

# Miracle Man

*Sermon preached by the Rev. Robert A. Arbogast  
Olentangy Christian Reformed Church  
Columbus, Ohio  
August 3, 2008*

## **Matthew 14:13-21**

*Wherever Jesus went, large crowds gathered to hear him. In his home town, however, he received a chilly reception. But John the Baptist received a worse reception in Herod's palace, where a dance and a promise cost him his head. John's disciples brought that news to Jesus.*

After he heard, Jesus went away in a boat to a deserted place by himself. When the crowds heard, they followed him from the towns by land. When he got out [of the boat], he saw a big crowd. And he had pity on them, and he healed the sick among them.

When it was evening, his disciples came to him and said, "This is a deserted place, and it's already late. Send the crowds away, so they can go into the villages and buy food for themselves." But Jesus said to them, "They don't need to go away. You give them something to eat." They said to him, "We don't have anything here, except five small loaves and two fish." But he said, "Bring them here to me."

He instructed the crowds to sit down on the grass. After taking the five small loaves and the two fish and looking up toward heaven, he said the blessing. After breaking the bread, he gave it to his disciples. And the disciples gave it to the crowds. Everyone ate and was filled. And they picked up twelve baskets full of broken pieces that were left over. There were about five thousand men who ate, besides women and children.

## **Children's Story**

Suppose you had a next door neighbor named Joshua – not a boy any more, but not an old man yet either. A young man, not so much older than any of you. And suppose unexpected things happened whenever Joshua was around. At the grocery store. In the movie theater. Or on the sidewalk in front of your house.

By unexpected things, I don't mean ordinary things that people weren't planning on: like a sudden rainstorm or a surprise visit from an old friend. By unexpected things, I mean extraordinary things, things you couldn't imagine happening. Like a poor woman buying a bag of rice that doesn't run out. Like a movie that's funny without being gross. Like scraped knees that heal up before you can run home to say you fell off your bike.

Suppose things like that happened whenever Joshua was around. You might think Joshua was special. You might think Joshua was scary. You might not know what to think. But you sure would be thinking about Joshua. You can count on that!

## **Sermon**

I may have made a mistake when I titled this sermon, "Miracle Man." After all, what do we mean when we say, "miracle"? It's a fuzzy word, and it gets used carelessly.<sup>1</sup> A floating ax-head (2 Kings 6:6)? It's a miracle. The Red Sea split in two the short way (Exodus 14:21)? Miracle. A dead girl standing up alive (Mark 5:42)? Miracle. A cancerous tumor that just disappeared. Miracle. The Chicago Cubs win the World Series? Well, let's not push things.

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<sup>1</sup>Except, of course, by philosophers. Philosophers are very careful about words and definitions.

Miracles – whatever that word means – what are we supposed to do with miracles? Especially when miracles have a fixed place in the Bible. More especially when miracles have such a prominent place in the Gospels.

**Matthew 14, for example, narrates a day full of miracles, beginning with an entire set of miracles that usually gets overlooked.** After he found out about John the Baptist, Jesus tried to get away, alone. It was hard news to take. John had been in prison; that was bad enough. After all, John was a colleague, a partner of sorts in the work of God. It was John who had paved the way for Jesus. And John was family. But now John was dead. Jesus had to get away. He needed some down time, some alone-with-God time.

But the crowds had other ideas. They followed Jesus. He went by boat. They went by land. And they beat him to the other side. When Jesus stepped out of the boat, there they were. It was too much. It was just what he did not need. There had to be limits. Enough was enough already. But he looked at the crowds with compassion, with pity. He forgot about himself. He focused on what they needed. “And he healed the sick among them” (v. 14), says the Scripture. And then the story goes on to the next big event.

But hold on. There are miracles here, miracles you can’t collect in baskets. People’s lives had been in pieces – maybe for a day, maybe for a month, maybe forever – and Jesus knit those pieces back together. He made broken people whole. He transformed their lives for the good. It only gets a passing mention in the story – “and he healed the sick among them” – but it was huge. For every person, for every home, it was huge. It was a miracle. A whole set of miracles.

Then came the main event, what everyone remembers, the only miracle recorded in all four Gospels: the miracle of bread and fish and about five thousand men, besides the women and children.

