

SERMON - THE FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY – 3 FEBRUARY 2019

St. John's Anglican Church, Greensboro, North Carolina

Father Mark Menees, D.D.

Romans

Matt. 8:1-17

+In the Name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost. Amen+

We stand on the fourth Sunday after the Epiphany, and once again the gospel for the day brings us a miracle story. We have been witnesses with the Magi to a journey and a star, heard with Jesus the voice of the Father proclaiming adoption, shared water turned to wine, and today a series of healings from this ‘new Moses’, a great miracle worker who restores with touch and a word. What might St. Matthew be telling us by lining up 10—yes, 10 healing miracles in sequence upon the heels of the Sermon on the Mount in chapters 8 and 9? Something is afoot!! Let me suggest clue and it is this: the miracles themselves are not paramount in Matthew’s attention. We will see that a little later.

The truth is there were multiple miracle workers around the near middle-east and Greco-Roman communities in the 1st century and just before and after. Honi, the Jewish charismatic, is well attested. One of the more interesting characters is Apollonius of Tyana, who supposedly healed multiple people, raised the dead, was himself raised and ascended. Shaky historical scholarship has attempted to link him to Jesus and say he was the model for the gospel accounts, but since he died around 100 AD, and the only attestation of his works comes from a biographer around the beginning of the 3rd century that is suspect at best. The biographer was enlisted to write about him in order to get good “press” and raise money for building a Roman temple. The point is that miracle workers abounded, even as newer versions seem to arise in every generation. So what is unique or significant about Matthew, and for that matter all the Gospel accounts, related to Jesus? Matthew’s purpose is to show that these healings are not intended as self-aggrandizement or attention seeking...They are signs of the how God through His Messiah acts in human experience to stretch beyond the expected and reasonable, and bring wholeness to His people, and outside those boundaries to all people.

These stories push us, make no mistake. We live as children impacted by the Enlightenment which starts with the belief that nothing can happen outside of prescribed laws of nature, so miracles are not possible. And, we are so focused on the individual, that we think of healing as limited to singular persons often missing the communal and indeed, cosmic aspects of God’s intent. Matthew corrects those mistakes in his story telling. Notice the bookends of the text—“Jesus comes down from the mountain followed by crowds who represent Israel, and in the ending of this section the people proclaim, “He took our infirmities and bore our diseases”. And in between these the absolute mercy of God is extended to the outsider, the ritually unclean, the second class citizen with nowhere to turn. The Centurion, a man of authority and power, finds himself at the end of a rope having no knot onto which to hold, an unfamiliar state of life. His servant (or child depending on how you translate the text) is without hope, and all he has left is to turn to this potential enemy and place himself in trust in his heart. Matthew is asking us to see what all of these healings, and restorations tell us about the heart of God. It is not the faith of the recipients that make things “work”. Instead, faith is what allows them to move across the limitations of reason and expectation and closed doors, and receive what they could not figure out on their own. In his encountering the broken and giving them what they could not give themselves, God becomes manifest, and that is what makes these encounters miraculous.

Paul Tillich, the great 20th century theologian and philosopher, once commented that he word ‘faith’ is the most misunderstood word in the religious vocabulary. It is used variously to describe the intellectual content of Christianity, or to cajole those struggling with doubt to try a little harder (as if faith is simply a human psychological endeavor), or as a state in which reason is rejected and replaced by a non-critical view of the world. Let me suggest that faith is what happens when we are met by the Messiah, the Christ, and we find that in him we meet the deepest love and mercy available to any human in spite of the darkest places in our souls, the highest fences that block our hope, or the stringent rejections that put us on the

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outside of acceptance. For me, faith takes over at the point where reason meets its limits and can no longer offer meaningful answers to the struggles of this life. It is not naïve thinking or Pollyanna perspectives on the world out there. The Centurion knew well the tough and tumble of being a soldier, of battle, and of meeting insurmountable odds. His heart became open to a deeper reality. Soren Kierkegaard, the Danish Lutheran theologian, said faith is “a passion for the impossible”; not believing impossible things, but passion for what goes behind the limits of reason. **Passion in this sense is not emotional fire, while it may well include that, but is focused energy on what is central to fullness of life!!!** Matthew is recounting these series of healings and miracles to invite us to see that in Jesus we are looking directly into a human face of God, and then further to trust that his place in our lives is the most worthwhile thing to take our energy and attention.

A number of years ago there was a movie, *City Slickers*, starring Billy Crystal, Daniel Stern, and Jack Palance as Curly. If you have seen Jack Palance you know he is not someone you want to meet in a dark alley, or maybe even a light one!! He plays a quiet, tough, and shadowy figure who takes a bunch of city boys and tries to teach them how to face adversity. When Billy Crystal asks him, “What is the secret of all this?”, Curly holds up a finger and replies, “One thing”. “But you have to decide what that is.” We live as a people in a culture and time that strike me as more distracted, dissimulated, scattered, and stretched than any in recent history. And the more voices that pull upon us, the more unfocused and anxious we become. St. Matthew's story gives us a picture on which to focus...He is telling us this is God's person for the world; Jesus' grace is what heals and sustains and invites and makes whole.

Faith is not turning off our eyes and ears and refusing to acknowledge the obvious. Nor is faith simply persuading ourselves to do something that plain judgment and ordinary evidence contradict. Matthew did not record this story so that people would feel guilty that we don't have the same faith the centurion had. It was not his purpose to give us a guilt trip for not having enough faith. We have to start any such examination by asking who Jesus was, and what the Bible is all about. Why was this story recorded?

If we are feeling alone and helpless in this world, what does the story say about God's love and grace? Is God available to us in our world? The centurion had a need. Jesus helped him. Because of his faith? No, because it is the nature of God to have mercy. The love of God, undeserved, not purchased, not traded for, is always the sticking point in our relation to God. We want to make an exchange with God, but God already loves the unloved. He helps the helpless.

Does the story mean that God will send some invisible power to heal whoever is sick or whatever is broken depending on the strength of my faith? The story was not told to make us think we have to try harder as though God's power depends on us. The story tells us that in God's showing of his love and power in Jesus Christ, no one is outside the reign of his kingdom. Jesus was kind to all the outsiders. He remains a savior to all who need him. We can take great comfort in knowing the story of God on the mountain with Moses, or being with Jesus in his temptation, or in his power at the resurrection. God who sent his son is alive and well and at work in our midst and throughout the whole world.

Without God, we are helpless in this world to face all the fears and disasters that accompany life. The history of God in dealing with people is that he has called the whole human race to be his people. We are indeed outsiders upon whom God has had mercy. He has taken us in. Faith is the passion to finally realize it! Perhaps faith is coming to see that God is reaching out to us. Amen+