

MIRACLE

WALKING IN THE WONDER OF JESUS

A LENTEN STUDY



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OVERVIEW

You are invited to walk in the wonder of Jesus as we explore the seven miracles in the Gospel of John during this season of Lent. Each miracle serves as a sign, pointing to an important aspect of Jesus: his identity and mission in the world. Experience the wonder of Jesus and have life in his name.

THIS LENTEN STUDY BELONGS TO

MIRACLE WALKING IN THE WONDER OF JESUS

INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the season of Lent, a period in which Christians remember the events leading up to and including the death and resurrection of Jesus, whose life and teachings are the foundation of Christianity. United Methodists celebrate Lent as a time of reflection and self-analysis and intentional consideration of what we believe and stand for as Christians. At the end of 40 days, we will emerge with a renewed understanding of the magnitude of Jesus' sacrifice for us and a renewed trust in God's sovereignty in the light of the greatest celebration that the universe has ever known: Easter!

HOW TO USE THIS LENTEN STUDY

READ>LISTEN>DISCUSS

- 1. READ** each chapter. The chapters are aligned chronologically according to the way the miracle stories unfold in the Gospel of John. The NRSVUE Bible version is used throughout this study unless otherwise noted.
- 2. LISTEN** to the sermons each week. During worship, the stories will travel with us beginning with the start of our Lenten journey on Ash Wednesday, through Holy Week, and eventually Easter.
- 3. DISCUSS** the chapters, sermons, and reflection questions with your life group or consider them individually. Sign up for a Lenten Study at FlorisUMC.org/lenten-study or RestorationReston.org/lenten-study.

SCHEDULE

- Wednesday, March 5 | Chapter 1 Divine Exchange | Ash Wednesday
- Sunday, March 9 | Chapter 2 Life-Giving Word
- Sunday, March 16 | Chapter 3 Movement of Freedom
- Sunday, March 23 | Chapter 4 Complete Fulfillment
- Sunday, March 30 | Chapter 5 The Great I Am
- Sunday, April 6 | Chapter 6 Light of the World
- Sunday, April 13 | Chapter 7 Resurrection and the Life | Palm Sunday
- Thursday, April 17 | Holy Thursday Services
- Friday, April 18 | Good Friday Services
- Sunday, April 20 | Easter Services

QUESTIONS?

- **Floris UMC:** Bill Gray at bgray@florisumc.org or Carol Edwards at cedwards@florisumc.org
- **Restoration:** Nikki Buermeyer at nbuermeyer@restorationreston.org or Sangeeta Jacob at nishalee68@gmail.com

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PROLOGUE

by Gina Anderson-Cloud

UNPACKING MIRACLES

As a mother, if I counted the times that one of my kids came running to me pronouncing something miraculous in their younger years, it would be a lot. From there being leftover pizza in the fridge from the night before for my hungry teen to making the Junior Varsity volleyball team their freshman year, many things were labeled as a “miracle” with a lightness for the word, as well as an appreciation for whatever seemed to be right with the world at the moment. The connection to what was a miracle was really in the eye (or mind) of the beholder—the one to whom the good thing had happened.

As a pastor, my encounters with the word miracle have interestingly yielded a range of pronouncements, as well. I’ve experienced a church member who shared with great joy and believed that it was “a miracle” that he found a convenient parking space downtown during the Christmas parade when generally there was no parking anywhere. I’ve also seen well-meaning, faithful people say it was “a miracle” that their favored political candidate prevailed in an election. Additionally, I have heard several stories of Christians narrowly escaping what would have been a tragic car accident labeling the event as “a miracle,” when they were left unharmed.

In other contexts, I have witnessed an ICU doctor tell family members that their loved one would not live through the night. Yet, with the light of day, there was a major turnaround in condition and recovery happened “miraculously.” I have heard many claim successful medical interventions to be “miracles.” Relatedly, I’ve listened to glorious accounts of lives “miraculously” saved from the grasp of long-held addiction, as well as powerful transformative stories of “the miracle of faith” that uprooted lives in ways that truly seemed like a new person was born in the grace they came to know through faith in Jesus.

As we toss the word about in our present context, the stuff of miracles can have a range in understanding, as well as explanations. We use the word lightly. We use it when things go our way or when things seem good for us or our loved ones. Then, there’s this other space where miracles hold a place of transcendence: a unique space where with our human perspective, we sense that something more (outside of us) is at work that goes beyond our full ability to understand.

THE STRUGGLE WITH THE TOPIC

This space, like the ICU account from above, or the story of the person suffering from addiction who arrests their condition, also causes many questions to emerge particularly about theodicy. Theodicy is a theological concept that questions how divine goodness can coincide with the reality of evil and/or hardships where it seems that God is absent or simply God refuses to intervene. This struggle is age old and has not been cleared even as we have the benefit of many theological works on the topic. Questions emerge that are frankly hard to answer: Why would God decide to save one person with addiction over my relative, or heal an illness in your loved one and not mine?

In our struggle with the topic, it often sounds like a miracle until we don't see the miracle emerge for ourselves. This is the space of tension and so much more.

The struggle of theological interpretations of miracles, even the miracles we see in scripture, has left many feeling harmed or just left out in some way because the lack of receiving what to us seems miraculous has often been wrongly attributed to flaws within the believer or person suffering. This misguided theology unfortunately makes us cautious to enter the space of discussing, teaching about, or as preachers, preaching the miracle stories of scripture. We do not wish to do more harm. Yet, Jesus' ministry pivots around miraculous actions. So, what are we to do with miracles?

WHAT DO WE DO WITH MIRACLES?

As a group of theologically trained church staff, our work together in reflecting upon the seven miracle stories found in the Gospel of John hopes to look beyond the controversy and old harms done, to the connection God desires us to have with Jesus. The miracles in the Gospel of John are meant to be signs for us as we seek out a life fully connected to God. Miracles help us, if you will, understand life that involves the Holy—the transcendent nature of Christ.

This understanding of “life in Christ” is what John introduces in the very first chapter of the Gospel (John 1:4), and this life is rooted in the concept of *zōé*. *Zōé* is the Greek word used for life in the Gospel of John (and a few other places in the New Testament). It differs from *bios* which is also the Greek word for life. However, *bios* refers to our earthly life—our human corporeal existence. *Zōé*, on the other hand, is a life that is full, abundant, spiritual in nature, and connected to God's eternal plan of salvation. This abundant life, *zōé* is the gift that God wants for us and is available to us through our faith in Jesus. Our journey together through these seven miraculous happenings is intended to inspire wonder and a new or renewed connection with true

life, zóé, in Jesus. We offer this journey in the Lenten season with a desire to ready readers' hearts for the true miracle of Resurrection on the horizon. As you read the context of each miracle, we hope you will envision yourself traveling along with Jesus and the early disciples, perhaps walking the dusty hillsides or paths along the Sea of Galilee, noting along the way the miracles as signs for you to read, study, and incorporate into your understanding of the miraculous nature of a daily walk with our Lord.

CHAPTER 1

DIVINE EXCHANGE

John 2:1-11 | Turning Water into Wine
by Rev. Lauren Todd

Growing up in church, Ash Wednesday was always my favorite service. I know that's odd for anyone, but especially a child. I loved the somber nature of the day. In the United Methodist Church, where we speak so much about the grace of God, the church provided the only place to reflect upon my need for God's grace. While I wouldn't want to dwell on that forever, the experience of coming together and collectively naming our need for God as we prepared to move toward Easter spoke to me. It united me to the larger congregation and the whole story of human history and salvation through Jesus Christ. It meant my shortcomings, whatever they were, were not any larger or any smaller than those that Christ had encountered before, and it reminded me that God was larger than any sin I feared. "From dust, you have come, and to dust you shall return. Repent, and believe in the Gospel." Those words said while the sign of the cross was imposed upon my head in ash, reminded me that I was placed within the grand narrative of God's loving salvation. Within somberness, there was comfort.

As a pastor, my love for this day continues for much the same reason. Recently, I was blessed to be called to a hospice bedside on Ash Wednesday, and as I made the sign of the cross upon a beloved's forehead and said in front of the grieving family those words that remind us of our mortality, I was once again comforted by the underlying promise of the Gospel. Nothing can separate us from God's great love. Even in the presence of death itself, we experience the comfort of the Holy Spirit in the knowledge of salvation through Jesus Christ.

You can imagine my surprise when leading worship at my first Ash Wednesday after COVID. While the solemn nature of the day remained, I was amazed to see that after being reminded of their mortality, those worshipping in person left with joy—glee even—congregating outside in the Gathering Space. They talked for longer than typical, caught up with friends, and brought an energy to the beginning of Lent. Then, the next year, that energy remained. As I considered why, it dawned upon me that many people were seeing each other for the first time in a long time, as the Ash Wednesday service combines worshipers from across multiple sites and services at our church. We spent years being reminded of our mortality and the shortness of life during COVID but here, gathered together, we got to name that reality and claim the truth of our faith; that we are held within the fullness of God's story and saved by Jesus Christ.

It is that energy, joy, and glee that we find in our scripture for this day. When initially reading the story of a wedding celebration on Ash Wednesday, perhaps you thought “Isn’t this meant to be a somber day? What does this have to do with Ash Wednesday?” Well, I’m glad you asked, because this, Jesus’ first miracle in the book of John, points us to the reality of God’s presence with us through Jesus. So let’s break down this story a little and reflect together on how God may be using it to help us to know Jesus better.

It may be helpful to know as you move forward through the miracles of Jesus in the Gospel of John, that the wedding in Cana is very typical of the way John portrays a miracle story. He gives us the context, presents a need, shows us Jesus’ miraculous response to that need, and then describes how the people respond to the miracle. Each stage of this shows us something about God.¹

There is so much meaning caught up in the wedding, which is why it is a crisis worthy of Mary’s attention when the hosts run out of wine. Such a failure in hosting could result in social judgment, and likely arose because the couple, like Jesus and Mary’s own family, were poor and unable to celebrate “properly.” Even more, wine is served as a symbol of joy, and a failure to have enough might suggest that the couple is not joyful in their union.

