

# Signs and Wonders

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## Mark 1:29-39

Year ago, I attended one of the early meetings of the Jesus Seminar in Sonoma. It was much smaller then, but was already famous – or infamous – for its method of voting- using colored marbles - on whether or not sayings of Jesus were authentic. This particular morning the members of the Seminar were discussing the healings of Jesus. Now this was a pretty academic group, mostly from secular universities, not seminaries, and not with much of a connection to the church. And the scholars in the room were very skeptical about healing stories... indeed about miracle stories in general. They did not seem to feel such stories added much to the understanding of Jesus' life and ministry. Suddenly Walter Wink, a noted New Testament scholar from Auburn Seminary in New York, stood up, threw his papers into the air and exclaimed, "How can you possibly dismiss the healing stories of Jesus? It is impossible to have any understanding of Jesus and who he was without those stories!" It was unusual for one of the Seminar scholars to be so passionate, but clearly Wink just could not contain himself any longer.

Wink insisted that there is no way we can go around or ignore the powerful stories of Jesus as healer. And yet, much like the scholars of the Jesus Seminar, we are modern, sophisticated, scientific and thoughtful people. Jesus' healings can be a problem for us and our world view. Are these stories a hindrance or a help to our faith? After all, we live in a world that values predictability, order and control more than surprise, mystery and wonder. We tend to think of our world as closed, rigidly following certain natural laws that don't change and which make the line between natural and supernatural obvious and unassailable. Many modern people, people like you and me, have contented themselves with a fairly flat and confined worldview. We know what is possible – and not possible.

But, asks one colleague, "What if we're wrong? What if there is more going on in us and in our world than we have been led to believe by the modern worldview? What if the 'modern worldview' is somewhat of a fiction, just another in a long line of futile human attempts to play God? What if Mark is right? What if something's afoot that can never be fully contained or described by our human modes of coping with the unknown? That day at Simon's house it was as if Jesus pulled back the veil that separates the real from the unreal and showed us what's really going on behind the curtain of our limited notions of what's what. He disrupted our notions of what God can and cannot do."

A story told by Fred Craddock: "As a boy I spent pleasant summer evenings gathering fallen stars. As I think back on it, the spent stars were worthless, but it was something to do. I would go into the field near the house, climb up on a tree stump, and wait for stars to fall. From this perch I could see exactly where they fell, and it was not uncommon to have my pockets filled within an hour. Sometimes, whether from greed or out of compassion for fallen stars that might otherwise go unnoticed, I would sneak from the back porch with Grandma's clothes basket and harvest the remaining stars still flickering on the ground. Sometimes I was too tired to empty it. "I'll do it in the morning," I would say, but in the morning Grandma was already fussing about a residue of gray ashes in her clothes basket. (Everyone knows you cannot save stars until the next night.) I denied charges of having kindled a fire in her basket and snickered off to play, protected from punishment by the mystery.

"But during her last illness, Grandma called me to her bed and told me, almost secretively, that she knew what I had been doing with her basket. My guilty silence was broken by her instruction for me to bring to her a package wrapped in newspaper from the bottom of an old chest. I obeyed and then waited the eternity it took for her arthritic fingers to open the bundle. 'Oh, it's gone,' she said, showing me where it had been. In the bottom of the package was a little residue of gray ashes. We stared at each other."

"'You, too, Grandma? Why didn't you tell me?'"

"'I was afraid you would laugh at me. And why didn't you tell me?'"

"'I was afraid you would scold me.'"

Now what, you might ask, does a rather whimsical story about the gathering of fallen stars have anything, even remotely, to do with today's text. But I share it because I love the story's sense of wonder, its willingness to believe in possibilities beyond the possible. I believe this is what we have in the stories of Jesus the healer. What we see in the healings is a reality not fixed and unchangeable, but in fact a reality that is open and porous, always subject to intrusions by the divine.

