

JUNE 2012

FRANCISCAN MEDIA

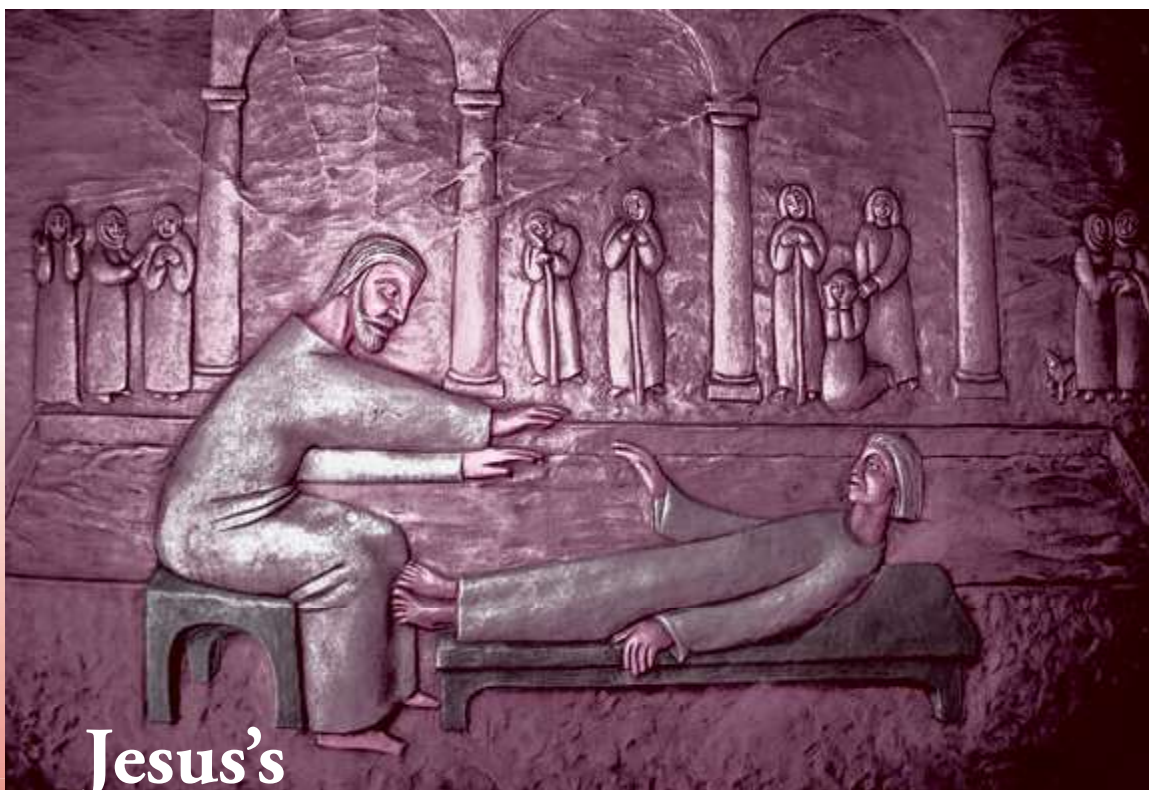
Catholic

UPDATE

C0612

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by John R. Barker, OFM



Jesus's “MIGHTY DEEDS” of HEALING

in Mark's Gospel

Christians believe in a compassionate God who, through Jesus, works to bring healing and wholeness. The Gospel of Mark features over a dozen “mighty deeds” or healings performed by Jesus. He gives sight to the blind and hearing to the deaf, casts out demons, and heals a hemorrhaging woman and a paralyzed man. Healing stories fill about one-fourth of this shortest Gospel.

Mark wants readers of his Gospel to understand that Jesus’s “mighty deeds” of healing and exorcising demons are expressions of God’s victory over evil.

COVER IMAGE FROM THE CROSIERS/GENE PLAINSTED, OSC

When Mark assembled his Gospel, he didn't haphazardly string together stories about Jesus healing people and exorcising demons. He arranged them to express who Jesus is, what he came to do, and what this means for his disciples.

These stories demonstrate that Jesus is the Messiah, who has power to heal and cast out demons. But if that were the whole point, one or two stories would suffice. So why are there so many mighty deeds in Mark? And what do they mean—for him and for us?