John mentions in setting the context for us that the wedding celebration was on its third day (John 2:1). The marriage covenant, or the celebration itself, is frequently used as a metaphor for God’s relationship to God’s people, both in the Old and New Testaments (for instance, Isaiah 62: 4-5; Matthew 22: 1-14; Revelation 19:9). Through this metaphor, we understand God’s kingdom to be a place overflowing with great joy while also being a fount of forgiveness, just as in the best situations spouses both delight in one another and must extend one another grace. More specifically, the wedding and marriage covenant imagery alludes to the messianic time. The messianic time is a term used to refer to a vision the prophets give of God’s reign when the Messiah, that is the savior, has entered into the world and ushered in a new era. It is when God’s salvation comes through the promised one, the messiah. By performing his first public miracle at a wedding, Jesus is signaling to those around him, and us, that he is connected to this vision of God’s kingdom, and is ushering it in. What’s more, John is careful to note that this story takes place on the third day of the wedding, which to those already familiar with Jesus’ life will be reminiscent of another important third day, the resurrection.

The Bible is filled with this kind of cyclical storytelling, in which images and language are reminiscent of former or future stories. For instance, the language in Revelation about the final coming of Jesus points us back toward the Garden of Eden and creation, or of how David and the role he plays point us forward to Jesus. John is doing similar work in setting the stage for this miracle, reminding us that this miracle, and indeed ourselves, are connected to the larger story of God’s salvation through Jesus Christ. God’s work is without beginning or end, and so even now, poised at the start of Lent, we already look with hope toward the resurrection.

So if this third-day wedding imagery is meant to show us that Jesus is ushering in the promised time of salvation, what are we to do with his response to his mother Mary, specifically when he says “My hour has not yet come?” When Jesus speaks of his “hour,” he is referring to the fulfillment of these plans of salvation in his crucifixion and resurrection. However, note that Jesus does still perform the miracle, showing us that God’s presence is real to us no matter what moment within the larger story of salvation we find ourselves.

An important note of Jesus’ response to his mother is in John 2:4. His language of “Woman, what concern is that to me and to you?” is not hostile, as we might read it in our modern context. Rather, it is a common Hebrew response used elsewhere in the Bible, like a turn of phrase, that shows acknowledgment without engagement. Think of that way you might respond “That’s life!” to someone’s observation of an inconvenience.

Of more interest to me is Mary’s response to his lack of engagement. Though he makes no indication that he will perform the miracle, she instructs the servants in John 2:5, “Do whatever he tells you.” She does not know if he will perform the miracle or not. Her trust, which is her faith, comes before the evidence provided by a miracle. She is willing to accept whatever Jesus’ choice is. She trusts his decision. Though she is the one who asks for the miracle and is ready to act in preparation, she also is ready to follow his leadership should he provide different instructions.

John goes on to tell us about the stone jars that were there, used to store water for the Jewish rite of purification. These jars were made from stone, as opposed to pottery, as it was believed that kept the water pure. He uses what is on hand. He could have chosen any way to make this miracle happen, but he uses what, and who, is around him.

Note that because it is the servants who receive Jesus’ instructions to fill and draw from the jars, it is they who are invited to help Jesus in the performance of the miracle. God asks for humanity to be involved in the signs, but their action requires trust and faith. Imagine bringing water to the steward! They risk looking foolish or worse being reprimanded. It is the least and the lowest who are given special insight into the source of this delectable wine. It holds echoes of the shepherds at Christmas, those on the outside drawn closest to the unfolding of God’s plan of salvation, and points us toward the cross, at which time women and thieves will have the clearest picture of the redemptive act Jesus performs. Time and time again, those who get the clearest vision of who Jesus is are the least and the lowest. Jesus chooses a poor couple to be the beneficiaries of his first miracle.

This sign reminds us that it is not always the chief stewards of the world, the experts, who have the most insight into God’s acts of salvation. Rather, this miracle, and the history of the Holy Spirit’s movement throughout the Bible and human history, shows us that God again and again chooses to reveal

himself to the poor and powerless.

Upon tasting this wine, the steward is amazed at its quality, but I would like to add that we should be amazed by its volume as well. Jesus produces 120-180 gallons of wine, about 2,000 glasses! The absurdity of the volume and quality point us towards the overflowing, abundant nature of God's presence with us in Jesus Christ. It is the communion cup that runs over. It is the blood that flows without restraint from the cross. It is the river that brings forth life from all it touches. It is grace upon grace. Remember how wine serves as a symbol of joy, and see how in the kingdom of God, joy is abundant for all.

This miracle shows us much of who God is revealing Godself to be in Jesus. We see God's presence with us; we see the fulfillment of God's promise of salvation; we see God's care and concern for those who are powerless; we see the abundance of joy offered by God. But what does this have to do with Ash Wednesday? On this day, we gather to repent, an act that is only possible because we see ourselves clearly. In light of Jesus' presence among us, we recognize our sin and mortality. We do that with confidence, even joy, and celebration, because we know that Jesus' presence with us points to the reality of God's kingdom among us. We know that we see ourselves clearly because of God's great love. We know that even as we come to repent, salvation is offered through Jesus Christ, who is the bridegroom prophesied in the Old Testament. We start this season of reflection already pointed toward the ultimate sign of God's love: the cross.

1. Gilberto A. Ruiz, "Commentary on John 2:1-11."

Reflection Questions

1. Pastor Lauren shares her remembrance of Ash Wednesday services. What was/is your experience of this Holy Day? Was this part of your tradition?
2. What does it mean for you to be in the “grand narrative of God’s salvation?” How does it manifest in your faith journey?
3. Why would a wedding theme be used to describe God and God’s people?
4. In John 2:4, what could Jesus’ lack of engagement of his mother’s request signify?
5. How has the focus on the lost, the lowly, the poor, and those on the margin as God’s chosen people make you feel? In what way(s) are you part of this focus?
6. The concept of zóé was introduced in the Prologue. How does this concept fit within the framework of the miracle at the wedding in Cana?
7. What is the symbolic meaning of the stone jars?
8. In John 2:11, what does John mean when he writes “Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee and revealed his glory, and his disciples believed in him.”?

CHAPTER 2

LIFE GIVING WORD

John 4:46-54 | Healing the Official's Son by Rev. Gina Anderson-Cloud

With the ashes from Wednesday long washed away, we step forward in our Lenten journey reminded of our sacred connection to Jesus. As we draw closer in this journey to the cross and resurrection ahead, we are called to awaken to the possibility that Christ offers us signs of his miraculous presence. In this week's reading, we will see that these signs can be apparent when we seek out Jesus.

As part of an educational immersion aimed at teaching unbiased perspectives on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, I visited Beit Jala in Israel. On the western side of the Hebron Road, it lies opposite the city of Bethlehem and below the hilltop Israeli settlement of Gilo. It was 2001, during the Second Intifada, a Palestinian uprising against Israeli occupation of the West Bank, and tensions in the community were high. Israeli tanks lined the hillside of Gilo, and there had been mortar fire into some Palestinian homes in Beit Jala the evening before. Jews had also told us of shelling near Gilo. As our guide walked us toward the rubble of shelled homes, he tried to explain all that we saw. Straining to understand, I suddenly heard yelling. It was a woman's voice, and as she neared us, I felt an adrenaline rush and quickly became fearful. We had just passed some young Palestinians with automatic weapons, and I could see soldiers walking near the tanks on the hill above as they looked down with binoculars. We were literally in the fire zone.

As the woman's voice became clearer, I heard, "Americans! Are you Americans?" Then, she began to run toward us and our guide stepped forward to stop her. As she ran, I glimpsed a gold cross over the dark scarf she wore shining brightly in the sun. I admit I breathed some relief as my mind said, "She's Christian!" This thought was pushed back as she continued yelling. She confronted us about American support of those who would "hurl bombs in the night toward children." She said this after asking if we were Christians, too. With hesitance, a few of us answered, "Yes."

The sign of the cross, the emblem of Jesus' suffering, and my redemption around this Christian woman's neck called out to me that day. All during the time she spoke to us, that cross was like a signpost that could not be ignored.

Staring at the cross, I felt relief on one hand as she approached, that we had something in common, that was of God. In my adrenaline-fed fear, I also

quickly thought: “Surely, she is not a suicide bomber or someone with a gun that would shoot?” However, almost as quickly as my thoughts rushed, on the other hand, I was confronted by the sign of the cross she wore. In Christ, the connection of our joined faith got real in ways that were painful and deeply challenging given our context—Christians, yet American, and Palestinians, standing in a blast zone.

Desiring to be heard (and perhaps seen as well), the woman shared that the bomb casing in her yard had an American insignia on it. She asked how she could explain to her child that a “Christian nation” could be a part of such a horrible act. Her voice and the cross she wore will never leave my memory and have shaped my way of seeing far beyond that street in Beit Jala.

As we think of this construct, of the power of a sign and God at work through the sign, I find it interesting that John’s Gospel uses the words “signs and wonders” instead of just the word miracles when he speaks of the seven miracles of Jesus. Generally, we believe that John changes this nomenclature when referring to the miracles of Jesus to point to something that has meaning beyond the miraculous events themselves. Importantly, when we look closely, the signs and wonders tell us about the nature of Jesus and help us understand more clearly his mission for humanity and all creation.

In our scripture reading this week, Jesus returns to Cana. Just before this, he was in Samaria changing the life and story of “the women at the well.” Now, in familiar Galilean territory, another stranger presents himself to Jesus, “a royal official,” who from the description, we suspect is a Gentile working for Herod, likely a centurion. This man has traveled a long distance to plead with Jesus for healing. His boy is very sick, near death in Capernaum (which today would be about an eight-hour walk; back then, maybe as long as two days due to the terrain). Jesus says to this desperate man, “Unless you see signs and wonders, you will not believe” (John 4:48). Then, with these simple words, “Go; your son will live” (John 4:50), we discover that at that very hour, the boy is made entirely well.

In this text, we are not given an elaborate backstory about the boy or the official. John asserts, however, that the man and his entire household change and become followers of Jesus because of this “sign” which he tallies in the text as the “second sign” (John 4:54) after the wine at the wedding of Cana. At this point in John’s Gospel, Jesus is on a mission of life-saving and life-changing.

