solemnly pulled the sheet up over Jairus' dead daughter's face. Jairus' BELIEF would have become the miracle at that point...his willingness to believe that she was STILL in God's good hands, even though she had sadly slipped from his own.

Now, I don't know about you, but whenever I think about miracles and whether they do or don't come when I pray for them, it helps me to remember that Jesus HIMSELF prayed for a miracle on the night before he died. *"All things are possible for you, Father!"* Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane. *"If it be possible, remove this cup of suffering from me."* Only, when he opened his eyes, the cup was still there. So tell me: Did JESUS lack faith? Did Jesus not BELIEVE strongly enough? I don't think so. The miracle was that he DRANK the cup, believing in the power of God more than he believed in his own. It is ALWAYS a miracle, isn't it, when we understand that **GOD** is God and **WE** are NOT!

Of course now, I don't expect that ANY of us to stop praying for miracles. I least I HOPE we won't. The world needs all the miracles it can get. Every time you hear about one, remember that you are getting a sneak preview of the Kingdom of God...which is here, in the MIDST of us...but which has, as of yet, not come in all of its fullness. So CELEBRATE the miracle...and REJOICE! And ESPECIALLY say a heartfelt *"Thank You!"* to God, from whom all blessings flow.

But don't, whatever you do...PLEASE DON'T go getting all worked up if every time you pray for a miracle, the miracle doesn't happen. There is simply NO FORMULA for success where miracles are concerned. Which, in reality, is a real relief for those of us who can't quite seem to muster up miracles upon demand. But then, maybe we can't do it because it's not OUR job. *"Do not fear...only BELIEVE!"* That's OUR job. The rest, as they say, is up to God!

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