When we hear these stories, we must search for the larger messages being presented. Let's look at three stories: Jesus's first exorcism and two stories about curing blindness.

Jesus's Authority

Immediately after his baptism and trial in the desert, Jesus proclaims, "The kingdom of God is at hand" (1:15). His first mighty deed occurs shortly after, while he is teaching.

Mark writes, "The people were astonished at his teaching, for he taught

them as one having authority and not as the scribes." An unclean spirit possessing a man cries out, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God!" Jesus orders the spirit to be quiet and come out of the man. The people wonder, "What is this? A new teaching with authority. He commands even the unclean spirits and they obey him" (1:21-28).

We discover the significance of Jesus's entire mission: overcoming evil forces. This isn't just a confrontation between one unclean spirit and Jesus. The spirit knows that Jesus came to destroy "us"—all of Satan's forces—and to interfere with the havoc that evil wreaks in the world: sickness, possession, sin, and death.

God's reign is manifested in this man's healing. Mark wants us to understand everything else in his Gospel—other exorcisms and healings and, eventually, Jesus's death and resurrection—as manifestations of the battle God is waging and winning against his cosmic enemies.

This story also addresses the question of Jesus's "authority." The people recognize and are amazed by his unique authority. At story's end, they again express astonishment at this "new teaching with authority."

An exorcism story that begins and ends with mention of Jesus's teaching authority tells us the two are intimately connected. What's "new" in Jesus's teaching is that it's accompanied by a sign that confirms it—God's kingdom is at hand; you can see it for yourself.

The scribes *talk about* God; Jesus *brings about* God's reign. God's authority is now exercised through Jesus—his "Holy One." In Jesus, God actively fights evil, whose ultimate destruction is ensured. Mark's other exorcism and healing stories share in this first story's meaning.

Victory Over Evil

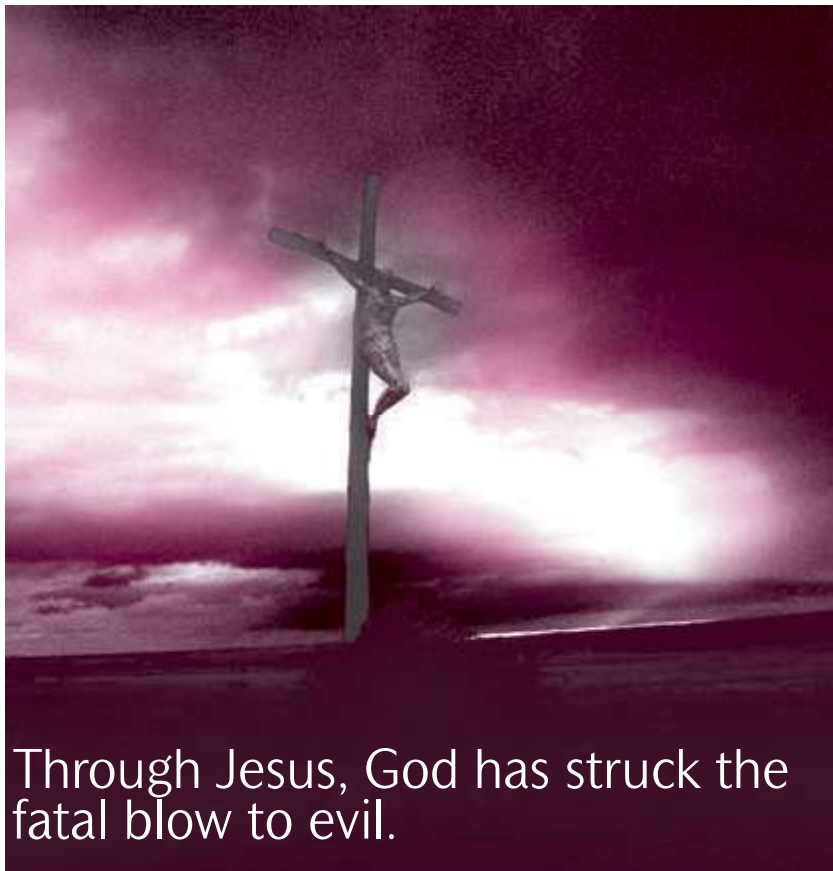
Mark wants readers to understand that Jesus's mighty deeds express God's victory over evil. It's part of God's plan to heal and restore creation to wholeness and harmony.

