

**A LIFE OF JESUS**  
*the third in a seven-part series*

"a worker of wonders"



This is the third sermon in a series of seven in which I am attempting this Lent to sketch the life of Jesus, from beginning to end. Last week, we looked carefully at the event that marked the beginning of Jesus' public ministry, namely, his baptism by John. By the conclusion of that sermon, I tried to establish my belief that in the end Jesus' message and ministry was radically different from John.

Unlike John the Baptist, for example, Jesus' proclamation of the coming Kingdom of God was accompanied by great "signs and

wonders." The Fourth Gospel interestingly states unequivocally that "John (the Baptist) did no sign" (Jn. 10.41). But Jesus did. And his signs and wonders, along with his teachings, form the two principal activities of Jesus' ministry.

The benchmark of this sermon is that Jesus was indeed a "worker of great signs and wonders." Do not be dazzled, however, or distracted here by Jesus' miracles, for I mean by "signs and wonders" something more than just "miracles." For instance, last week we looked at Jesus' cleansing of the Temple, that dramatic and prophetic acting out of John's message that the Temple was defiled. That cleansing of the Temple, if done at the beginning of his public ministry as the Fourth Gospel records, may have been the first of Jesus' great signs and wonders, although there was nothing particularly miraculous about it. Nonetheless "when (Jesus) was in Jerusalem during the Passover festival, many," we are told, "believed in his name because they saw the signs that he was doing" (Jn. 2.23). We are also told that crowds of Galileans welcomed Jesus on his return, for they had "seen all that he had done in Jerusalem at the feast" (Jn. 4.45).

Shortly after Jesus returned, there occurs the story of the feeding of the five thousand, another great sign and wonder, and one of the few stories that is found in all four of our Gospels. Also you may remember that one of the few things we know John the Baptist preached, was that if someone "has two tunics, then let him share with him who has none; and he who has food, let him do

likewise" (Lk. 3.10). Now some interpreters of the feeding of the five thousand see it not so much as a supernatural miracle of multiplying the loaves and fishes, but as another dramatic and prophetic fulfillment of John the Baptist's message, where those who had brought food on that day were perhaps a little reluctant to let on to that fact, for fear that they would have to share with so large a crowd, and that there won't be enough to go around. However the crowd was inspired by Jesus' willingness to share the young boy's loaves and fishes such that they brought out their own food and shared with those around them, as John as preached they should do, and there was then more than enough food then to go around. "When the people saw the sign which (Jesus) had done," the Scriptures record, "they said 'This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world! . . . (and) Perceiving then that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, Jesus withdrew again to the hills by himself" (Jn. 6.15).

Not all of Jesus' signs and wonders were fulfillment of John's message. Indeed some of them actually differentiated Jesus from John. For instance, rather than separate himself from the unclean and the unrighteous as John had done out there in the wilderness, Jesus appears to have sought out the company of sinners and tax-collectors in the cities, and the opportunity to mingle and eat with them, and assure them of God's love and mercy. That sign of Jesus caused many to wonder.

In the same way Jesus appears to have reassured the sick and the diseased of God's love and mercy. This too was a great sign and wonder. For the Jews of Jesus' day interpreted all sickness and disease as evidence of God's punishment or judgment upon them. You may recall that on one occasion Jesus was asked by his own disciples whether a certain man born blind was blind because of his sin, or the sin of his father. Either way the blindness was understood by Jesus' own disciples as the result of sin, or unrighteousness. This is why the seriously diseased, like the blind or lepers for instance, were usually isolated from the rest of the community. They were social outcasts. They were permanently defiled, and the good Jews of that day did not want to be contaminated by them, to become unclean themselves. Thus Jesus' actions of repeatedly making contact with the blind, the lame, with lepers, and the possessed was simply extraordinary, and dramatically different from that of other religious leaders of that time. Jesus' words and actions in such cases must have brought with them an immeasurable element of comfort and consolation and even healing to the outcasts and the despised.

Now the working of mighty acts and *healings* go hand in hand in the Jewish tradition. Jesus was not unique in this way. Moses, for example, is said to have performed many signs and wonders, and also healed many people. So did the prophet Elisha, who even raised a young man from the dead. Jesus was essentially following a long Jewish tradition set by the *nabi* or the *hasid*, the wise

men and holy ones of Israel. In the century before Jesus we know of a Galilean named Honi the Circle Drawer who was a powerful worker of mighty deeds, and in the century after Jesus there was in Galilee another particularly reputed healer named Hanina ben Dosa.