The hours had been rolling by. (Who knows how long it took Jesus to “heal the sick among them”?) Now it was late, the people hadn’t eaten, and there wasn’t enough food. The disciples presented that problem to Jesus. And they proposed a solution. But Jesus had another idea. Jesus took bread from the disciples’ hands. And a miracle happened. He took the bread, said the blessing, broke the bread, and gave it to his disciples. (Does that set of actions sound familiar to you? Look for it next Sunday morning.) And the disciples, not Jesus – the disciples fed the crowds.

Five thousand men, plus women and children, sat on the grass. They ate five small loaves and two fish. And they never ran out. And they all had plenty. And there were leftovers – more left-overs than start-out-withs. It was a miracle, without a doubt.

But the day wasn’t over yet. Jesus sent his disciples away in the boat. He sent the crowds home. And then he finally had his time alone with God. Meanwhile wind and waves were tossing the disciples to and fro on the lake until, early in the morning, Jesus walked out to meet them. Yes, he walked out to them, walked on water. It was enough to scare any sensible person. And the disciples were scared when they saw him. Yet Peter walked out on the water, too. Then he was scared by the wind, and Jesus had to save him. But both Jesus and Peter had walked on water. Impossible. It was a miracle. What a day it had been!

**Whether it’s one miracle or a day-full of miracles, what’s the point of it?** Sometimes we think of miracles as demonstrations of God’s power. Certainly some miracles do demonstrate God’s power. The Old Testament describes miracles as the work of God’s “mighty hand and outstretched arm.” That’s about power. But I don’t think the point of a miracle is to get us or anyone else to say, “Wow! Lookee what God can do!” Of course God can do amazing, miraculous things. There’s no surprise in that, is there? Is anything too hard for God? Is anything impossible for God? The point of a miracle (or set of miracles) is not the abstract demonstration of God’s power. Something more than that is going on. I don’t say this to rule out “gratuitous” miracles. Perhaps some miracles are mere demonstrations of power. (I do wonder about that floating ax-head.) But that’s certainly not the general rule with miracles. And it’s certainly not the case with the miracles of Jesus.

What is the point of a miracle or set of miracles? A miracle indicates that God is here. That God is here in this place, in this moment, in this event, in this person. A miracle indicates that God is here and at work.

When Elisha sets twenty loaves of bread before one hundred men and they all eat and have their fill and there is bread left over, it means that the Lord is with Elisha. It means that the Word of the Lord is coming through Elisha. And that Word will not return empty.

When Peter's shadow falls upon and heals people waiting for it in faith, it means that the Lord is with Peter. It means that the Word of the Lord – the word that Christ is king – is coming through Peter. And so, through Peter, many enter the kingdom.

And when Paul shakes off a poisonous snake that has bitten him and he lives, it means that the Lord is with Paul. It means that the Word of the Lord is coming through Paul, finding its way to the seven hills of Rome.

That's how it is with miracles. A miracle indicates that God is here, that God is at work.

And then there are the miracles of Jesus. The miracles of Jesus indicate much the same thing. That in this place, in this time, in these events, in this person, God is present. God is at work. But with Jesus there is not one miracle or ten miracles or even a hundred miracles. With Jesus there is miracle after miracle after miracle. With Jesus the miracles are so many, so often, so continual, that it is not enough to say that God is present, that God is at work.

The miracles of Jesus say more than any others. They say, "The kingdom of God is here." They say, "The king is here." Moses and his miracles served the king. Elisha and his miracles served the king. Peter and his miracles served the king. But Jesus is the king. Too much happens around him and through him not to reach this conclusion. But there's more.

There were other reasons, too, but the miracles of Jesus – so many, so often, so continual – drove the church to conclude not just that God was present in Jesus, not just that God was with Jesus, but that God was Jesus and Jesus was God. Jesus, the miracle man – Jesus, the church concluded – and there was no avoiding this conclusion – Jesus is a member of the Holy Trinity. God from God. Light from Light. True God from true God. Having the same essence as God the Father.

