



Signs and Wonders

Week 3: The Patient Persistence of Jesus

Lori Lampert - 11/20/2022

Next Sunday is the first Sunday of Advent. This afternoon, the Christmas decorations will come out of their hiding place in the basement. When you worship next week, it will be in a sanctuary beautifully prepared to celebrate the birth of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. And we will begin to prepare our hearts as well. At 9:15 on Sunday morning you are welcome to join one of our two classes for adults. Or, for 4 weeks on Wednesday evenings starting November 30, I will lead a group from 6:30-8pm. We will use Adam Hamilton's new Advent study, *Prepare the Way for the Lord*. I know this season is very busy. It always will be. Please don't miss an opportunity to prepare your spirit for this miracle of all miracles, the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ.

Signs and wonders. Miracles. These are the events we have been looking at the past few weeks as written in the oldest Gospel, Mark. Jesus healing the man on the mat who has been let down through the roof by his friends. Jesus heals him, first of his sins, then of his paralysis. Jesus demonstrates his power to calm the storm and takes the disciples to the other side where another miracle takes place in the healing of a person possessed with demons.

Today we are going to talk about a miracle that has the ick factor. It is uniquely found in Mark. Other synoptic gospels, Matthew and Luke, do not

share this miraculous story. Some commentaries say it is because of the ick. Some say it is because it looks like it takes more than one attempt for Jesus to perform this miracle, and it diminishes his authority. But me? I like this story. I find it full of meaning. Full of hope. Rather than diminishing Jesus in any way, I believe it beautifully demonstrates the miracle that is grace. Prevenient grace. A grace given by God before we are even aware. A grace that draws us to God until we are able to recognize that Jesus is indeed the Christ, the Messiah. The Son of God.

Look for a moment first at the 8th chapter of Mark so we can put this miracle in context. Remembering all Jesus has already done to demonstrate who he is as the second person of the Trinity—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—he feeds the 4000.

The Scribes and Pharisees are getting more and more concerned as the crowds continue to grow. There are a few more boat trips in this chapter, back and forth across the Sea of Galilee. The disciples, the good old disciples, have forgotten to bring some of the abundant bread leftover from the miracle with them. And believe it or not they are wondering what to do. They still don't get it.

I find this hopeful. Not because the disciples are struggling, but because Jesus will not give up on them. Ever. He has asked them to follow him, and they did so. They have witnessed many miracles but are still doubting. Jesus may be frustrated with them. He may be shaking his head as he peppers them with nine questions in five verses. But he does not give up on them. Ever.

¹⁷ And becoming aware of it, Jesus said to them, "Why are you talking about having no bread? Do you still not perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened? ¹⁸ Do you have eyes and fail to see? Do you have ears and fail to hear? And do you not remember? ¹⁹ When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand,

how many baskets full of broken pieces did you collect?" They said to him, "Twelve."²⁰ "And the seven for the four thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you collect?" And they said to him, "Seven."²¹ Then he said to them, "Do you not yet understand?"

Do you have eyes and fail to see? Ears and fail to hear? Do you not yet understand? In other words, "don't you get it?" To which the obvious answer is no. We don't get it. We are struggling to understand. We keep getting into the boat. We *will* keep getting into the boat. But nope. We are still trying to figure this out, Jesus.

We see things, we hear things, we even have eaten well because of what you have done. But the truth of the matter is, we have doubts. We have questions.

How many of us would have said to the disciples, go on home? I give up. I have tried to teach you. I have tried to reach you. I have tried and tried and I am done. Enough. I am going to start over with 12 other people. You guys are hopeless. But that is us right? Thanks be to God that is not Jesus Christ.

Now to the miracle.