Surely, we could leave the father’s story here in awe of how Jesus can just speak and by his command, things happen miraculously, even very far away. Yet, there is more to be taken in, more that this sign and wondrous act reveal about the divine nature of Jesus. In Beit Jala, the woman I encountered exemplified much more than a fellow believer in Christ. This became apparent as her story excruciatingly unfolded before us. In John’s telling of this miraculous healing in John 4, it is as if we should know the hard parts of the father’s story. In listening beyond what is written, we can discern a lot about

the tension in the context. Importantly, this man, a Gentile, is the enemy of the Jews. He is an accomplice in their oppression, and he is active in injustice simply by virtue of his vocation as a Roman Centurion. Moreover, this royal official held very different, contrasting ideas about religion, if only from his culture. Any righteous Jew would steer far away from someone like him.

Even so, with all the backstory baggage, this father seeks out Jesus in desperation and hope. In doing so, he finds his plea for help met with compassion and without condition. It is the grace-filled word of Jesus that changes the man's situation, gives his boy renewed health, and brings his whole family a new life.

Some feel that Jesus sounds harsh with the father when he says: "Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe." (John 4:48) However, when the man responds with an impassioned plea, "Come before my little boy dies" (John 4:49), Jesus extends compassion in seeing the man's desperate faith. Jesus' comment in verse 48 is most likely for us.

Herein lies the essence of this miracle. As the man affirms his belief in Jesus, the words of Jesus transform his life. These words know no boundary of culture or religion, of Gentile or Jew, or even of proximity. From our vantage point, we ascertain that with mere faith the words of Christ bring transformation. Thus, the big sign here is not the healing. The deeper purpose of the divine intervention with this family demonstrates the boundless nature of Jesus' words bringing life and hope for all.

To fully understand this, we must recall that John is the Gospel that begins by casting Jesus as preexistent (before creation) in the Word which was God:

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life and the life was the light of all people." (John 1:1-4)

The "Word" was Jesus. This Word and his words have the power to change situations and people, with love that reaches far and wide without condition. Jesus freely gives life (z^oé), as well as light to all. More than a couple thousand years after that Father trekked to Cana, this is still true for those seeking him today. Jesus reveals God's deep love for us that knows no boundaries and the emblem of the cross speaks with light and confronts us, even still. This Word that took on flesh in Jesus Christ and died upon the cross has the miraculous ability to change hearts, open eyes, and save individuals and households. Much like the women's cross was illuminated by the mid-day sun in Beit Jala, the Word of Jesus shines into our pain and offers hope, and within our most desperate moments connects us to a Word that yields life. This Word transforms us and ultimately leads us home.

Reflection Questions

1. What does this healing miracle reveal about faith versus seeing signs and belief?
2. In John 4:48, why does Jesus say “Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe.”?
3. How do you interpret the royal official’s persistence, particularly as he comes from outside the Jewish tradition to Jesus? Where else in the Gospels does this occur?
4. What significance does the healing have given the great physical distance between the boy and Jesus?
5. How does this passage challenge you when in your own prayer life there seems to be a lack of response from God?
6. As the official returns to Capernaum, his faith deepens. How does the man move from faith in miracles to complete faith and power in Jesus? How is his faith affected by the miracle?
7. When have you been confronted or challenged by an event and invited into deeper faith as a result? Like Pastor Gina with the woman and the cross, has God used a “sign” or symbol to speak to your heart in a way that you were led to be more open to see, hear, or be shaped through the encounter?
8. What similarities do you see between this healing miracle and the miracle at the wedding feast in Cana? How can what we learn from these events about Jesus speak to us today?

CHAPTER 3

MOVEMENT OF FREEDOM

John 5:1-15 | Healing a Paralyzed Man **by Rev. Lauren Todd**

While training in chaplaincy as part of the preparation for pastoral ministry, I was taught to ask the question “What does healing look like to you?” Most of the time, this question was answered with a confused look and then some variation of the phrase “not being sick anymore.” Occasionally, someone would answer with a response that justified my asking the question. “Healing would be for my family to reconcile before I die.” “Healing would mean I could lift my grandchildren again. I’m not looking to have everything back; that would be enough.” One time though, a gentleman looked at me and gave the response a lot of people thought, but didn’t have the courage to say. “What kind of a question is that?” It’s a fair ask, and I explained that sometimes, people have hopes for healing and understand it in terms larger than their bodily health.

When reading about the healing of this man at the pool, that gentleman and his candor come to mind. Jesus asks, “Do you want to be made well?” which seems like an obvious question. Through this miracle, as in every miracle, we see part of the nature of God revealed in Jesus, which here reminds us of the diversity of freedom offered through the healing work of Jesus Christ that cannot be contained by our limited imaginations.

This healing miracle comes in the Gospel of John immediately after Jesus has performed the second miracle, Jesus healing an official’s son, which was also healing, though one of a very different nature. Jesus is on his way to a festival when he comes upon these porches surrounding a pool where people wait to be healed. This brings us through John 5:3, but I must make a note about John 5:4. Depending on the translation of the Bible you are reading, you may not have John 5:4! In translations such as the King James Version (KJV), a line here is included that describes how an angel would go down to stir the water and the first person who got in is healed. In the 400 years since the KJV was written, older more reliable manuscripts have been discovered that don’t have that verse. Likely, a scribe copying the Gospel added a commentary for context in the margin, just like many of our study Bibles have, and through repeated copying, it was eventually introduced into the Gospel text itself. To reflect the most accurate way the Gospel of John was written, most modern translations remove this verse. Even with this scribe’s context, we cannot be sure if the stirring of the water and the resultant

healing in this pool is miraculous or if it is simply superstition. Either way, it is interesting that Jesus performs a healing miracle here, at a place where it is believed healing is miraculously possible.

We then are introduced to the man who will be the recipient of the healing, a man whom we are told has been sick for 38 years. The selection of this man is a complicated matter. In the previous healing miracle, the man approached Jesus, and in faith asked for his son to be made well. John does not give us any indication that this man calls out to Jesus. Rather, it is Jesus who approaches him. For me, this poses an uncomfortable question that must be at the heart of any reflection upon miracles. Why is this man chosen for a miracle and not the others around him? There were many sick people there, many who had been sick their whole lives as well, and nothing makes this man particularly “worthy;” in fact, as our story continues, the man willingly cooperates with those who seek to kill Jesus to avoid scrutiny himself. He does not express faith or even ask to be healed. When Jesus asks about his desire, the man doesn’t request healing, but rather simply laments that he cannot be carried into the pool and others beat him to the blessing he desires. This man lacks the community to help him be healed in the “normal way.” (Normal being a function of the culture and time.) Perhaps this is why the man is chosen. Jesus recognizes him as on the margins without the support of others. However, there certainly were many others who would have fit this category as well. Ultimately, I cannot provide you with a clear or satisfactory answer to this question but rather encourage that God’s indiscriminating grace through Jesus Christ is the very thing we are meant to ponder and question within this miracle.

Jesus heals because it is the work of God, not because it benefits Jesus. This man does not go on to convert others, praise Jesus, or even learn his name! Jesus is simply living out the gracious character of God which provides for all without discrimination.

Before that happens though, Jesus asks him a question: “Do you want to be made well?” I bring this up because I think it is a critical component of what we learn of God’s grace through this sign as well. This question helps us address the way healing has sometimes been used in a disempowering and “othering” way. If you are in a relationship with or are yourself someone with an obvious disability, you likely have a story about a “laying on of hands” in an attempt to perform healing, often without consent. Physical disabilities are used as metaphors for spiritual ineptitude, creating a sense that there is something “wrong” in need of “fixing” because of the disability. Jesus presumes no such thing and rather asks about this man’s desire and seeks his consent before engaging further. Jesus doesn’t presume that a life after healing would be better or more holy, and neither should we.

After their exchange, Jesus instructs him to “Stand up, take your mat and walk.” (John 5:8) Like many miracles, the details of the actual healing are

rather limited, and not much ink is spilled on it. Miracles are signs that point us to who God is and how we live in relationship to God's revelation through Jesus, so what is of much more interest to the writers of the Bible, and to me, is what happens before and after these healings.

The man gets in trouble for carrying his mat on the Sabbath. The Sabbath is a commanded day of rest, a time ordained by God to help restore creation to the right relationship with God. Over time, humans have layered laws on top of it, to try to make the day more "restful," including not carrying your mat. Instead of being amazed at this miracle, a sign pointing us to creation's right relationship with God, in which the Spirit of God is working in and through us in grace, the community condemns the man for breaking human laws. I could imagine a modern-day situation where a new believer in Jesus comes into the church, freshly touched by God's grace in their lives. Instead of being excited about seeing the Spirit beginning work, we get caught up in all the ways this new person is "getting it wrong," like using the wrong language for God, not wearing the right clothes, or being too loud in worship.

Interestingly, it is not just the community that is worried about these religious laws, but the man who is healed himself. He deflects blame for the infraction by hoisting it upon Jesus. Though the man doesn't know Jesus' name of the moment, he is quick to provide Jesus' identity to those who would condemn him once they meet again in the temple. He is more concerned about maintaining his standing within the community, which he had lacked for those decades he was sick, than understanding the presence of God in Jesus which he has experienced. I say that not to condemn him. It is deeply human. We are designed to be placed in the community, something Jesus knows and honors by the many ways his work reunites those who have been on the margins.

The outrage of the community on the Sabbath points us once more to the character of God. Jesus heals, choosing to live into people's hope at the pool of Beth-zatha rather than the religious law. It shows us that God is as attuned to the way our human hopes and imaginations are shaped by the human things of life, like holding onto the promise that an angel might stir the water, as God is to the rules we like to believe keep us close to God. No part of the Triune God is constrained by the limits of how we know and experience God. When confronted with the human law of the Sabbath, Jesus will say "My father is still working, and I also am working." (John 5:17) God's care for us is not limited to our legalism and our interpretations but rather works in and through all things. One of the things I observe in this miracle is how limited the vision of those involved is. The man cannot imagine a way to be healed beyond the pool, so he answers Jesus in a limited fashion. The religious community cannot imagine God operating outside of their laws, so they condemn the movement of the Spirit because it doesn't fit into their limited imagination. How often do we limit our experience of God's grace because of a limited imagination?

Finally, we must address the word that Jesus shares with the man later in the temple. “Do not sin anymore, so that nothing worse happens to you.” (John 5:14) Like the selection of the man, this statement raises many questions for me. Is the man’s condition a result of his sin? Elsewhere in scripture, Jesus tells us not. Is Jesus threatening the man to revoke the miracle if he doesn’t “behave?” This vein of thinking would lead us to a bargaining relationship with God. “I promise to be a great Christian if you just...”

