

Mark 5: Power

Series: Following Jesus: Studies in Mark's Gospel

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Texts: James 5:13-16; Mark 5

One of the big objections that people have to the Christian faith is that they say Science has disproved Christianity. This is especially so when it comes to miracles. Since the Enlightenment many people have argued that belief in miracles is incompatible with a modern, rational, scientific view of the world. Since the Bible contains many accounts of miracles, like Mark chapter 5, it can't be reliable because science has disproved miracles. Or so the argument goes. But smuggled into this view are a number of leaps of faith. Yes, science can only study natural phenomena and seek only natural causes. Science functions under the premise that the universe is governed by natural laws that can be discovered. A miracle, by definition, is a suspension of those natural laws by a supernatural cause. If science can only study natural causes, then miracles are by definition outside of its field of view. To say that because science can't study supernatural causes that means they don't exist, is not a scientific statement, but a statement of faith. As one philosopher put it, it's like a drunk looking for his lost keys and insisting that they must be under that light because he wouldn't be able to see them in the dark.¹

But if God does exist, and he has made and sustains all things, then it should not surprise us that he does, on occasion, act in miraculous ways. In fact, because God is personally involved in sustaining his creation, we could better describe a miracle as his extraordinary work in creation, in contrast to his ordinary work of making the sun to shine and rain to fall. Why all this talk of miracles? Because, in our text today, Jesus performs 3 miracles. He casts out a legion of demons, he heals a sick woman and raises a little girl from the dead. I recognise that for our modern, scientific worldview Mark chapter 5 is incredibly confronting. But in this we are not alone. In verse 42 we read that those who saw Jesus raise the little girl were "completely astonished." Jesus' actions broke open the worldview of the people of his day, no less than ours.

Mark's Gospel has three key themes:

Who is Jesus?

What is the Kingdom of God?

And What does it mean to follow Jesus?

We're asking those questions each week as we work our way through Mark. You might remember back in chapter 1 we learned that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that that means that he is God himself come in the flesh. The key thing Mark shows us in this chapter is that because Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God he has power. Jesus has power over the spiritual world. Jesus has power over sickness. And Jesus has power over death itself. Our world feels more and more chaotic.

¹ Taken from Tim Keller, *The Reason for God*, Hodder & Stoughton, 2008: 85-86

Coronavirus. Climate change. Possible war with Russia and China. So much is out of our control. We're fearful and anxious. We need to trust the one who is more powerful than all these if we're going to live lives of peace and purpose. So let's look at the 2 stories and as we ask those three questions - who is Jesus? What is the Kingdom of God? And what does it mean to follow Jesus?

Story 1 - Jesus has Power over the Spiritual realm (1-20)

In verses 1-5 we see that the spiritual world is real.

They went across the lake to the region of the Gerasenes. **2** When Jesus got out of the boat, a man with an impure spirit came from the tombs to meet him. **3** This man lived in the tombs, and no one could bind him anymore, not even with a chain. **4** For he had often been chained hand and foot, but he tore the chains apart and broke the irons on his feet. No one was strong enough to subdue him. **5** Night and day among the tombs and in the hills he would cry out and cut himself with stones.

Again, this is one of those moments where the story of the Bible breaks the categories of how we typically see the world so that it's hard for us to know what to do with this. Our modern, rational, scientific worldview can only comprehend natural causes. And so we reach for a natural explanation. I remember discussing this in Bible study and people suggesting that maybe the man had a mental illness.

I grew up in PNG and there people had no problem with this story. For them, the spiritual world was very real. This is one of the great things about the body of Christ - the different perspectives different cultures bring can help us better understand the Bible. My parents once took a team of people from Australia for a short trip to PNG. At one village one of the team was violently ill. The 2 doctors on the team couldn't find anything wrong with her. Then the local pastor asked where the necklace she was wearing was from. She said, "I was given it at the last village." "Ah!" he said. "This is the problem. This necklace was used in our ancestor worship. It has an evil spirit that is making you sick. We need to pray, and then you will be fine." So, following the instructions we read in James 5, he and my Dad and one of the doctors anointed her with oil, prayed for her, took the necklace off and commanded the spirit to go in the name of Jesus. Immediately she began to improve. The pastor said the necklace was fine, but, as my Dad said, for some reason she didn't want to keep it.

