

Jesus Performs Miracles
THE STORY, 283-290

Mark 4:35 – 5:20 – Bottom of 283 – top of 286

This is a series of four miracle stories: Jesus stops a storm, Jesus casts demons out of a man, Jesus heals a hemorrhaging woman and Jesus raises a little girl from death. The level of threat that Jesus overcomes increases through the series: The disciples fear that they will die, the demoniac experiences a living death, the hemorrhaging woman is bleeding to death, and Jairus's daughter is dead. The stories fall into two pairs: two miracles that benefit males and two miracles that benefit females. The message throughout is that there is no threat so serious that Jesus's power is not able to overcome it.

There are two odd details at the beginning of the first story: (1) "Leaving the crowd behind, they took him along, just as he was, in the boat." The phrase "just as he was" appears several times in ancient Greek narratives and doesn't seem to mean much of anything. It is sort of a throwaway line similar to "with no further ado." (2) "There were also other boats with him." These other boats get no more than that one sentence. Maybe the intention is to remind the audience that Jesus had more than twelve disciples---more than would fit into a single boat. Marine archaeologists have brought up out of the lake that Mark calls "the sea of Galilee" the remains of a wooden fishing boat from the time of Jesus that held about fifteen people, so if more than fifteen "disciples" were following Jesus then it would take more than one boat.



It is difficult to grasp why a group of experienced fishermen would have been spooked by the sort of windstorm that is very common on the lake, but they are so scared that they wake Jesus up, not to ask him to do anything, but just to rebuke him: "Don't you care if we drown?" Jesus rebukes the wind and waves (the same language "rebuke" is used for dealing with demons) and they stop. Then Jesus asks, "Do you still have no faith?" The answer, of course, is NO! Not

only do they have no faith, but they still can't fathom what's going on with Jesus. While the demons have been shouting, "We know who you are! Holy one of God!" the disciples are scratching their heads and asking each other, "Who's this? What an amazing trick!"

The region of the Gerasenes is Gentile territory on the eastern side of the lake. This story is filled with military allusions: the name "Legion" claimed by the demon(s), the pigs, which not only indicate that somewhere nearby there is a market for a lot of pork (to feed Roman soldiers?) but also allude to the symbol of the Roman Tenth Legion, whose symbol was a wild boar. The Jewish members of Mark's audience would have found it thoroughly appropriate that the unclean spirits would want to go into unclean pigs and that they would force the pigs to "rush" (the term used for charging soldiers) into the lake which was identified in the previous story as haunted by demons. If you can't get rid of the occupying troops, you can at least make jokes at their expense.

Naturally this causes the stock of pork futures to plummet and the residents, who care nothing for the fact that a man has been miraculously delivered, demand that Jesus leave.

In a departure from his usual command to be silent, Jesus tells the former demoniac to "Go home to your own people and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you." Jesus gives the credit for the miracle to God but the man spreads the word about what Jesus had done for him. He knows who Jesus really is --- unlike the disciples.

Jesus crosses back to the Jewish (western) side of the lake and a synagogue leader named Jairus humbles himself and begs Jesus to heal his daughter. Jesus starts out to do it, but on the way a "woman who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years," pushes her way through the crowd and touches Jesus's outer coat. Somehow "she heard about Jesus," which is why she is confident of her healing. Mark, thoroughly disgusted with the medical profession, comments that not only has the woman spent all her money on doctors, but she has only gotten worse rather than improving.¹

Sure enough, the woman is instantly healed and Jesus knows it, even though he has not taken any direct action. His response to her admission is, "Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace and be freed from your

¹ This is not really a surprise, because when one investigates the standard treatment for chronic vaginal bleeding at that time, one is surprised that the woman is still alive at all after being treated by doctors.

suffering.” Here the word “faith” seems to mean confidence that Jesus has the power to heal, rather than implying a trusting relationship with Jesus, which is a common meaning of “faith” in the Gospel of John and Paul’s letters.

While all this was delaying Jesus, Jairus’s daughter has died. At the end of the story we learn that she was twelve years old. She has been living as long as the bleeding woman has been dying. When Jesus overhears the message about her death, he urges Jairus, “Don’t be afraid, just keep on believing.” When Jesus takes the girl by the hand, she is restored to life, proven by the fact that he tells the parents to give her something to eat. It was believed that spirits/ghosts/angels did not eat and that was how you recognized that someone who appeared to be a real person was actually a spirit. This time Jesus does command the parents “not to let anyone know about this.” It is easy to see why Jesus would not want to be known as a corpse resuscitator—he wouldn’t ever get anything else done. Mark wants the audience to know that Jesus can overcome anything, even death.²

Matthew 9:27-34 – page 286

Two blind men identify Jesus as “Son of David,” which was the royal title of the kings of Judah. Jesus asks them if they believe that he is able to restore their sight and when they say they do, he heals their blindness. Again, “believe” means “have confidence in Jesus’s power.” Again they disobey the command to silence. Next Jesus drives out a demon that prevents a man from speaking. These two stories are arranged this way so that the members of the audience who know their Old Testament will recognize the allusion to Isaiah 35:5-6: “Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, . . .and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.”³

² However, it is a strange ending to this particular story, given that the funeral has already started. This is going to be another command to silence that will be disobeyed unless the parents want their neighbors to think that they called off the funeral and are keeping the girl’s corpse in the house for some reason. Maybe they will just say, “Oops, Jesus was right after all; she was only asleep. Thanks for coming, anyway.”

³ The context in Isaiah is the miraculous deliverance of God’s people and their triumphant return to their homeland after exile. Matthew was written after the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD by the Romans and the Christians now see the Isaiah passage as a prophecy of the inauguration of God’s Kingdom in Jesus’s ministry. God has restored God’s people before and God will do it again!