Neither of these leads us to a healthy relationship with God’s miraculous power. Rather, Jesus is warning here against the sin of unbelief. The man has been unsure the whole time of Jesus’ power and has demonstrated that he is deeply concerned with judgment and shame from others. Jesus reminds him that if he persists in living his life based upon the judgments of others instead of the grace of Jesus, he is surely doomed to worse fates than simple judgement.

When I ponder this miracle and what I learned from it about who God is and who I am in a relationship with Jesus, two words come to mind: grace and hope. I see here that God shows indiscriminate grace to all. At the beginning of this Gospel, John writes “No one has ever seen God. It is the only Son, himself God, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known.” (John 1:18) Immediately after this sign, Jesus will remind the crowds of this by saying “Very truly, I tell you, the Son can do nothing on his own but only what he sees the Father doing, for whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise.” (John 5:19) Jesus is God’s clearest revelation on earth, and here Jesus is pointing us towards the abundance of God’s grace, that does not depend upon anything, including the merit of our faith. Elisabeth Johnson puts it this way: “The God whom Jesus makes known is a God who does not discriminate in giving good gifts, a God who wills that all may have life, and have it abundantly.”¹

Because of God’s great grace, I learn that I can be a person of hope, and hope that is well founded. This man waited by the pool for 38 years. He is then seemingly randomly selected to be healed by Jesus, and it makes me wonder, what about when our hopes don’t come true? Was he waiting for 38 years as if he were waiting to win the lottery? Perhaps. Waiting with superstitious hope does make us fools. But Jesus points us here to a different kind of hope, one that goes beyond our limited expectations. This miracle begs us to consider what it might be like to expand our hopes beyond what we have considered and to trust Jesus to lead us into abundant life. With that trust, we are freed from the burdens of our expectations to live in the fullness of God’s love.

1. Elisabeth Johnson, “Commentary on John 5: 1-9.”

Reflection Questions

1. The “Jews” that John refers to are not the Jewish people but rather the religious leaders. Why are the religious leaders truly upset with Jesus beyond his breaking the Sabbath law? How might our interpretation of the “Jews” be misconstrued?
2. In what ways has the church reacted like the religious leaders? When has your own experience and knowledge of God in Jesus caused conflict between you and the church? What challenges to existing religious systems have been confronted over time?
3. How are we to guard against harm from the “correct” interpretation of scripture?
4. Of what importance is Jesus’ response in John 5:17, “But Jesus answered them, My Father is still working, and I also am working.”?
5. In John 5:6-7, what is so striking about Jesus’ question to the man, “Do you want to be made well” and the man’s response? How might our answer to this question be similar to the man’s? How might it differ?
6. Pastor Lauren asks, “Why would this man be chosen over anyone else?” What is your response?
7. What do you think motivated the man to go back to the religious leaders?
8. Jesus does not link the man’s condition to sin as a cause but instructs the man to sin no more lest something worse happens to him. What does Jesus mean by this? What has been your response to instances of grace in your own life?

CHAPTER 4

COMPLETE FULFILLMENT

John 6:1-14 | Feeding the Crowds

by Rev. Gina Anderson-Cloud

As we continue our journey together, we move from the life of individuals back to Jesus at work in the crowd as his transformative ministry shapes both the personal life and the communal. As a pastor, I have seen both types of transformation. I have witnessed people fundamentally embrace life differently after encountering the life-saving grace of Jesus, and I have thankfully seen churches reorient toward the same grace and seemingly come to life. In that transformation, they also begin to shape their community for the better. Whenever anyone truly walks with Jesus, there is change. Jesus knows us and knows exactly what we need to move into the life we are called to live.

My life certainly bears witness to being changed by Jesus in more ways than one. Growing up in a coal mining town in the Appalachian Mountains of Virginia, I learned early in life that most people around me did not expect girls from my locale to achieve, to have goals for success in life, or to even be very intelligent. Long-held traditions in the “hollers” of that area enculturated girls “to keep the ways,” to find the same spaces in a culture that many hardworking women had chosen by supporting men in mines and other male-led trades. In contrast, those who did see more for us, who knew we could aspire beyond what tradition seemed to dictate, instilled within young girls like me a drive to be the best. Teachers and family members knew it would be a struggle to set a different course for life because the culture and stereotypes were hard to overcome, particularly if you decided to leave the area. We were told that people would look down on us because of our roots in those mountains and hollers. So, when I left for college, the ones who saw my potential told me I would have to work harder than all others, that I needed to read my chapters twice (which I did), study the most, and always work to both honor my roots and escape them at the same time. Yes, that was confusing, but nonetheless, I launched with dreams of success.

As you can imagine, this kind of launching makes you driven to say the least. I was not going to fail. Many women of my generation (not just from the mountains) were pushed to excel, taking new spaces of leadership and accomplishment in American culture. Times were changing and glass ceilings were at least kind of reachable. Yet, that drive knowing that I would always carry a mark of “less than” due to my roots made me even more driven to excel and achieve. To make a long story short, with success, I found my way as

a young adult into a renaissance of the faith I had in childhood from my country's Methodist church. In this adult connection to faith in a different place, I began to ardently embrace my value in Christ. Walking with Jesus allowed me to drop much of the baggage I was carrying from those years of finding my way in life. I had achieved professional success as a woman from Appalachia. Those years of walking with Jesus were healing and allowed me to appreciate my roots differently.

You never know what the journey with Jesus can bring. You can imagine my surprise when my husband, also from the Appalachians, and I announced to my family back home in the mountains that we were both being called to ordained ministry. This would require us to give up our successful professions and good incomes. That news was surprisingly met with this exact comment, "You are throwing your success away." The very culture that had not encouraged me toward success now did not want me/us to live a life that would depend on the grace of God in so many ways. This realization was hard and disappointing, to say the least. It got harder when I was also told by some of the same people, "Doing that work will always be a struggle for you because you are a woman!" The words were not heard in the same way as that girl in the mountains would have heard them, but they felt discouragingly similar. I felt I was being warned "to take my place" even in my calling.

Both of us had not expected this response. We were successful adults. We were giving our lives to God. Why would family not be happy for us? Even if they feared we were making a wrong turn, why could they not just bless us in our calling? Regardless of how hard those questions were, what we found was that where there was emptiness (from those relationships for a while) and where there was doubt (from old baggage), Jesus filled us. Life in faithfulness and dependence gifted us with grace that was sufficient, even as we carried wounds forward. In the journey, we found goodness around each turn, even when times were not easy. People stepped in to cheer us on and counsel us in places that lacked family members' support. The good news is that the family members who questioned so much initially finally saw our joy and full life in Christ. It took some years, but they came to embrace, and even be proud of our calling, even mine as a female lead pastor.

Our miracle text today speaks to how Jesus can transform what we have and who we are, even when a situation seems to have slim odds. As we enter John 6, Jesus is moving away from crowds that have been following him to a place across the Sea of Galilee (also called the Sea of Tiberias). However, they chase him there, John says, because of the miraculous signs he's been performing which reveal the transformative power of his ministry. People are getting to see full life, again a reference to *zôé*, and they want it for themselves—a life full and abundant in Jesus Christ. The invitation to walk with Jesus is attractional.

Jesus knows these people and the journey they have been on in literally chasing him across the sea. He sees their physical and spiritual hunger and has compassion. He also sees this as a teaching moment for his disciples. John states that he questions Philip “to test him” (John 6:6) about how they might feed so many hungry people. In John’s telling of this story, he says, “Now there was a great deal of grass in the place, so they sat down, about five thousand in all.” (John 6:10) Scholars have also added that women and children usually were not in such counts in that day, so we can expect that it would have been many more than 5,000.

Interestingly, as we look at the parallel stories of this miracle in the other Gospels, we find that this is the only miracle of Jesus (other than the Resurrection) that occurs in all four Gospels. With that, we ask, why? Why would the Gospel writers all record this one instead of others?

I remember being asked this in seminary as I sat in Archbishop Desmond Tutu’s class. Tutu (sometimes we called him “Arch”) answered his own question with a smile, “This miracle is in all four Gospels because God felt it the most important miracle!” I agree with my professor. This sign/miracle stands in the Gospel narrative boldly and repeatedly because it shows how transformation and full life (zóé) is possible with Christ not only available individually but in the community as well. John tells us the miracle comes to pass as the disciples find a boy with his lunch. In trust, this boy is willing to share his lunch because others need it. He is far away from where he traveled from that day. To give his lunch over means he will know hunger, but he still offers it.

Knowing this unnamed child’s heart, Jesus sets the stage for this great feast. With the blessing of Christ, the child’s gift is multiplied beyond what anyone could imagine. The boy gets his fill as do all the others with 12 baskets left over from just 5 barley loaves and a mere 2 fish.

In the blessing of Christ, full abundance and so much more are consumed this day. With the meal, Jesus points to the reign of God over both our physical and spiritual needs. In this reign, God’s kingdom will advance when humans in humility and faith give back what is given them. Like the boy, when we yield our gifts to the One who can and will multiply them, we are transformed. As we trust, even when it seems much is sacrificed and, odds may be slim, Jesus makes a way where our self-giving leads to life and joy in abundance.

Now, I can hear you thinking. Sometimes our giving and our faith can bring hardship. That’s true. However, transformation comes in time by walking faithfully through life with Jesus. Was this boy’s mom upset that he didn’t bring back a couple of those loaves that day? Maybe she was at first. Yet, in a life transformed because of this holy encounter, I want to believe that in time his mother saw the true gift her son received that day in being fed to fullness in Christ. I cannot believe that his young life was not shaped through his

actions that were in concert with Christ's holy plan, for John tells us that Jesus knew what he was going to do that day (John 6:6).

Jesus knows us. He knows where the challenges will present themselves in our journey with him. When those challenges raise their head (or their voices as in my story), our Lord provides beyond our ability to even imagine. His plans for our life and its fullness go beyond the plans we can design or hope for ourselves. This is good news for all, just as I am sure it was also witnessed by all there on that day by the Sea of Galilee as people shared in the goodness of being refreshed with food and transformed in communing with Christ our Lord.