²² They came to Bethsaida. Some people brought a blind man to him and begged him to touch him. ²³ He took the blind man by the hand and led him out of the village, and when he had put saliva on his eyes and laid his hands on him, he asked him, "Can you see anything?" ²⁴ And the man looked up and said, "I can see people, but they look like trees, walking." ²⁵ Then Jesus laid his hands on his eyes again, and he looked intently, and his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly. ²⁶ Then he sent him away to his home, saying, "Do not even go into the village.

Imagine this moment. Remember Jesus' question: Do you have eyes and fail to see?

Some people have brought a blind man to Jesus. Some people have gone out of their way. Some people are advocating for this person. These are not the disciples. These are people who have been waiting for Jesus with the hope he would come their way. They believe Jesus' touch can heal this man because he has for many others.

Jesus took the blind man by the hand and led him out of the village. Can you feel the tenderness in that moment?

I imagine Jesus nodding to his disciples to come with them. Away from the noise of another crowd. Away from the distractions. Toward a quiet miracle that will change a life.

Here is the ick factor. Jesus put saliva on this man's eyes. According to historians, saliva was believed to hold healing powers. But why did Jesus do this? He could heal with a word, a touch. Without saliva. But this is an intimate miracle. This is one person, away from the crowd. Before the disciples.

The man begins to see. First people as trees. Jesus looks at him again. Touches him again. And his sight is restored. He sees clearly. Grace upon grace. Miracle upon miracle.

You know the expression "you can't see the forest for the trees?" That is what has happened for the disciples. They have watched miracles unfold multiple times but they cannot seem to put it together. There is something bigger happening here than they could understand.

So Jesus takes one person, one physically blind person, as a living parable. This one was blind and now can see. You are not physically blind, you are spiritually blind. Open your eyes. See clearly. There is an entire forest before you. The words of the prophet Isaiah are being fulfilled.

Luke 4:18 "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed,¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

Now Jesus asks another question.

²⁷ Jesus and his disciples headed out for the villages around Caesarea Philippi. As they walked, he asked, "Who do the people say I am?" ²⁸ "Some say 'John the Baptizer,'" they said. "Others say 'Elijah.' Still others say 'one of the prophets.'"

²⁹ He then asked, "And you—what are you saying about me? Who am I?" Peter gave the answer: "You are the Christ, the Messiah."

³⁰⁻³² Jesus warned them to keep it quiet, not to breathe a word of it to anyone. He then began explaining things to them: "It is necessary that the Son of Man proceed to an ordeal of suffering, be tried and found guilty by the elders, high priests, and religion scholars, be killed, and after three days rise up alive." He said this simply and clearly so they couldn't miss it.

Here is the forest. The whole picture. What will be seen is even greater than the healing of a person who was blind. It is greater than a paralyzed man picking up his mat to walk. It is more than feeding thousands with bread who will only be hungry again. It is even more than speaking peace to a storm and demons leaving a man and going into pigs who jump off a cliff.

If we, like the disciples, get too caught up in those miracles, we won't be able to see the forest for the trees. But also, like the disciples, Jesus has incredible patience for us. He will not leave us. He will come to us over and over again.

Sometimes it will be in the midst of crowds. Sometimes it will be while the storms of life are raging. Sometimes it is even as we are debating the merits

of bread. But most often it is when we feel Jesus take us by the hand and walk us somewhere quiet. It is when we admit our inability to save ourselves, heal ourselves. It is when we hear him ask "can you see anything?" And we respond with honesty, not yet. And grace upon grace. Miracle upon miracle, he touches us again until we can finally say "You are the Christ."

My prayer for you today is that you will determine to make this Advent season a time to see more clearly the incarnation of Jesus Christ.

The Downtown Church will be full of opportunities for you. Starting today, as we serve together and create a place ready to receive guests. You will hear of classes to take, music to hear, cookies to decorate. You will be asked to give of your resources and gifts for our community. You will learn of a special Noel at Noon coming December 18 after church. I am so excited to celebrate with you. These are the trees. Beautiful Christmas trees.

The forest? The coming of God in Jesus Christ.