

Week 2 Discussion (Jan. 16, 2021)

More miracles and healings are headed our way this week—and, predictably, more doubt and questions. The readings for this week show the divine power of Jesus as he displays his reign over the natural world, from calming the storms to driving out unclean spirits, from healing the sick to raising the dead, from multiplying five loaves and two fishes to walking on water. And still, despite all the evidence in front of them, the people of the day and even the disciples have trouble believing in Jesus as the Son of God. It's easy for us today to belittle the crowds and disciples for their "unbelief," but this character trait connects humans through the ages. If we don't understand it, if something can't be explained by reason or science or tradition, we question it. How could this be? When confounded by a situation, we dismiss it rather than allow for the possibility of miracles in our midst.

After Jesus commands the wind and gives permission for unclean spirits to enter 2,000 swine (who subsequently drown in the sea), we hear about Jesus healing the daughter of Jairus as well as a woman plagued by bleeding. Interestingly, both stories include the number twelve (the age of the daughter and the number of years the woman has been sick). Like the numbers three and seven, twelve has a special place in biblical symbolism. Considered a "perfect" number that reflects the authority and power of God's kingdom, the number twelve appears nearly 200 times in the Bible: Jacob has twelve sons; in Leviticus, God commands twelve loaves of unleavened bread to be placed in the Tabernacle; Jesus first speaks in the temple at age twelve; and of course, Jesus calls twelve disciples. Biblical numerologists have a heyday with Revelation, especially chapter 21, with twelve in a starring role as the number of gates, angels, pearls, and more. Whether the inclusion of the number twelve is happenstance or purposeful in these passages from Mark is up for discussion, but Mark tends to be stingy with details unless there's a reason.

All of these miracles have set the townspeople aflutter. You can imagine the chatter: "Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands!" And we encounter the famous prophet-without-honor-in-the-hometown dig: "Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?" Haters gonna hate. I'm just thankful there was no social media in Jesus's day. We get a glimpse of what seems to be frustration from Jesus ("he was amazed by their unbelief"), but he doesn't let their skepticism dissuade him from his saving mission, and the healings and miracles continue.

Soon we encounter the horrific story of the beheading of John the Baptist. This is the longest version of this story, though it appears in all three synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke). This gruesome account offers a cautionary tale of the excesses of fear, greed, power, and manipulation. It also marks a turning point in the ministry of Jesus. Just as Jesus's public ministry began with his baptism by John the Baptist, John's murder is the beginning of Jesus's turn to Jerusalem and his own gruesome death. The Episcopal Church and other traditions remember this event in the liturgical calendar on August 29.

We end our weekly reading with two familiar and well-loved miracles. The Feeding of the 5,000 miracle, the only one recorded in all four gospels, offers both an example of Christ's divinity and a foreshadowing of the Last Supper, as Jesus "looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to his disciples to set before the people." While folks are packing up the leftovers (**twelve!** baskets full), the disciples head to their boat to cross the Sea of Galilee. When a storm rises, the disciples battle the wind, and Jesus comes to their rescue, literally walking on water to be with them—and us: "Take heart," Jesus says, yesterday, today, and tomorrow. "It is I. Do not be afraid."