

HOPE AND PRAY OR THE MIRACULOUS REIGN OF GOD

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GOSPEL TEXT FOR THE FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY, YEAR B:

AS SOON AS THEY LEFT THE SYNAGOGUE, THEY ENTERED THE HOUSE OF SIMON AND ANDREW, WITH JAMES AND JOHN. NOW SIMON'S MOTHER-IN-LAW WAS IN BED WITH A FEVER, AND THEY TOLD HIM ABOUT HER AT ONCE. HE CAME AND TOOK HER BY THE HAND AND LIFTED HER UP. THEN THE FEVER LEFT HER, AND SHE BEGAN TO SERVE THEM. THAT EVENING, AT SUNDOWN, THEY BROUGHT TO HIM ALL WHO WERE SICK OR POSSESSED WITH DEMONS. AND THE WHOLE CITY WAS GATHERED AROUND THE DOOR. AND HE CURED MANY WHO WERE SICK WITH VARIOUS DISEASES, AND CAST OUT MANY DEMONS; AND HE WOULD NOT PERMIT THE DEMONS TO SPEAK, BECAUSE THEY KNEW HIM. IN THE MORNING, WHILE IT WAS STILL VERY DARK, HE GOT UP AND WENT OUT TO A DESERTED PLACE, AND THERE HE PRAYED. AND SIMON AND HIS COMPANIONS HUNTED FOR HIM. WHEN THEY FOUND HIM, THEY SAID TO HIM, "EVERYONE IS SEARCHING FOR YOU." HE ANSWERED, "LET US GO ON TO THE NEIGHBORING TOWNS, SO THAT I MAY PROCLAIM THE MESSAGE THERE ALSO; FOR THAT IS WHAT I CAME OUT TO DO." AND HE WENT THROUGHOUT GALILEE, PROCLAIMING THE MESSAGE IN THEIR SYNAGOGUES AND CASTING OUT DEMONS. MARK 1:29-39

"And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons."

The caption beneath the photograph in the morning's newspaper read: "Relatives of passengers from the sunken Egyptian ferry prayed and wept as they sat on the dock at Safaga, awaiting the return of rescue boats."

On another day, the caption beneath another photo on the front page might have read: "Relatives clamored at the entrance to the downtown Baghdad hospital in desperation to wait, and weep and pray for news of the dead and injured following another suicide bombing in a crowded marketplace at noonday ..."

Another headline caption on another day could have been: "Survivors of the earthquake that leveled the remote mountain village were found huddled in small groups in freezing temperatures, hoping and praying for a miracle that someone might still be alive in the massive rubble." Or again: "Everyone in this small company town where everyone knows everyone else gathered in the little church across from the entrance to the mineshaft, to pray and weep quietly as rescue workers and government officials coordinated efforts to reach the trapped men two miles inside the mountain."

Then there's this one: "Protesters holding signs kept a silent candlelight prayer vigil late into the night outside the prison gates, hoping against hope for a last minute stay of execution."

Or the all too recurrent: "Friends and family members fought back tears as they gathered with clasped hands outside the emergency room to await hopeful news, as doctors worked frantically to save the injured."

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Ever heard someone say something like this: "Normally, I'm not someone given to prayer, but"? And then their words trail off into silence and a mixture of hope and hopelessness.

Somewhere in between those two – that remote intersection of hope and hopelessness – prayer and weeping (or holding back the tears for some prideful, stupid reason) both seem to reside and come to the surface. Sometimes prayers and tears seem to almost intrude into otherwise "normal" lives, as unwelcome and sometimes unfamiliar attendants.

"Normally, I'm not someone given to prayer, but" someone will sometimes say to me; perhaps assuming a professional lifetime spent leading corporate prayer makes me an expert. And sometimes I'm tempted to ask in reply, "If you're not someone normally given to prayer, then to *what* are you normally given?"

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I suspect what is meant or implied oftentimes is that one resorts to prayer and the seeming powerlessness of tears only after all else fails; and only as a last resort. Such as when our luck or otherwise good fortune runs out. Or when technology, it seems, can no longer save us. Or once our wealth, power or influence doesn't seem to count for anything. Or when good, clean living, or responsible citizenship, or honesty, personal integrity and moral fortitude aren't enough to keep us out of harms way – *then what?*

Then we half-hope -- but all the while doubt – such prayer could be answered with some kind of miraculous divine intervention; and, say, reverse the course of a natural disease's most likely progression. Or absolve us of some bad choice we've deliberately made. Or completely rectify an unintentional "if-only" mistake of taking that left turn instead of a right, etc.

Or – while risking getting a little too close for comfort – there’s this one: when one of you entrusts me with the sad and shocking news of a friend and colleague’s sudden, serious diagnosis; and things go from bad to worse in a matter of days. And suddenly now, you and your friend find yourselves in that strange and alien kind of a place, when everything feels upside down, and those remnants of normalcy and your customary daily routines seem out of place.