Reflection Questions

1. Pastor Gina talks about the pressures of societal expectations. When in your life have you experienced this? How has that affected your faith journey?
2. How does the communication between Jesus and his disciples prepare them to recognize Jesus' divinity? In this text, Jesus also demonstrates the importance of self-sacrifice. How might the introduction of this concept, in light of the miracle, foreshadow what is to come in Jesus' divine mission?
3. John contrasts faith with signs. The text says that crowds saw the signs being performed and followed Jesus. Do you think the crowd had any idea of Jesus' source of power before the miracle? What about after, what does it mean that the people thought Jesus was a prophet who had come into the world?
4. Remember a time in your life that seemed impossible and yet, transformation for the good arose. What were/are the elements of faith that allowed for this?
5. John tells us, Jesus took the loaves and gave thanks. What does this foreshadow? Why would John be making a connection? What can you draw from this?
6. In John 6:12, how does Jesus' direction to leave nothing to relate to the Exodus 16 story? Can you find any other correlations? What might those suggest about Jesus?
7. How has God used insignificant or small things in your life to help you find greater purpose? When have you seen God multiply a gift given in ways that go beyond expectations?
8. In John 6:15, why does Jesus shun the people's desire to make him King? How might Jesus react to our references to him as king?

CHAPTER 5

THE GREAT I AM

John 6:16-21 | Walking on Water
by Rev. Isaiah Park

The disciples had just witnessed, experienced, and participated in an extraordinary sign—Jesus took five loaves and two fish, multiplied them by the thousands, and fed a massive crowd. Can you imagine what the disciples were feeling? They were likely ecstatic, joyful, full of wonder and surprise.

This was not a miracle they observed from a distance; they were fully immersed in it. They moved among the people, physically touching the bread and fish with their hands. The event was so powerful that the crowd wanted to take Jesus by force and make him king (John 6:15). However, Jesus, knowing the crowd's intentions, withdrew to a mountain alone, sending his disciples ahead of him to their next destination.

In that moment, the disciples may have been wondering, “What’s next?” They were riding a spiritual high, witnessing what seemed like an inbreaking of God’s kingdom. The feeding of the multitudes was unlike anything they had seen before. Would Jesus perform another mighty sign? Would he heal an even greater crowd? Would he deliver a powerful new teaching? They could not have imagined what was about to happen next.

Maybe you have been there before, standing on the mountaintop, feeling invincible, thinking nothing could go wrong. You have experienced something powerful and wondered if it could happen again. That was where the disciples were as they entered the next moment in John’s Gospel. They were living in a space of high expectations and anticipating Jesus to do something amazing once more.

I remember a time when I was on my mountaintop, convinced nothing could go wrong. I felt the undeniable presence of God, as though anything was possible. I was riding a wave of joy. Then, a storm hit. Suddenly, I found myself navigating difficult questions. I was emotionally disoriented, asking, “What’s going on? Why is this happening? Are you still with me, God?” In that struggle, I experienced guilt for even asking those questions. Early in my faith journey, I was taught that I should never question God. Where was my faith? Where was my joy? The disciples might have felt something similar.

As we read through scripture it is important to pay attention to the literary details used in introducing the situation. John's Gospel tells us "When evening came, his disciples went down to the sea, got into the boat, and started across the sea to Capernaum. It was now dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them." This is a setup to leave the audience in wonder of what might happen next. Throughout scripture, references to darkness or evening time prepare for an unexpected event. In this case, it is a storm that is rising quickly, the winds are blowing hard, and the waters are getting rough. The Sea of Galilee is known for sudden storms that can be very devastating.

John 6:19 reveals to us that the disciples had rowed about three or four miles when they saw Jesus walking on the water. Jesus was coming near them, and they were afraid. The Gospels of Matthew and Mark record this story a little differently than John's Gospel. In Matthew and Mark's Gospels, the disciples saw a figure walking on the water, and they were terrified because they thought they were seeing a ghost. John's Gospel on the other hand points out that the disciples knew that it was Jesus walking on the water coming towards them. The Gospels of Matthew and Mark seem to indicate that the disciples were seized with terror and fear, while John's Gospel suggests that while the disciples knew it was Jesus, they were afraid for other reasons. In all three accounts of Matthew, Mark, and John, the ancient Greek word for afraid or fear is Phobos, and it requires context to explain its meaning. This is because phobos can mean fear and terror or awe and reverence. Matthew and Mark portray the disciples as having fear and terror. John's Gospel alludes to the disciples having reverence and awe.

John 6:21 reads, "Then they wanted to take Jesus into the boat." Why did the disciples want to take Jesus into the boat? If it were me and I knew that it was Jesus walking on water, I would be so fascinated that I would want to watch Jesus walking on water more! Perhaps I might even ask him to push the boat from behind! When the disciples wanted to take Jesus into the boat, it was as though they were trying to save him when in fact, they were the ones in need of saving. The story then ends in the most miraculous way ever. They immediately arrive at their destination.

In this chapter, we are focusing on the miracle of Jesus walking on water not simply as a miracle, but as a sign. Miracles leave us in awe of the event itself. However, a sign points us to the purpose. When we drive towards a destination, we look for landmarks and signs to help us along the way with the purpose of arriving at the final destination. In John's Gospel, signs point us to our final destination: Jesus is God. Signs point us to who Jesus is so that we might believe in him and have life in his name.

Why did Jesus walk on water? Why did he not take another boat? Why did he not walk around the sea? If he was going to defy the laws of nature, why did he not just fly? It is because this was a sign. This miracle is a revelation that Jesus is God in two ways. First, it is a revelation that Jesus is the mighty and

powerful God. In the Old Testament, God is depicted as one who walks on the sea. Job 9:8 (NIV) writes, “He alone stretches out the heavens and treads on the waves of the sea.” When Jesus is walking on water, he is making a powerful statement of his deity. Job 9 refers to God in Hebrew as El, which is to convey power and might.¹ Jesus is the powerful and mighty creator God.

As the disciples see Jesus walking on water, there is a realization that the man they have been following is not merely a human being, but truly God. In the midst of this holy reverence and awe, Jesus reveals something more. Jesus is not simply God in all wonder and infinite majesty, but Jesus is Yahweh God, a personal name given to the Hebrew God.

However, the people were not able to understand and believe this because they saw Jesus as a prophet like Moses (John 6:14). So much of Jesus’ ministry mirrors the ministry of Moses. Deuteronomy 18:15-18 talks about how God will raise a prophet like Moses from among the people of Israel. The Israelites were waiting for another Moses-like leader to lead them out of their situation of oppression and persecution. Even the disciples could not help but see Jesus as a Moses figure to the people of Israel. However, not only is Jesus walking on water, but his response to their awe and reverence is powerful.

This leads us to the second revelation that Jesus is God. When Jesus says, “It is I,” in ancient Greek, this phrase is *ego eimi*, which more directly translates to “I AM.” The disciples hearing that phrase would be reminded of a very significant moment in the Old Testament when the powerful phrase “I AM” is first used. The first time God reveals God’s name, “I AM” is when Moses encounters God at the burning bush. It is a response given to Moses when Moses is afraid in the presence of God (Exodus 3:6). This is similar to when the disciples realize that they are in the presence of God. When Jesus says, “I AM,” he is revealing who he is. Jesus is the Yahweh God in the burning bush. He is the one who met Moses, called him, and sent him forth for the liberation of God’s people.

As Jesus draws near to his disciples, they come to an awareness that Jesus is not simply El, but he is Yahweh God, the personal God who was revealed to Moses for the salvation of Israel. In other words, Jesus as God is being revealed in two phases. First, he is the powerful mighty God who walks upon the waters. Second, Jesus is the personal saving God who has come to the disciples to rescue them and deliver them to where they need to go. John’s Gospel describes Jesus coming to the disciples, calming them in their fears, and telling them not to be afraid.

There is a difference between a stranger telling you not to be afraid, as opposed to someone you trust and love telling you “It’s going to be okay.” It has the effect of great assurance, and you can lean into that hope. This is because the one you know, love, and trust is going to be with you and go with you.

As the people previously perceived Jesus to be a Moses figure, Jesus reveals that he is not a Moses figure but rather the God of Moses! This is not about comparing apples to apples. Jesus is at a completely different level of personhood and identity than Moses. While Moses needed God's power to split the sea so that the people could walk on the ground of the sea, Jesus walked on top of the sea and delivered the people across the sea. This sign reveals that Jesus is God.

I once heard a story in a sermon about a young girl named Tess. She overheard her parents talking about her little brother, Andrew, who was very sick. Only a costly surgery could save him, but her family had no money. Tess overheard her father say to her mother, "Only a miracle can save him now." Tess was intent on saving her brother, so she went to her bedroom, pulled out her jar of coins, and carefully counted every cent. She had exactly \$1.11. She rushed to a pharmacy, determined to buy a "miracle." The pharmacist was too busy to notice her at first because he was talking with his brother whom he had not seen in a long time. When the pharmacist finally noticed Tess, he asked her what she wanted. Tess said, "My brother is really sick, and I need to buy a miracle." The pharmacist responded, "I beg your pardon?" Tess then replied, "My brother has something bad growing inside his head and my daddy says only a miracle can save him now. So, how much does a miracle cost?" The pharmacist empathetically answered, "We don't sell miracles here, little girl. I'm sorry but I can't help you." The pharmacist's brother had been listening to Tess and asked, "What kind of miracle does your brother need?" Tess explained that she did not know—only that he needed surgery, and her father said, "Only a miracle could save him." It turned out that the pharmacist's brother was a neurosurgeon. He said to Tess, "Let's see if I have the kind of miracle you need." Indeed, he did. He performed the operation for free. Later, Tess' mother said, "That surgery was a real miracle. I wonder how much it would have cost?" Tess smiled, knowing exactly how much: \$1.11.

Much like the stories of Tess and the disciples of Jesus, when we find ourselves in the storms of life, the miracle of Jesus walking on water reveals to us that God is powerful, but God is also personal, caring, and shows up in the midst of our crises. We often hear that Jesus is a good friend, Jesus is a servant, and Jesus is a teacher. However, this story teaches us that Jesus is Lord. Jesus is God. As I have walked along with Jesus I've come to know that not only is Jesus God, he is my God. My family often reads Psalm 91 together and there is a powerful line that reads, "He is my God, and I trust him." (Psalm 91:2, NLT)

The disciples facing the windstorm on the sea points us to the storms in our lives. Currently, we are facing many challenges. We have political division. We have gun violence with our children practicing lockdowns. We have sicknesses and illnesses. We have people living with financial challenges. Mental health concerns are at an all-time high. We have great natural disasters that are unforeseen. We cannot prepare for them, for they are situations beyond our

control. We are surrounded by these realities, and social media seems to magnify them. So, what does this ancient story have to do with us? What difference does it make that Jesus is Yahweh God? How does Jesus walking on water intersect our lives today?