Returning to Mark 5, the rules out mental illness as the cause of this man's problems. Yes he was certainly troubled in his mind, cutting himself and living in the tombs. But he was also able to break iron chains. The spiritual world may be outside the Western worldview, but it's there in our culture on the periphery and in the shadows. Some are more sensitive to it than others. This text shows us that demons or evil spirits can be powerful and destructive. Elsewhere Jesus says that Satan's purpose is to kill and destroy. And this is why the Bible forbids things like witchcraft, horoscopes, fortune tellers, and so on.

What's interesting in the Gospels is that while it's unclear for people, the evil spirits have no problem identifying who Jesus is. In verse 7 we read:

He shouted at the top of his voice, "What do you want with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? In God's name don't torture me!"

In verses 8-13 we see Jesus' complete power of the evil spirits. They recognise his authority and they have no choice but to obey him. He commands them with a word.

He gave them permission, and the impure spirits came out and went into the pigs.

Back in chapter 2 Jesus tells us that he has come to bind up the strong man, Satan, and to rescue people held in his power. And so we see this man, freed from the Legion, is restored and in his right mind. Jesus still has authority over evil spirits. In Luke 9 he sends the disciples out with authority to drive out demons in his name. And in Acts we see the apostles doing just this.² All who trust in Christ come under his protection. He gives us his Spirit. We need not fear the power of Satan or his minions because Jesus is more powerful. Do you remember that key theme of the Kingdom of God? In Colossians Paul says that, for those who trust in Christ, God has "rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves".³ Freeing this man from the power of the demons is a moment where the kingdom of God breaks in. The king has come to rescue those trapped in darkness.

In verses 14-20 we see 2 different responses to Jesus' power over evil spirits. The first is from the people in the Gerasene region. When they saw what had happened to the demon possessed man, they were afraid, and they asked Jesus to leave. They rejected the kingdom. If Jesus could bring this astonishing change in this man's life, what would it mean for them? "No thank you. We'd much rather things stay as they are." If you want Jesus' power at work in your life, you need to be prepared for the changes that he will bring.

The other response is from the man himself. Jesus tells him,

"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." So the man went away and began to tell ... how much Jesus had done for him. And all the people were amazed.⁴

What does the man do? He shares his story of how Jesus changed his life. Our third theme is "What does it look like to follow Jesus?" This man shows us. Share the story of how much the Lord has done for you and how he has had mercy on you. How have you seen God work in your life? What prayers has he answered? I know our culture likes to keep faith private, but if Christ is at the centre of our lives, if he shapes who we are and how we live, then this should bubble out in our everyday conversation, no matter how countercultural it is. Or perhaps we need to cultivate the habit of

² Acts 9.16-18, cf 19.11-16

³ Colossians 1.13

⁴ Mark 5.19-20

noticing each day where God has been at work, and giving thanks to him. Then we'll have something to say.

Story 2 - Jesus has Power over sickness and death (21-42)

Well what about the second story in Mark 5? Jesus demonstrates his power over sickness and death. He heals a sick woman and raises a girl from the dead. Just as an aside, it's significant that 2 women are at the centre of this story. In retelling these miracles Mark uses one of his favourite literary techniques, framing one miracle inside the other. It's such a favourite that scholars call it the "Markan sandwich". He does so because he wants both stories to be taken together and to interpret each other.

Jairus, a local religious leader, comes to see Jesus with an urgent request. He's heard that Jesus can heal the sick, and his daughter is dying. So he asks,

"Please come and put your hands on her so that she will be healed and live."

Jesus starts going with him, but then we're introduced to another person. A woman who has been bleeding for 12 years. In only a few words Mark invites us into her world of suffering, poverty, shame and social exclusion. It's an intimate condition. She's spent all she has on treatment and things have only gotten worse.

There is an added layer to her story that we as modern readers can miss. According to the Law of Moses, bodily discharges like a woman's period make a person unclean. The law prescribes how, once the flow has stopped, you can wash and be cleansed.⁵ Only those who were ceremonially clean could come and worship. So this woman's condition had meant that she had not been able to draw near to God in worship for 12 years. What's more, anything and anyone she touched would become unclean and have to be cleansed. So her physical suffering would have been compounded by social isolation. How many hugs to comfort her would she have received in those 12 years? We've all had a taste of this with social distancing in COVID. I had to spend 2 weeks in quarantine before I could hug Claire and my kids when I returned home after my Mum's funeral. How much worse for this woman in her suffering?