What was the point of Jesus' miracles? To show compassion? Certainly. To bear witness to the presence of the kingdom of God and of its king? Absolutely. But more than that, those miracles revealed Jesus as God – holy God, eternal God, God with us, a dogmatic conclusion, no doubt, but a real one nonetheless.

**Now . . . what do we do with this revelation? With this dogma?** Last Sunday afternoon, Martha and I went to church. (That's right, we went to church twice last Sunday!) It was the Armenian Church of Central and Southern Ohio. They meet once a month at St. James Episcopal Church on Calumet. Martha and I understood only a little of the service. It was conducted almost entirely in Armenian. We followed along as best we could in the book that contained the liturgy – one column in Armenian, a second column in transliterated Armenian (Armenian words with Roman letters), and on the facing page an English translation. We did our best to follow along, page after page after page. What was clear, despite the language barrier, were the two high points in the service. The first was the reading and hearing of the Gospel. The second was the giving and receiving of the Body and Blood of Christ.

On Monday, I think it was, I followed up on-line to learn more about that liturgy. Here's what I found out. The liturgy in the Armenian Church focuses on Christ coming to be present with his people, in particular as he comes in the Gospel and in the Sacrament. Most of the liturgy, page after page, is spent preparing for those two moments when Christ makes himself especially present. It's no time to be casual, haphazard, or ill-prepared. Not when Christ is coming to be present among his people. So there are Scriptures. There are prayers. There are pleas. There are processions. Before the Gospel is read, the choir proclaims, "*Aseh Asdvadz*. God is speaking." And before the Sacrament is shared, the priest removes his shoes, because he is standing on holy ground in the presence of Christ.

The Armenian Church has found a way of responding to what God has revealed, to the dogma that God is Jesus and that Jesus is God. How might we respond to God with us in Jesus Christ? To the Holy Trinity among us? How might we respond to Christ, the Holy One, speaking to us in the Gospel? How might we respond to Christ, the Holy One, giving himself to us in his Body and Blood? How might we respond to Christ, the Holy One, who is among us when we gather? How might we respond to Christ, the Holy One, who sends us into the world and promises never to leave us, never to forsake us, so that we are always in Christ's holy presence?

On Sunday, will we not be on time? Will we not quiet ourselves in Christ's presence? Will we not listen attentively and eagerly to Scripture? Will we not humble ourselves to receive the Sacrament of Christ's Body and Blood? Will we not busy ourselves in prayer throughout the liturgy?

On Monday, will we not begin our day by acknowledging Christ in prayer? Will we not carry the presence of Christ in our hearts to guide us? Will we not carry the Word of Christ in our minds to direct us? Will we not carry the hope of Christ in our spirits to encourage us? And will we not end our day by acknowledging Christ once again in prayer?

More than a "miracle man" is among us. He is God Almighty. Will we not stand in awe in his presence, here together today and wherever he sends us tomorrow?

#### **Addendum: A Preparatory Word for Holy Communion**

*I was asked to publish the words of preparation that I spoke near the conclusion of the Sunday liturgy. I was, however, speaking extemporaneously. Below is my attempt to recall the substance, at least, of what I said.*

Next Sunday morning, if the Lord tarries, we plan to celebrate Holy Communion. The church has never quite figured out what's going on in Holy Communion . . . I'm not sure that's a problem. The sacrament is a mystery that is beyond fully understanding, beyond fully expressing, though the church, of course, has always tried to give some account of that mystery.

You may recall the words of the angel Gabriel to the virgin Mary. When she asked how it would be that she would bear a child, he told her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. And so the holy one to be born will be called Son of God" (Luke 1:35). In the Armenian Church, the priest prays those words over the bread and the wine: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you . . ." This is both an acknowledgment and a plea that somehow, through the mysterious action of God, Christ will be made present in the bread and the wine.

Our tradition, too, has its own expression of that mystery. In our confessions we say that in the Sacrament the Holy Spirit unites us with Christ, with his body and blood, that somehow the Spirit brings us into the heavenly presence of God, where Christ is seated at the right hand of the Father.

That's why we come to the sacrament having prepared ourselves. Because it is no small thing to draw near to God. It is no small thing for God to draw near to us. It is no small thing to commune with Jesus Christ in all his holiness.