No, Jesus was not unique as a healer and worker of wonders. So what did his signs and wonders mean? Nowadays we often get all caught up in debating the nature of miracles in such stories, sometimes seeing 'miracles' where no miracles actually occurred. And this I think we sometimes miss the more important point. There are no claims in the Gospels to natural laws being broken or supernatural events in the Scriptures. Interpretations of that type would require a different kind of understanding than was present in first century Palestine. The early Christian writers, and apparently Jesus himself, saw these mighty works as evidence, not of Jesus' own personal power or divine nature, but of the fact that the kingdom of God was indeed at hand. These mighty signs and wonders were evidence of the fulfillment of Jesus' preaching and message.

And it was apparently Jesus' mighty signs and wonders which attracted the big crowds, not his preaching. And there are times when it appears Jesus is all too aware that his message was getting lost in its medium, times when the crowds weren't interested in what he had to say, but wanted to see only signs and wonders. On one occasion, "(Jesus) sighed deeply in his

spirit, and said, 'Why does this generation ask for a sign?'" On another occasion, Jesus says to the crowd: "Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe" (Jn. 4.48). And later "Blessed are those who have not seen me and yet believe" (Jn. 20.29).

And that brings us to this week's pivotal story, the familiar story of Jesus' homecoming to Nazareth. The first five chapters of the Gospel of Mark, believed to be our oldest Gospel, are full of the accounts of various signs and wonders that Jesus performed, and Mark duly reports the huge crowds that gathered around him. At one point, the crowds were so large that a paralytic had to be let down through the roof. On other occasion, Jesus' family had come to try and actually seize Jesus at Capernaum, where the crowds were so great that they could not get close to him. Shortly thereafter, Jesus returns home to Nazareth, the native son done good, the local hero. Luke moved this story of Jesus' homecoming to the beginning of his ministry right after the temptation in the wilderness, and many a Hollywood movie of Jesus highlights this event at the start of his preaching career. But I think that the older Gospel Mark has it right. It is only after five chapters worth of signs and wonders and healings and huge crowds following him that Jesus returns home to Nazareth.

"And he came to Nazareth where he had been brought up;" the Scriptures record, "and (Jesus) went to the synagogue, as his custom was, on the Sabbath day. And he stood up to read; and there was given to him the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. He

opened the scroll, and found the place where it was written; 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.' And he closed the scroll, and gave it back to the attendant, and sat down; and the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. And he began to say to them, 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing' . . ."

At his own homecoming, "all spoke well of (Jesus) (at first)" (Lk. 4.22), and then they asked 'what we have heard you did at Capernaum, do here also in your own country' . . ." (Lk. 4.16-23). They didn't seem to want to hear Jesus preach, they wanted to see signs and wonders. Only Luke's version of the story tells us what Jesus actually said to the crowd in Nazareth, what he taught them. Jesus offended his hometown folk by repeating to them, not one but two different biblical stories about how God had passed over his own chosen people, in order to minister to strangers and outsiders; stories where foreigners found God's favor and Israel did not (Lk. 4.25-28). First Jesus reminded them of the story when there were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah the prophet and how there was a great famine in the land for three and a half long years. Yet the great Hebrew prophet Elijah was sent by God with relief to none of the Israelites, but only to a widow of Zarephath, a Phoenician, a stranger in the

land of Sidon, a foreigner, where Elijah saves the widow and her family, even reviving her son when he died. Secondly, Jesus reminded the hometown crowd of the story when there were many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and how Elisha healed none of them, but only Naaman the Syrian, an officer in the army of Israel's enemies. Jesus was not telling them anything new with these stories. He was telling them things that were right there in their own Scriptures, only that was not apparently how they read them. So after these stories the crowd at Nazareth quickly rejected Jesus. The minute Jesus denied them their special status, and broke down the barriers between them and foreigners, Jesus went from being a favorite son to degenerate stranger, who offended them so badly that they decided to kill him. For when they heard his preaching, according to Luke, all in the synagogue were filled with rage (4:29-30). (And Jesus) could do no mighty work there . . ." (Mk. 6.5) and "all in the synagogue were filled with wrath. And they rose up and put him out of the city, and led (Jesus) to the brow of the hill on which their city was built, that they might throw him down headlong. But passing through the midst of them he went on his way" (Lk. 4.28-30). And from the Gospels it appears that Jesus never went home again. For his own people had tried to kill him, all because he could not or would not perform signs and wonders for them. What a contrast between the crowd of Galileans that had earlier welcomed him after his appearance in Jerusalem, a crowd



that would have crowned him king, and this crowd at Nazareth that sought to kill him.

As Jesus began to move from actions to words, from "signs and wonders" to teaching, the crowds began to turn against him, or to simply diminish. What was he saying that so outraged or discouraged them? That is the topic for next week. AMEN.