We look to Jesus, not just as a companion for our life's journey. We look to him, not just as a teacher of standards and understanding of God. We see him as the one who walks on water and reveals to us the full nature of who he is. Jesus is the Great I AM! He is our mighty and powerful God who is more than able to give us faith. It is he who can rise above the storms and waves and rescue us.

1. Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon, 2006 ed., "God"

Reflection Questions

1. How does Jesus walking on water connect to the previous miracle of feeding the 5,000? How does it relate to the crowd's desire to make Jesus king?
2. What does this miracle teach us about facing uncertainty and doubt? How does Jesus' response to the disciples in the storm shape our understanding of faith in difficult times?
3. Pastor Isaiah asks, "How does this miracle intersect with our lives?" In what ways do you see this sign speaking to your journey of faith?
4. Think of a time when you faced a crisis and made it through to the other side. Looking back, how did you see God working in and through that experience?
5. Reflect on the meanings of El and Yahweh as explained by Pastor Isaiah. Why do you think there are multiple names for God in scripture? What significance does this hold for our understanding of who God is?
6. Jesus' response, "I AM," is a powerful declaration of his divine identity. Do you think the disciples fully understood who he was at this moment? The phrase "I AM" appears multiple times in John's Gospel. Look up the other passages where Jesus uses this phrase and discuss the significance of each statement.
7. Compare this account of Jesus walking on water with Matthew 14:22-33 and Mark 6:45-52. What are the key differences? Why might John have recorded the event in the way that he did?
8. What other symbolism or connections to Genesis do you see in this sign? How does this miracle reflect the themes of creation, chaos, and divine authority?

CHAPTER 6

LIGHT OF THE WORLD

John 9:1-41 | Healing a Man Born Blind
by Megan Dietrick

In fourth grade, my doctors realized that I might benefit from corrective lenses. On the drive home from the optometrist, decked out in very unfashionable wire-framed glasses, I exclaimed with awe and wonder. “Wow, I can see trees on the mountain! There are leaves on the trees! I didn’t know you could see grass!” My dad still remembers this day as one of his biggest failures as a parent, not realizing how poor my vision was.

In middle school, I became less enthusiastic about glasses, as they were demonized by popular media in the late nineties. I decided to lobby my parents and doctors for contact lenses. They knew I was an over-achieving eldest child, so the professionals agreed that a rule-following sixth grader could likely be trusted with responsible lens-wearing.

However, as I entered high school, I succumbed to the confluence of laziness and arrogance that is a trademark of the teen years. My vision had progressively worsened. Mornings and evenings without lenses were blurry, and I could not be bothered with glasses. In my adolescent wisdom, I decided that surely my optometrists and parents were incorrect in their assessment that contact lenses could not be worn overnight. I was a seasoned contact lens veteran! I knew the limits of my eyes, and it would not hurt to occasionally “forget” to take them out before bed.

Much to my dismay, on Christmas morning of my junior year of high school, the Lord and the realities of science gifted me with a valuable life lesson. I awoke to searing pain and a swollen red eye. My parents reluctantly admitted that I needed to go to the emergency room. They mentally calculated the cost of this teenage blunder yet piled me in the car to take me to the hospital. A layer of ice on all the trees made my plight particularly painful, as the light was reflected and intensified, mocking my mistake.

We walked into the emergency room, and I squinted to make sense of the blurry environment. The nurse took me into a room to assess the degree of severity. She held a plastic spoon-shaped device over one eye and asked me to read the top line of the chart.

“Um, I cannot read it, my vision is too bad,” I said.

Alarmed, she covered my infected eye and tried to compare the two.

“No, I cannot read it. I will never be able to read it. My vision is too bad.”

I felt the heat of embarrassment as the blurry human gestured again toward a beige wall. She was frustrated that she was forced to deal with an obstinate teen on Christmas morning, and my frustration grew because she could not seem to hear me. This misunderstanding continued longer than it should have.

Flustered, she asked, “Well, which line can you read?”

“Ma’am, I cannot even see the sign,” I answered.

Much like my Christmas morning adventure, the Gospel of John often uses the literary motifs of misunderstanding and dramatic irony to convey the teachings of Jesus. This is quite prevalent in this story of the man born blind.

It takes place in Jerusalem following the Festival of Booths. Jesus has recently taught in the temple and had multiple altercations with the chief priests and Pharisees. There is great division among the crowds, as people are asking, “Is this really the Messiah?”

Jesus and his disciples continue their journey, and they walk past a blind man begging on the side of the road.

At this time in the Greco-Roman world, begging was not uncommon, as first-century Jerusalem was marked by extreme economic inequality. For the least fortunate in society, such as beggars, survival may have been frequently in question. Yet, it was considered incredibly shameful to be needy. Ben Sira, a prominent Jewish teacher, stated it would be better to die than to beg.¹

The disciples look upon this beggar and ask the question that underpins most of this narrative, “Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” (John 9:2).

It is important to note that first-century readers would automatically make assumptions about the moral qualities of this man, simply due to his disability. Physiognomy, the practice of inferring someone’s character from physical appearance, is an ancient pseudo-science that was common in this time period.² It was a belief that the further one deviated from physical perfection, the more egregious the person’s character must be. Eyes were particularly important as a tool for determining the value of a person. Anyone experiencing a physical disability would have been a social outcast, and in the

Jewish faith, these persons deemed sinners would be cut off from the religious community.

Jesus refutes this belief, stating that this man's blindness has nothing to do with the sin of the man or his parents. He then proceeds to spit saliva on the ground, mix it with clay, and spread the mud mixture on the man's eyes. He tells him to go and wash in the pool of Siloam, a pool used for ritual immersion and purification before entering the Temple. The man does exactly as Jesus instructs, and he returns with the ability to see. It is miraculous.

It is tempting to stop at this moment. The miracle has happened! Nothing else matters! Unfortunately, this tendency has led many to irresponsibly use texts such as John 9 to further alienate and dismiss those in the disability community as less-than, or sub-humans in need of healing. We flatten them into one dimension and stop seeing them as people and start seeing them as a problem to fix. Luckily, this is not what is happening here, because the story continues.

In Biblical texts, healing stories associated with Jesus are often not about the person being healed. Rather, they function to highlight the divinity of Jesus and the nature of God. In the Bible, the recipients of healing are generally flat, undeveloped characters, with little to no speaking lines occurring after the healing is finished.³ Once they are healed, they fade into the background.

John 9 begins similarly to these other miraculous healings, with a passive receiver of Jesus' power and glory. The blind man does not reach out to Jesus. He does not speak or ask to be healed. Rather, Jesus simply sees him and begins the work of healing. However, this is where we see a deviation from the norm because the man born blind becomes a dynamic character.

The neighbors who had previously seen him begging on the street were perplexed when they realize, the man could now see. They continue to speak about him as if he is not a person capable of answering, until he shifts the narrative. He speaks up for himself stating, "I am the man." In this way, he claims his role in society and his story. He asserts his identity by repeating himself. "He kept saying, 'I am he.'" (John 9:9).

It is at this moment that the man has agency. His neighbors begin to address him directly, and he is brought before the Pharisees. These religious leaders question the man born blind and develop a hyper-fixation on the perceived sin of Jesus, with whom they had already clashed on multiple occasions. Surely a man of God would not heal on the Sabbath, some Pharisees argued. However, other Pharisees questioned, "How can a sinner perform such signs?" (John 9:16). This created division among the Pharisees, and their group unity was threatened by this disagreement.

Dissatisfied with their inability to reconcile their group's beliefs with his response, the Pharisees then begin to doubt he was ever blind (John 9:18). They question his parents, who state that he was indeed born blind, but they do not know how it is that he now sees. They affirm that he can speak for himself, which is likely for their self-preservation, but their affirmation does further give him a voice and progresses his claim as an active participant in his narrative.

The man born blind finds himself at the center of a precarious situation. The spotlight is once again on him, as the Pharisees give him another chance to join them. All he must do is affirm the goodness of the group by denouncing the goodness of Jesus. He can have his sight restored and his place in society, all at once.

However, he refuses to participate in solidarity against the one who cured him. He refuses to imitate his parents and instead breaks the cycle of exclusion. He stops the pattern of conformity at the expense of another.⁴ The man becomes increasingly emboldened as he makes the iconic statement that inspired a line in the famous hymn, *Amazing Grace*, "I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see." (John 9:25).

This angers the officials, who turn on him and reveal what we have known all along. They believe themselves superior to the man who was once blind. What can he possibly know about God, since he is a sinner? He is expelled from the Temple. Jesus hears of this and comes to find him. The man, who has never physically seen Jesus before this moment given the timing of his miracle, immediately recognizes Jesus and his divinity.

The man born blind sees what the Pharisees cannot, just like Jesus sees what the community cannot.

The former beggar sees that God is still working in this world. Early in the text, Jesus mixes saliva in mud to restore his sight. When combined with Jesus' earlier commentary about light and darkness, we can make a connection to Genesis 2:7 when God made humans out of dust and breathed the spirit of life into them. The man was not worried about answering questions that only served to divide and exclude. He understood what mattered. Jesus, the Light of the World, is continuing this work of bringing abundant life, or *zôé*, to those on the margins of society. God is continuing God's work of creation through Jesus. The Pharisees, consumed by arrogance, miss the miracle altogether. Their perception is so distorted that they cannot even see the sign on the wall.

So often we miss each other, and we miss the miracle. Jesus does not. Jesus sees the humanity within this man, whom the community does not even bother naming. The neighbors, family, and Pharisees only saw disability, weakness, sin, and otherness. Jesus saw a person capable of revealing God's works (John 9:3). Amy Kenny takes this further by stating, "Disability acts as a

method for revealing the living God to the community, not something that always needs to be prayed away to showcase God's power."⁵ What do we make of all this? If we return to the beginning of John 9, Jesus responds to the disciples' initial question of sin by stating:

"Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him. We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world." (John 9:3-4).