Toward the end of his life, Joachim Jeremias, one of the great New Testament scholars of the mid-20th century, said this: “Nothing, no human institution, can possibly hinder the free flow of the grace of God; and all my life I waken each morning with the possibility of being surprised, not only in my own life, but in the life of someone I had not even noticed.” This is what the healing stories do for us and to us. They invite us to be surprised by the unexpected and free flow of God’s grace. They invite us to consider the possibility that what we consider odd and unusual and beyond the customary order of things is in fact what God considers quite normal – a glimpse into the way the world is intended to be. God is working – something’s afoot.

And one further words about Jesus the Healer. I think back to Walter Wink that afternoon in Sonoma. He insisted we cannot just overlook the healings of Jesus because they are far more than simply healings. They are concrete testimony to the in-breaking of a whole new world order, signs of the dawning of a new day – the old is passing away, the new has come.

A pastor shares this story: “The first person I had the privilege of ministering to, from the day he found out that he had AIDS until the day he died with AIDS, was a friend, a member of my congregation, and a musician. In those early days, there were pitifully few treatments available for AIDS. The disease meant death within a few months. Most people in our congregation had had no experience with this illness and I wondered how people would react.

“Thanks be to God, the church became the church with beauty and power. Quietly, but resolutely, various members of the congregation undertook to minister to his every need. Meals were brought, the house was cleaned, a couple of people even refurbished his yard. For me, as a pastor, it was an inspiring experience. And when he died, the church gathered in a great crowd and sang songs of Easter. For me, part of this motivation, even though the church members may not have known it, was their anger, their righteous indignation and their clinched-fisted determination not to let illness, disease and suffering have the last say. It was a triumph of life over death. It was Easter, outshining Good Friday. We sang at his funeral in grief and great sadness for our loss of him. We sang in great joy for the triumph of Christ. And we also sang in anger.”

The anger, the refusal to give into the powers of evil and death, the faith in the dawning of a new world – I believe we find all this in the healings of Jesus. There is an edginess here, a refusal to accept, the world as it is with its dominant hierarchies and powers of oppression, violence and suffering. Consider those whom he heals: Peter’s mother-in-law: there in front of God and everyone, Jesus reaches out to lay his hand on a woman. That just wasn’t done in polite society – a man touching a woman. I think of the woman with the flow of blood – he allowed her to touch him, and when she did so, he blessed and healed her when all around him assumed he would condemn her. He touched and healed lepers – lepers perhaps the most feared and isolated members of society; people kept at the fringes, not even allowed to worship with others. But that didn’t stop Jesus. A blind beggar by the side of the road. Who even took time to notice one such as him? Well, Jesus did.

So many of his healings are strange, unpredictable, take us and everyone by surprise. In Jesus’ healings, we see the power of touch, of intimacy, of nearness, of acceptance; the power to make what was broken whole. We see the meek, the poor in spirit and the peacemakers blessed, we see the outcast and oppressed welcomed into the family. If you listen closely during these stories, you hear the sound of walls crashing down. You see supposedly permanent boundaries between people being erased. You see nothing less than the birth of a new heaven and new earth.

We read the story of the healing of Simon’s mother-in-law and ask, “Is it true?” or even, “How can this be?” But perhaps our first question should be, “What does this say?” What is the message God is communicating to us, what is this telling us about God and what God might want for us and our world? To see Jesus reach out and heal, therefore, is to see something of God. Touch, intimacy, relationship, presence, a new way of being... it’s all there. Finally, I think the power of these stories is captured in this eyewitness account shared by physician, Richard Selzer:

“I stand by the bed where a young woman lies, her face post-operative, her mouth twisted – palsy, clownish. A tiny twig of the facial nerve, the one to the muscles of her mouth, has been severed. To remove the tumor in her cheek, I had to cut the little nerve. Her young husband is in the room. He stands on the opposite side of the bed, and together they seem to dwell in the evening light, isolated from me, private. ‘Will my mouth always be like this?’ she asks. ‘Yes,’ I say, ‘it will. It is because the nerve was cut.’ She nods and is silent. But her husband smiles, ‘I like it,’ he says. ‘It’s kind of cute.’ He bends to kiss her crooked mouth, and I am so close I can see how he twists his own lips to accommodate her, to show her that their kiss still works... I hold my breath and let the wonder in.” “Jesus came, and took her by the hand, and lifted her up.” Thanks be to God.