Jewish tradition expected that healings would accompany the Messiah's coming: "Then the eyes of the blind shall see, and the ears of the deaf be opened; Then the lame shall leap like a stag, and the mute tongue sing for joy" (Is 35:5-6).

But the crowds might be distracted by Jesus's mighty deeds and fail to understand the demands of his mission. If they concentrate too much on God's triumphs, they may not recognize the sacrifice required to achieve them. Mark makes it clear that Jesus's mighty deeds can only be properly understood when seen from the perspective of the cross: God's victory over evil comes at tremendous cost.

Mark dramatizes how difficult it can be for Christian disciples to understand how much of a shadow the cross casts over the mission of Jesus. The disciples are portrayed as well-intentioned but slow, never really comprehending the meaning of Jesus's words and actions.

PHOTO FROM DIGITAL STOCK



Through Jesus, God has struck the fatal blow to evil.

This is especially true when Jesus starts to talk about his death in the Gospel's second half. Here the journey to Jerusalem and to the cross begins, and Jesus begins to teach his disciples who he is and who they're expected to be.

The story of Jesus's journey to Jerusalem places great emphasis on two main things—Jesus's predictions of his passion and his teachings on discipleship—making it clear that the two are connected. To be disciples, we must be willing to follow Christ to the cross (see 8:34).

To help his readers appreciate the relationship between Jesus's journey to the cross and the journey of discipleship, Mark brackets this section with two accounts of Jesus healing the blind, placing these stories as symbols of the relationship among God's healing power, Christ's cross, and the call to discipleship.

'See' Our Discipleship

As Jesus turns toward Jerusalem, the people of Bethsaida bring a blind man to Jesus and ask him "to touch him."

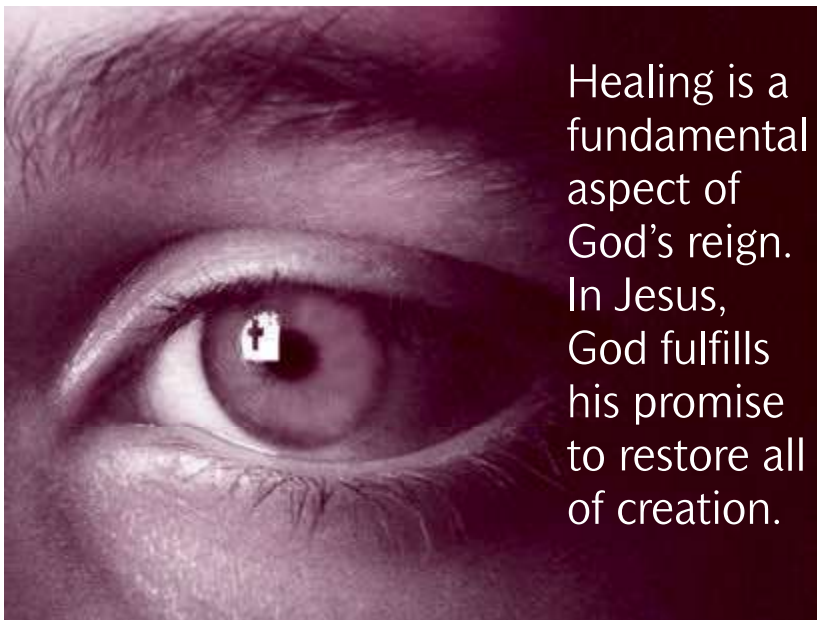


PHOTO FROM THE CROSSIERS/GENE PLAISTED, OSC

Healing is a fundamental aspect of God's reign. In Jesus, God fulfills his promise to restore all of creation.

Jesus puts spittle on the man's eyes and lays hands on him. The man says he sees "people looking like trees and walking." He's gained some sight, but it's imperfect and hazy. Jesus lays hands on him again, and his sight is restored completely: "He could see everything distinctly" (8:22-26).