The themes of revelation and light are prevalent within the greater Gospel of John. It is no coincidence that John uses the word "light" in this story about blindness. The Greek word for light, *phós*, also appears in John 1:9 when we are introduced to the word *zóé*, which has been discussed throughout our study. In this case, the word *phós* can refer to a literal object that emits light, but it is also strongly associated with truth and knowledge, or that which is exposed for all to see. In Greco-Roman times, blindness was seen as the absence of light, or life. How beautifully ironic that a person deemed as sinful, or without light, was able to reveal the true nature and light of Christ.

It also seems fitting that Jesus is placing such emphasis on the concept of works in his response to the disciples. The world receives revelation through the work of God in Jesus; however, Jesus includes the disciples in this work by using the word "we" in verse four. The Gospel of John, which also brings us the famous foot-washing scene at the Last Supper, repeatedly communicates to readers that love is a verb. It is a series of actions, not a feeling. We too are called to action as we walk with Jesus. As I read through this miraculous healing, I could not help but notice the verbs associated with the various players. This is mostly because at first, all I saw was some variation of "asked" and "answered" repeated in a true interrogation format. However, as I began to distill the various actions throughout the scene, I noticed that the Pharisees were associated with actions such as: investigate, deny, doubt, blame, divide, revile, and exclude. In contrast, the blind man went, washed, defended, dissented, and declared Jesus as Lord. Most strikingly, the verbs associated with Jesus were saw, heard, healed, and included.

It is so tempting to cast ourselves as the victim or hero of this story, but I must wonder how often we ourselves miss the miracle? How often do we not see the sign of awe or wonder because we were too quick to judge or assume our rightness? How often have we excluded or cast blame instead of seeing, hearing, healing, and including? How willing are we to boldly dissent when a group around us misrepresents the good nature of Christ or uses religion to exclude?

As Christians, I believe we are called to follow the witness of obedience revealed in this man, who once was blind but now can see the abundance of life offered by Christ. We are called to see humanity in all people, the way Jesus saw the beggar. So many people walked past him without a thought of

love, but Jesus saw him with awe and wonder, the same way a little kid was amazed at the clarity of the leaves on the trees that came with that first pair of nerdy wire-framed glasses. We are called to bear witness to the miracle of the goodness of God.

1. Powell, *Introducing the New Testament: A Historical, Literary and Theological Survey*, 2nd ed.
2. Hartsock, *Sight and Blindness in Luke-Acts: The Use of Physical Features in Characterizations*.
3. Hartsock, *Sight and Blindness in Luke-Acts: The Use of Physical Features in Characterizations*. 128.
4. Alison, "The Man Blind from Birth and the Subversion of Sin."
5. Kenny, *My Body is Not a Prayer Request: Disability Justice in the Church*. 7.

Reflection Questions

1. Megan shares how a pair of glasses changed her whole view of the world. When and how have you experienced a new world view?
2. The disciples ask Jesus whether the man or his parents should be blamed for his blindness. Megan writes about Physiognomy as the practice of judgment of character based on physical appearance and ability. How are we guilty of this same practice? What are your first inclinations when you meet or see someone with disabilities? What other physical traits might cause you to make snap judgments?
3. In this chapter, we learn that “healing” from the perspective of those with a disability does not always equate to the eradication of that disability. How does this affect your understanding of wholeness?
4. The Pharisees seem more concerned that Jesus healed on the Sabbath than the actual outcome. What does this say about their priorities and spiritual condition? How might we be like the Pharisees in modern times?
5. Jesus confronts the long-held belief that people’s conditions and suffering are the result of sin. How does individual sin affect our spiritual and physical condition? Why are we prone to believe it is divine punishment? Do you carry long-held beliefs or unwritten “rules” that prevent you from acknowledging God’s work in your story?
6. Within this miracle we see the man’s spiritual maturation taking place. He journeys from otherness to the experience of grace, to the belief that Jesus is a prophet, to the final belief that Jesus is the Son of Man. What has your spiritual journey looked like? How have you been maturing on your walk with Jesus?
7. Megan references Jesus’ claim that he is the light of the world. We hear this often. What does this claim mean to you? Do others see this in you? How might Jesus be inviting you to not only experience this light but to be this light?
8. At the end of this passage, the Pharisees are convinced that they are not blind. How does Jesus’ challenge invite them to see their opposition to his light? It is easy to point to the Pharisees and see their error about Jesus. How might your beliefs distort your view of who Jesus is?

CHAPTER 7

RESURRECTION AND THE LIFE

John 11:1-44 | Raising Lazarus from the Dead
by Rev. Daniel Park

When my son, Israel, was three years old, we began reading The Action Bible as part of our bedtime routine. He was drawn to this version of the Bible because it was a comic book style Bible with amazing illustrations. He would listen to me read the story while looking carefully at the pictures. Eventually, we got to the story of Jesus' arrest and crucifixion. After finishing that story, he stopped me from continuing. He flipped the pages back to the images of Jesus' arrest and crucifixion. Then he asked me, "Daddy? Is Jesus the strongest person in the whole world?" "Yes," I said. Then he asked, "Is he stronger than Superman?" I said, "Yes." He further asked, "Is he stronger than Batman?" Again, I said, "Yes." And then asked, "Spider-man?" I looked at him and said, "Absolutely." He looked confused. So I asked him, "What is it, Israel?" Then he said, "I don't understand. If he is the strongest, why is he letting these bad guys hurt him?" I sat with that for a while. Sometimes, children ask the most profound theological questions. Externally, I was quiet, but internally, my mind and heart were racing to find the right words to say! What an opportunity to help my son understand something deeply profound about our Lord and Savior!

As I prayed in my heart, I looked at my son and I saw how he was so little and I was so big compared to him. And there, I found the answer. I said, "Israel, Jesus is the only one in the whole world who can take all of the bad things, the sins, the evil, the problems and destroy their power." He looked at me with wide-eyed wonder and asked, "How?" I said, "You'll see." It was late, but I felt it was important to move on to the next part, the best part. The resurrection of Jesus Christ! As we began reading the Easter story, there was my son, Israel, speechless and in awe of the resurrection. Surely Jesus had died! But the surprise of Mary Magdalene, the disciples, and my son, he is risen, he is risen indeed!

We arrive at the final sign or miracle presented to us by John's Gospel. The previous six signs have been building up toward this sign. It is the miracle of miracles and sign of signs. If every sign performed by Jesus has been bending the laws of science, this sign changes everything we understand about life itself, where we come from, and where we are headed. In this chapter, we look at some key Greek words that deepen our understanding of the scripture text, theological themes found in the story of raising Lazarus

from the dead, and the certain hope we have for our resurrection that informs the way we can live today. In our study of scripture, much information gets lost in translation. It is helpful to consider definitions in the original languages. In the case of John's Gospel, we look at Ancient Greek. Below are some keywords that illuminate the meaning of this seventh miracle: raising Lazarus from the dead.

"Life" = Gk. *zōé* (John 11:25). When we say life in the English language, we often think of our biological life. In Ancient Greek, the word for our physical life is *bios*. We get words such as biology, biological, biography, and more. Another Greek word for life is *psuché*, which is regarding the mind. We get words such as psychology, psychological, and psychologist. This word describes the mental and emotional sense of our existence. Different from *bios* and *psuche*, the word *zōé* refers to the eternal, divine life. It is a life that is qualitatively different from the physical or mental life we have. Strong's Lexicon, a Bible index that helps readers find words and their meanings in the Bible, explains *zōé* as, "life in its fullest sense, encompassing both physical and spiritual dimensions. It is often used to describe the eternal life that is granted through faith in Jesus Christ. This life is not merely an unending existence but a quality of life that is abundant and fulfilling, characterized by a relationship with God."¹ Therefore, when Jesus proclaims, "I am the resurrection and the life," Jesus is not referring to biological life, but *zōé*, eternal life. The miracle of raising Lazarus from the dead is a sign that points to the eternal life offered to us through Jesus Christ. This miracle is a physical sign of what Jesus has already said in his conversation with Nicodemus, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life (*zōé*)." (John 3:16)

"Believe" = Gk. *pisteuó* (John 11:25-26, 40). A second word to focus on is believe. Jesus says, "Those who believe (*pisteu*) in me will never die." Belief is different from knowledge. It involves trust. Strong's Lexicon explains, "This belief is not merely intellectual assent but involves a deep, personal trust and commitment."² The invitation for us to go beyond the intellectual, and mental understanding of the details of who Jesus is, what he did, and its significance. The belief expressed here is not about acknowledging God's existence or feeling a spiritual connection. Rather, it is about taking a step of faith—better understood as trust. The United Methodist Church's baptismal vows ask, "Do you put your whole trust in his grace?" To which, we say, "I do." The raising of Lazarus is a sign for people to trust in Jesus. There's an old hymn "Tis So Sweet to Trust in Jesus" and the lyrics of the chorus are,

Jesus, Jesus how I trust him!
How I proved him o'er and o'er!
Jesus, Jesus precious Jesus!
O for grace to trust him more!

Someone once said that we should worship the giver, not the gift. The purpose of raising Lazarus was to cause people to believe. What shall we believe about Jesus? That leads us to the next word of study.

“Weep” = Gk. *dakruó* (John 11:33, 35). What is often humorously spoken of as the shortest verse in the Bible, “Jesus wept,” (Matthew 26:75) holds a profound truth that must not be overlooked. Preceding this emotional moment is the display of grief expressed by Mary, the sister of Lazarus. Jesus observes Mary’s expression of grief and in response is moved deeply. John’s Gospel describes Jesus’ response as being “greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved” (John 11:33). What’s important here is the kind of weeping. There are two kinds of weeping. The first weeping is from Mary, and the word is *klaió*, which conveys a loud lament in the context of deep sorrow.³ The second weeping is from Jesus, and the word is *dakruó*, which happens when one is moved deeply with compassion and empathy. In other words, Jesus observes the pain-filled, deeply grief-stricken lamenting of Mary and is so moved in spirit, that he is greatly disturbed. This results in a weeping that is prompted by compassion and empathy.⁴ When Jesus sees us in our weakness, our despair, our hurts, our fears, our laments, our griefs, and our deep pains, he sees our cries and he is moved to the core of his being.