Now you find yourselves in this abnormal, in-between time -- that *mean-time* -- between the preliminary diagnosis and the results of the MRI or the bone scan. Yet now, more than ever before, is the time for things like hopeful prayer, faith, courage.

The tendency and temptation might be to hold back; to hold back not only from the necessity of the “last resort” (prayer), but the very real fears, and even the welling tears. Sometimes we’ll find ourselves thinking to ourselves and saying to others, let’s just wait until we can know exactly what we’re dealing with today, that we weren’t even aware of yesterday.

The only problem with that is *this* is the time and situation when all the seeming exactitudes in our life have already gone out the window. When all else has failed to explain, or control, or give some semblance of order to our lives, sometimes all that’s left is hope and prayer.

And then it doesn’t really matter if you’re in the habit of praying like a pro; or if the notion is something unfamiliar, and for which one feels unqualified – or worse, undeserving – when all else fails. It is then – when we feel at a loss for words and don’t know what else to say -- that we’ll *all* say, “Well, let’s just hope and pray.” We’ll hope and pray in the face of all the undeniable fear that would expose a sense of hopelessness when the prognosis is grim, or (a popular phrase in usage these days) the “facts on the ground,” don’t add up.

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I believe most of us – given the limited credibility afforded to miracles these days – would prefer to rely on reason and logic, technology and the kind of predominant sense of reality that relegates any belief in miracles to the realms of naïveté, quackery, or superstitious folk religion. And I suspect part of our problem has to do with what we consider miraculous; as well as what we misperceive as what passes for “normal.”

In the New Testament (canonical) gospels, Jesus is portrayed as a miracle worker, healer, exorcist and teacher. In today’s story from the first chapter of Mark, the mere touch of his hand is sufficient to dispel the fever that has sent Simon’s mother-in-law to bed. Not only does she feel better instantly, she’s conveniently well enough to get up and fix the boys supper!

Then, once Jesus has supped, he’s ready for some more miraculous performances: “That evening, at sunset, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons,” Mark relates. “And the whole city was gathered around the door. And he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons.” And afterwards? He retreats in prayer, before going out again to preach his message.

Mark’s condensed gospel story of Jesus’ brief itinerant ministry is simultaneously so unpretentious, yet bold in its bald-faced assertions. Jesus’ versatility is such that in one moment he can be preaching and proclaiming the good news of the close proximity of the reign of God that’s closing in fast; and in the next gesture, turn around and perform another little miracle. He can do both things at once, *as if the message and the miracle were one in the same thing*; which, I believe, is the point of Mark telling us about them *both*.

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You see, Jesus was more than a miracle healer, as dazzling as his miracles were. There are other stories in the Bible about other miracle workers, of course. And, he was more than an exorcist. He was able not only to resist temptation himself, but rid others of the demons on their backs, as well. So, in Mark’s telling of the story, there is almost a sense that such healing miracles and exorcisms alone may have resulted in his local fame and notoriety. But miracles alone were still commonplace; and Jesus seemed clearly intent on something more than fleeting celebrity status.

The inclusion of miracles in Mark’s story is to be seen as part and parcel of a *larger* story. It is this larger story – about the ushering in of the reign of God, juxtaposed to this old world – that makes things like hope, and prayer, and faith something that can cast out the demons and *dis-eases* of hopelessness, faithlessness, fear and futility.

As Jesus says, “‘Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do.’ And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.”

Next week, following the assigned lectionary gospel texts in this Epiphany season, we’ll read yet another healing miracle story; and we’re only still in the first chapter of Mark’s gospel! We’ll hear about more ordinary folks plaintively asking and receiving a miraculous answer to their desperate prayers. Yet Mark relates these stories for reasons other than to impress us with merely a cumulative number of Jesus’ spectacular performances. The meaning of the message of the reign of God is not to be obfuscated, or get lost in the midst of all the miracles.

Nowadays, we may run just the opposite risk. In our own *mean*-times, hopeless souls today might tend to dismiss the portability of these old miracle stories for our own practical use. "Well, that was then, this is now," we might tend to say with a mixture of skepticism and longing melancholy. As a result, one might be tempted to see in Jesus only the lingering, residual meaning of his message, without the miracles; about the important meanings of his teachings, the helpful instructions how to lead a decent life, and even perhaps about his exemplary, sacrificial way of life.

Next week we'll further consider the consequences of Jesus' message, without the accompanying miracles; as well as what those miracle stories could mean, if devoid of his message about the perpetual imminence of God's reign. The point to consider? *You can't have one without the other.*

Meanwhile, I suspect we all know those types – perhaps intimately – who will sometimes confess, "Normally, I'm not someone given to prayer, but"? To which I'll simply say, there is something to be said for *abnormality*. Particularly given what passes these days for what's normal and acceptable in this world. There is something to be said for the abnormal, counter-intuitive, contradictory, and -- in the end -- even miraculous -- reign of God.

Amen. *jb+*

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