The man gains his sight gradually. Mark presents a symbol of discipleship in the man's healing. Sight is a biblical metaphor for understanding the ways

and will of God. The blind man stands for all who would be disciples, but who only come to understand gradually what this means. It's about our coming to "see" our discipleship in fits and starts. It's only through the ongoing, healing care of Jesus that we see "distinctly" what we're called to be. And this only happens when we understand the cross of Christ as *our* cross. This story fittingly comes at the beginning of the journey to Jerusalem.

UNDERSTANDING Mark's MESSAGE

1. CONCENTRATE on the meaning Mark ascribes to the mighty deeds of Jesus. Healing is a fundamental aspect of God's reign. In Jesus, God was fulfilling the promises he had made so long before to restore all of creation.

2. OPEN YOUR EYES to the ways Jesus continues to work in the world. Addiction, cruelty, suffering of all kinds—and apathy toward them—are some of the forms that evil takes in our world today, and people have been freed from them.

Can you recognize in your life or in the lives of others how God has confronted these evils and conquered them? Can you, to use the words of the author Mary Catherine Hilkert, OP, "name grace" in our world? More importantly, can you give hope to those who still suffer by proclaiming what God has already done for others?

3. SEE Jesus's mighty deeds from the perspective of the cross, itself a manifestation of evil. Through Jesus, God has struck the fatal blow to evil. In the end, God's reign will triumph. For the time being, the cross must still be borne in every generation by every follower of Jesus.

"Name grace," but also "name evil." Look for signs of God's kingdom, but also recognize evil. In what ways does evil wreak havoc in the world, your community, your own life? Do you have the love it takes to confront evil as Jesus did on the cross? Do you have faith that, if you risk confronting evil, Jesus will be with you? Do you dare hope that taking up the cross by naming and challenging evil can bring healing?

If you can't yet do all this, cry out to Jesus, like the father of a boy with a demon, "Have compassion on us and help us!" (9:22).

Nearing the end of this journey, Jesus heals another blind man (10:46-52). As he and his followers leave Jericho, Bartimaeus, a blind beggar, calls out, "Jesus, son of David, have pity on me."

When Jesus tells the people to bring the man to him, Bartimaeus throws aside his cloak, leaps up, and goes to Jesus, who asks him, "What do you want me to do for you?" The blind man replies, "I want to see." Without touching him, Jesus says, "Go your way; your faith has saved you." The blind man immediately gains his sight and follows Jesus.

Here is another symbol of discipleship, but the context and results present a new lesson. This occurs at the end of the journey to Jerusalem, during which Jesus has instructed his disciples about the cost of his mission and the demands of their discipleship.

Mark shows what discipleship looks like when one has fully learned these lessons. It's characterized by crystal-clear sight: Bartimaeus gains his sight completely and instantly, even without being touched. He approaches Jesus

with faith. When Jesus's followers (symbolic of the faith community) tell him to "take courage; get up, he is calling you" (the call to discipleship), Bartimaeus runs to Jesus. His response is immediate and confident; he knows that Jesus will heal him.

For Mark, this can only happen at the end of the journey to the cross. Only a disciple who fully understands what sort of messiah Jesus is can possess such mature faith. We're told that Bartimaeus follows Jesus "on the way." Bartimaeus, who represents the enlightened follower, goes with Jesus to Jerusalem, symbolically following him to the cross.

All of Mark's healing stories express not only facts of the healings, but also larger messages that Mark wishes to express through them. Paying attention to these larger messages can deepen our understanding of Jesus's mission and our own call to follow him. ■

A longer version of this article appeared in the January 2012 issue of St. Anthony Messenger magazine.

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UPDATE

Question Box

- 1) What has been your most significant experience of healing?
- 2) How well do you follow Christ by confronting evil as he did?
- 3) How can you offer hope to someone who is suffering?



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UNDERSTANDING MIRACLES

TODAY we understand the natural world to operate according to impersonal forces or "laws of nature." When someone experiences healing that cannot be explained according to our understanding of these laws, we call it a miracle. We understand it as God interfering with the laws of nature.

The word *miracle* as used today doesn't really reflect the way people in Jesus's time understood the extraordinary. They didn't think of the world in terms of impersonal laws. Rather, they believed God's will and purpose supported and guaranteed the world's normal functioning. God's power was always at work, keeping things moving according to divine wisdom. The extraordinary—such as a sudden or unexpected healing—was considered an eruption of God's power rather than an interruption of the laws of nature.