Why is this word study important? Raising Lazarus from the dead is a sign that points us to the incredible life (*zóé*) that we can have in Jesus if we trust (*pisteuó*) Jesus, and indeed we can trust him because he is full of compassion and empathy (*dakruó*) towards us. These three keywords provide us with the textual context that reveals the heart of God. Jesus came to reveal to us that God is a God of compassion, mercy, grace, and love. God is the one who calls us to a place of faith, trust, and belief so that we might live the life that God desires for us. This is a life (*zóé*) that is abundantly full of all the goodness, joy, love, grace, and peace of God. It is the eternal life promised and guaranteed for us.

The resurrection of Lazarus differs from Jesus’ resurrection in a crucial way: Lazarus is resuscitated—his mortal body restored temporarily—while Jesus’ resurrection is a transformation into a glorified, imperishable body (1 Corinthians 15:42-44). Lazarus’ return to life points forward to the greater reality of eternal resurrection that Jesus will inaugurate. Therefore, in raising Lazarus from the dead, we get a foretaste of true resurrection. The tombstone being removed and Lazarus coming forward at the sound of Jesus’ voice is a picture of the true resurrection that is to come. Soon after, Jesus would die and be buried in a tomb and he would not be resuscitated but resurrected to a forever form of glory. Resurrection would be the new reality that we can look forward to with great anticipation!

Another way to look at Lazarus' resuscitation is to think of this story as a prequel to the main story. It is a great story, a true story, an exciting story, and quite riveting. As glorious and wonderful as the resuscitation is, it serves its purpose as a foretaste of a far greater miracle: the resurrection. Lazarus' resuscitation was for him and only him. Its effect would be a blessing to his family and community, but it was a singular event for a singular time and a singular person. Furthermore, Lazarus would be raised from the dead to one day die again. Nonetheless, truly amazing! Yet, so much more amazing is regarding the resurrection of Jesus. This singular event in a single moment in time would become a global event that would affect humanity for all time. The sign itself is never greater than its purpose. Lazarus is the sign. The sign points to Jesus. What a joy!

In Jesus, we have *zocé* because he is *zocé*! His life is the light of all people (John 1:4). By declaring this life for us, we are also stating that death is defeated, darkness is destroyed, and Jesus indeed has become the victor over all that is wrong and evil in this world. This is not just a promise about the future but a present reality. Eternal life is not something believers merely receive at the final resurrection—it begins the moment a person places faith in Jesus. A key question is about how we might access and live into this life offered to us.

As noted in the word study, trusting Jesus is the pathway to *zocé*. This is because Jesus is the life. Our role is to actively practice faith. It is more than an exercise of acknowledging the existence of Jesus and his activity. It is trusting in him each day, every day, and yielding ourselves to what Jesus has in store for us. In doing so, we experience the life that Jesus promised us. Even when circumstances of life become difficult, we learn to trust Jesus. This is the path. The good news is that Jesus is not only the life, but he is also the way. Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6). Faith in the path (Jesus) is the way we grow in our understanding of God's truth, and in doing so, we get to live the life (*zocé*) that God has promised us. Staying close to Jesus yields the pathway to living the life God intended for us.

Raising Lazarus from the dead is the sign of all signs. As John's Gospel has seven signs, we have journeyed to this final sign. This sign of all signs points us to the ultimate purpose of Jesus: to live, die, and resurrect for us, so that we who believe in him might have life (*zocé*) in his name. The raising of Lazarus is not the end in itself but rather points us to the greater reality of Christ's resurrection.

A few years ago, there was a stop sign on the street in front of where I lived. This stop sign was old had faded and was slightly leaning over. All of us living on the street knew that it was a stop sign, and we all did what the stop sign was telling us to do: stop at the intersection. One day, as I was driving down the street, approaching the intersection, I noticed two men working to replace

the stop sign. I thought to myself, “Somebody must have reported that this stop sign is faded, leaning over, and not as visible as a stop sign should be.” Later that day, I returned home and noticed that there was a new stop sign. How wonderful was this new sign! It was bright red, with a nice metallic sheen, a brand-new post installed, and the white letters were bright and easily readable. How glorious was this new, shiny, bright, and upright sign! Yet, it still served the same function. The sign, no matter how new and glorious, was doing what all signs do: point beyond itself. The sign pointed drivers to the intersection where they had to stop.

The miracle of Lazarus being raised from the dead is truly glorious, powerful, and amazing. Yet, as glorious as this sign is, so much greater is what the sign points to: the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and as a result, our resurrection that we will claim one day. For us, the resurrection of Jesus Christ offers us great hope and anticipation, which informs us to live differently. In a world that is experiencing angst, fear, and worry, we need hope that all will be well. When we are unsure about where things are headed in our world, one thing we can have certainty about is the sureness of eternal life. We can have this assurance in our present reality, hold to the promise of resurrection, and love the zóé life!

1. Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon, 2006 ed., “Life.”
2. Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon, 2006 ed., “Believe.”
3. Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon, 2006 ed., “Mourn.”
4. Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon, 2006 ed., “Weep.”

Reflection Questions

1. Many struggle to believe in the raising of Lazarus, especially in light of modern science. Yet this miracle reveals God's transcendent power over life and death. Do you believe God has ultimate power over life and death? How does this miracle challenge or strengthen that belief?
2. Jesus deliberately delays His response to Mary and Martha, and during this time, Lazarus dies. What do you think is the purpose of this delay? Have you ever experienced a season where you earnestly prayed but felt God was slow to respond? How did that waiting period impact your faith?
3. In John 11:25-26, Jesus makes one of His most profound declarations: "I am the resurrection and the life." How do these words reveal the sovereignty of God in Jesus? What do they mean for your understanding of who Jesus is?
4. John 11:25-26 is often read at funerals to bring comfort to those grieving. But Jesus' power over death and resurrection is not just for the future—it is a reality we can experience now. How do you see his resurrection power at work in your daily life? What hope do you hold because of it?
5. When Jesus sees Mary and Martha grieving, He weeps (John 11:35). What does this reveal about his nature? How have you experienced the compassion of Jesus in your times of struggle and grief?
6. Pastor Daniel notes that while Lazarus was raised (resuscitated), he would eventually die again—but with the promise of resurrection. How does the promise of resurrection shape your daily life? In what ways does it give you assurance and freedom in Christ?
7. Jesus calls Lazarus out of the tomb, commanding him to step into new life. Through the Holy Spirit, Jesus also calls us out of our own "tombs." What might those be in your life? How does knowing that you are not meant to remain in those tombs impact your response to Jesus' call?
8. Mary and Martha display deep faith in Jesus, recognizing his power and connection to God. Imagine their emotions when they see their brother walk out of the grave. How might their unwavering faith inspire you in your journey?

EPILOGUE

by Rev. Daniel Park

WHAT IS ALL THIS FOR?

When raising children, they all get to a phase in development where they begin to ask “Why?” As a father of four children, I have discovered this to be consistently true. I am reminded of the many “why” questions I asked as a child. Why do we ask why? In our growing up process, we start with mirroring our parents and family members. We may not question “why,” and continue to mimic, but somewhere along the way, whether out of curiosity, boredom, or a desire not to do such tasks (teenagers!) we eventually get to the place of asking the question. Why? In other words, we are asking, “What was that for?” Why questions are asking about reason and purpose? This is no different when it comes to our Christian faith and we might ask the same about John’s Gospel. What is all this for?

SUMMING IT UP

The Gospel of John is not merely a telling of Jesus’ miraculous works; it is an invitation to faith, a revelation of who Jesus truly is, and a call to experience the life only he can give. Through the seven signs (or miracles), John’s Gospel unveils the glory of Christ. Each sign leads us, step by step, deeper into the mystery of his identity and mission.

Each sign is more than a demonstration of power—it is a window into the divine. From turning water into wine to raising Lazarus from the dead, Jesus was not performing miracles for spectacle, but revealing that he is the Son of God, the One who gives life. The signs are not just events of the past; they are an enduring testimony, urging every reader across time and space to see, to believe, and to receive the *zōé*—the true, abundant, eternal life—that comes from him alone. These signs form the structure of John’s narrative, but they are not merely about what Jesus did. They are about what Jesus is—the very source of life itself.

A CALL TO BELIEVE

Throughout the Gospel of John, belief is the ultimate response Jesus seeks. The Greek word, *pisteuó* conveys: “to believe” or “to trust.” This word appears nearly 100 times in John’s Gospel. The entire Gospel is written with this purpose: “so that you may believe.” This is not just an intellectual agreement but a surrendering trust in Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God.

John’s Gospel leaves no room for neutrality. The signs demand a response. We either believe and receive life, or we turn away and remain in darkness. Just as Jesus asked Martha at the tomb of Lazarus, “Do you believe this?” (John 11:26), so too does he ask each of us the same question.

LIFE IN HIS NAME

The final promise of John's Gospel is that by believing, we may have life in his name. This is not merely survival or existence (bios), but true, abundant, eternal life (zōé). It is a life that begins now, in relationship with Christ, and continues beyond death into eternity.

This is not just a future hope—it is a present reality. We are Easter people. We are people of resurrection. This is the greatest hope we live with. Easter is not merely a season on the Christian calendar or a celebration that comes once a year. It is the defining reality of our faith. All the signs in John's Gospel point us to Jesus as the Eternal Resurrected Lord, the One in whom we find true life. Because of his resurrection, we live in the power of new life now, and we look toward the day when all that is promised in Christ's resurrection will be fully realized before our eyes. The resurrection changes everything. Death has no hold on us, sin has no power over us, and the darkness cannot overcome the light. We live in the now of Christ's victory and the not yet of his final restoration of all things. We are always Easter people.

The signs are not just historical events—they are present realities. The same Jesus who turned water into wine, fed the hungry, healed the sick, and raised the dead is still at work today, calling us to faith and inviting us into his zōé life. Therefore, as we close this journey through the study of the seven signs, the invitation of John's Gospel remains open. Do you believe this? If you do, if you truly place your faith in Jesus, you will have life in his name.

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NOTES

NOTES

MIRACLE

WALKING IN THE WONDER OF JESUS

Discover the Wonder of Jesus

Embark on a transformative journey through the seven miracles in the the Gospel of John. Each miracle is not just an act of wonder, but serves as a sign pointing to key aspects of Jesus' identity and mission in the world. As you explore these awe-inspiring events, you'll gain a deeper understanding of Jesus' life, purpose, and the life-changing power found in his name.



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