Mark 6:14-44 – Bottom of 286 – middle of 288

As the summary in italics indicates, the death of John the Baptist follows a scene in which Jesus sends out the disciples to preach, heal, and cast out demons. Mark has already told us that is what the disciples will do back on page 275.

The “King Herod” in this story is Herod Antipas, son of Herod the Great, whom the Romans allowed to pretend to rule Galilee. He is portrayed as a cowardly despot who imprisoned John the baptizer for pointing out that Torah forbids one to have sex with his brother’s wife (Leviticus 18:16) if the brother is still alive (which Philip most certainly was). The story is reminiscent of Ahab and Jezebel because Herod seems to be a pawn of Herodias, who “wanted to kill [John].” We are explicitly told that Herod was afraid of John but “liked to listen to him.”

In a gruesomely surreal scene, Herod gets drunk at his birthday party and the daughter of Herodias dances for him and his friends. The daughter (only a young girl—the same word is used for her as for the daughter of Jairus) is not named and her dance is not said to be seductive.⁴ All the text says is that she “pleased Herod and his dinner guests.” When Herod makes a public promise to give her whatever she asks for, she goes straight to her mommie dearest, who has just the right answer, “the head of John the Baptist on a platter.” Herod is trapped; he has John decapitated and his head served to Herodias’s daughter as though it were the final course in this birthday banquet. The story closes with the information that John’s disciples retrieve his body and bury it---a lot more than Jesus will get out of his disciples, who will have run away long before he is even dead.

The disciples come back, they and Jesus try to take a little time off, but the crowd gets to the retreat center before them and Jesus “had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd” (Numbers 27:17, cf. Ezekiel 34). After Jesus has taught the crowd for several hours, it’s dinner time and the disciples think it’s time to send them away. But Jesus says, “You give them something to eat.” It apparently does not occur to the disciples that Jesus might be able to feed the crowd, although they have seen him do every other sort of miracle in the book. Before he sent them out to preach, Jesus had told them not to take any bread, but when he asks them how much bread they have, it turns out that they somehow managed to come up with five loaves of bread and two

⁴ Somehow the tradition assigned her the name “Salome,” but she is not named in any of the gospels.

fish.⁵ Jesus gives thanks and hands the bread and fish back to the disciples to distribute. After the 5,000 men have eaten their fill, the disciples pick up twelve basketfuls of leftovers.

Matthew 14:22-36, page 288

Mark and John both have the story of Jesus's walking on the water, but only Matthew includes the scene in which Peter first asks to be summoned to do the same and then begins to sink when he realizes what's happening. As in the storm scene in Mark, Jesus points out Peter's lack of faith, but this time the disciples "worshiped him, saying, 'Truly you are the Son of God.'" As soon as they land, word gets around and Jesus is mobbed by sick people to be healed.

Excerpts from John 6:22-71 – Bottom of 288 – middle of 290

In the Gospel of John, the feeding miracle occurs at Passover and is followed by an attempt by the crowd to make Jesus king. He gets away, the scene of walking on the water follows and when they come to land, the crowd finds them, just as in Matthew. But in John there follows an extended monologue by Jesus in which he contrasts the provision of manna to the people in the wilderness with "the bread that comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." Echoing the misunderstanding of the Samaritan woman in John 4 (page 271), the people demand, "Sir, always give us this bread" (289).

This is the introduction to one of the seven "I am" discourses in John: "I am the bread of life." Jesus identifies his flesh as the living bread that came down from heaven, which, if people eat, they will live forever. This raises the obvious question, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?"

Then Jesus begins to talk about the necessity for people not only to eat his flesh, but to drink his blood. Otherwise they have "no life." Not surprisingly, this kind of talk drives away lots of people (290). When he asks the Twelve if they too are going to abandon him, Peter gives the answer that all of us finally give when following Jesus gets really weird and we wonder why we ever started this journey in the first place. After considering the alternatives, we sigh and say, with Peter, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God" (290).

⁵ The boy who gives them his lunch is in John, not Mark.

Reflections on Christian maturity

Because in the “Bread of Life” discourse, Jesus does not say, as he does in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, that the bread at the Last Supper is his body and the cup of wine is his blood, many interpreters agree with the footnote on page 289 and the comments in italics on page 290. They say that Jesus is talking about knowing him being the source of satisfaction and life for humanity.

Other interpreters see a clear reference in the Bread of Life discourse to the Lord’s Supper and the claim that eating Jesus’ body and drinking his blood in the communion service results in deeper identification with Jesus and in some mysterious way conveys life to believers. In technical language, the elements of bread and wine eaten together by the community of faith are “a means of grace.” This is part of the theology of Catholics, Orthodox, and Anglican/Episcopalian Christians. John Wesley, founder of Methodism, believed that communion had a converting influence on people.

This has not been the historic Baptist position. Baptists have said that the Lord’s Supper is a symbol to remind us of Jesus’s death for us. The synoptic gospels and Paul use the phrase “in remembrance of me.” However, Baptists have the freedom to believe differently from each other about this and most other matters, except the confession that “Jesus is Lord.” It is a mark of Christian maturity to be able to discuss differences like this without being defensive and without insisting that everyone should believe what you believe. Almost every Christian belief has strong points and weak points. This is no exception.

Share in your group what you believe about the Lord’s Supper. Have you or people you know had any experiences with the communion service that were especially meaningful or that suggested that something was happening that was somehow “more” than a memory of Jesus? What do you think are the good and not so good aspects of different beliefs about this?