But now Jesus has come. And she thinks to herself, "If I just touch his clothes, I will be healed." With the crowd pressing around, it's the perfect opportunity to stay hidden. She reaches out and with the lightest of touches brushes his cloak. "Immediately her bleeding stopped and she felt in her body that she was freed from her suffering." Jesus knows that power has gone out from him. He asks, "Who touched my clothes?" The disciples think this is ridiculous with everyone pressing around him, but he keeps asking and eventually the woman comes and falls at his feet. Would Jesus take away what she had just received? Would he condemn her for having touched him while she was unclean? What would the crowd think? Trembling with fear she tells the whole story. And Jesus says to her,

⁵ Cf. Leviticus 15

Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace and be freed from your suffering.⁶

It's an astonishing moment. Notice that rather than being made unclean by her touch, cleansing and healing and wholeness and peace flow out from Jesus to her. Rather than being shunned because her secret shame has been exposed, Jesus honours her before everyone and makes her an example of faith. Of course it's by Jesus' power that she is healed. But if she didn't have the faith to come and seek healing from him, she would have stayed in her suffering.

In the healing of this woman we see the Kingdom of God breaking in. As the king of God's kingdom Jesus brings cleansing, and wholeness and peace and welcome. Jesus has the power to heal. He can and does heal still today. He may heal through the ordinary means of medicine and medical technology. Which, by the way, we've only developed with the gifts God has given us. And we give thanks to God for those incredible blessings. Or he may, on occasion, heal in more extraordinary ways. In both cases we're invited to pray and ask him to heal. But did you notice that Jesus did not only bring physical healing to this woman? He restored her spiritually, giving her access to worship. He restored her socially. He gave her inner peace. This was whole person restoration. And he offers that to each of us.

And this woman shows us what it means to follow Jesus. First, she is a model of faith. Do you come to Jesus seeking his healing and wholeness, trusting that he will provide what you need? Second, As citizens of the kingdom, we can offer that whole person healing to those around us as we point them to Jesus. His touch brings life and peace, healing and hope.

That brings us back to Jairus and his daughter. While Jesus has stopped for this woman, tragically the girl has died. We can feel Jairus' hope dissolving into tears. The people say, "Why bother the teacher anymore?" But Jesus will not abandon Jairus in his grief. With all the tenderness in the universe he says to the broken hearted father, "Don't be afraid; just believe."⁷ In Greek faith and belief are the same word. Jesus is asking Jairus to exercise the same trust he has just seen the woman display.

Again we are invited into an intimate setting. As readers we were privy to the woman's secret affliction of 12 years, now with Peter, James and John we're invited into Jairus' home. You might remember that Mark was Peter's scribe, and wrote down Peter's account of Jesus' life and teaching. So here we get his eyewitness testimony to this incredible miracle, with Peter recalling the very words Jesus' spoke. "Talitha koum!" Jesus reaches down through death and takes hold of her hand. He calls to her, "Little girl, get up!" And such is the power of his command that not even death is a barrier to hearing and responding to his voice. She gets up, and they are all completely astonished.

Who is Jesus? He's the Son of the Most High God the demons confess. He has the power to command them. He has power over sickness. He has power over even death itself. That is not to say that Jairus' daughter did not later succumb to old age. But here in this miracle we get a glimpse of what the

⁶ Mark 5.34

⁷ Mark 5.36

kingdom of God means - the defeat of our great enemies - evil, and suffering and death itself. And so we read at the end of the Bible that when Christ returns all these things will be banished from his eternal kingdom.⁸ For those who trust in Christ, death will be, as it was for Jairus' daughter, nothing more than a good night's sleep. As the Elizabethan poet John Donne put it,

One short sleep past and we wake eternally and death shall be no more. Death, thou shalt die.

We began our time considering the problem and possibility of miracles. Yes, a text like this confronts our modern, materialist, scientific worldview. Exorcism, healing, raising someone from the dead, they are all likely far outside of our experience. And yet in each of these stories we see people touched by the presence of God in the person of Jesus. Through his gentle touch God's power is unleashed in their lives bringing restoration, healing and life. And isn't that what each of us wants? To be touched by God? We can, like the Gerasenes, reject the inbreaking of God's kingdom and try to make Mark chapter 5 fit into the narrow confines of our so-called "rational" worldview. Or we can let our worldview be shaped by the Bible. Put another way, we can let the light of Jesus' kingdom break into our minds and hearts and be open to the life and healing that he brings. Jesus' words to Jairus are his words to us today, "Don't be afraid; just believe." As we trust him, Jesus' words to the woman are his words to us too, "Go in peace and be freed from your suffering." And with the man we can heed Jesus' words to us, "Go ... and tell ... how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you."

⁸ Revelation 21.4