

## Mystery, Faith and Miracles

Luke 8:40-55

H. Stephen Shoemaker

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In today's text we have two miracle stories, one within the other. They ponder the mystery of the relationship of believing and healing.

I use the word "mystery" for there is so much I do not understand about the relationship of faith and miracles. I have what one theologian calls "faithful disbelief" about some things.<sup>1</sup> I do not believe that God plays favorites and decides to intervene for some people and not others. I do not believe in the kind of intercessory prayer as described by William James as "lobbying in the courts of the Almighty for special favor." I do believe God is at work for the best of all God's children at all times. So perhaps a better word than "intervention" is "interaction". So faith is our human partnership with God, the offering of our whole selves, body, mind and spirit, into partnership with the power and purposes of God.

I do not believe there is a certain *amount* of faith that God requires before healing us. Jesus said, if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, that will be

enough (Matthew 17:20). In Mark's gospel a father brought his son who had suffered convulsions all his life to Jesus. He begged Jesus to heal him. Jesus said, "All things are possible to those who believe". The man said, "I believe; help my unbelief". And that was sufficient, and he healed the man's son. (Mark 9:20-27).

Jesus' miracles have three purposes in the gospels. The first is to alleviate human suffering, the act of a compassionate God. The second is to teach us something about God and Jesus, principally about the divine compassion. And thirdly to increase our wonder, create awe, to help us hope in the goodness and power of God.

In one of the sequels to L. Frank Baum's *Wizard of Oz*, named *Rinkitink in Oz*, a magic white pearl says to the young prince:

Never question the truth of what you fail to understand, for the world is filled of wonders.<sup>2</sup>

So let us proceed with a little wonder in our hearts.

## I

Jesus had just returned from the east side of the Sea of Galilee, Gentile territory, where he had healed the Geresene demoniac. Now he was back in Jewish territory.

Jairus, the president of a synagogue, came to Jesus, knelt down and pled with him to come to his house and heal his daughter who was dying. Are we ever more desperate than when our child is sick, or in trouble? The poet T.S. Eliot spoke of “the purification of the motive/In the ground of our beseeching”.<sup>3</sup> The father was at the *ground of the ground* of his beseeching. *Please, Jesus, help.*

The girl was 12 years old. This detail pulls at my heart. Is it because I’ve been the father of a 12 year old girl, and the brother of one? Do you remember when you were 12? What did you do that summer?

Is it the thought that the Creator of the universe would notice a 12 year old girl? God cares not only for Israel, and for the whole world, but also for a pre-teen middle school girl who is sick.

Jesus does not hesitate; he starts out immediately for the girl’s house.

## II

On the way another figure in need of healing enters the scene, a woman who has been ill with a flow of blood for 12 years, as long as the young girl had been alive. We are not given the exact diagnosis, but her story unveils a long trail of tears and heartbreak. Her continuous flow of blood rendered her ritually unclean. She could not go into the temple. She could not touch or be touched. She

was probably childless. She may have been divorced—Jewish law provided for such (Deuteronomy 24:1) – and now she was without family.

She had been from physician to physician with no cure, and now her funds are exhausted and she is exhausted. She is a citizen of the nation of the sick.

Those who suffer chronic illness often add to their sickness self-recrimination: Why can't I get well? Do I not have enough faith? Am I being punished? I visited a woman in the hospital one day. As I walked in the door of her room she said, "Pastor, I feel so ashamed. Here I am again. I didn't tell you I was in here, because I didn't know what to say. It seems every time I see you I'm sick again."

The woman is our story had suffered to flow of blood for 12 years, 4,380 days of pain, weakness, isolation, untouched, untouchable.

How, where, did she get the courage to seek out Jesus? Here is faith as sheer courage. Had she heard stories of his healing, how he touched the untouchable and made them well? Had these stories awakened hope in her?

She dared try one more time to get well. She approached him from behind. Mark places in her mouth the words, "If I but touch the fringes of his garment I will be made well." She was like the character in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*: "I can't go on, I'll go on".

Immediately as she touched him, the flow of blood ceased. Jesus felt the streaming power of God leave him. As he was the pure prism of God's light, he was also the pure vessel of God's healing love. "Who touched me?" he asked. The woman came trembling before him and told what had happened to her as she touched him.

He said to her, "Daughter", he was restoring to her her daughterhood, daughter of God, daughter of Abraham. "Your faith has made you well, go in peace." Faith as courage, faith as hope.

### III

While he was still speaking, a messenger from Jairus' house came to him and said to Jairus who was by Jesus' side, "Your daughter is dead; do not trouble the teacher anymore." But Jesus told the father: "*Do not fear; only believe.* She shall be made well."

When Jesus arrived at the house, he asked Peter, James and John to go into the house with him. In his most important moments Jesus asked these three to accompany him. Peter, James, John. The Transfiguration, the Garden of Gethsemane, and here in this moment of healing. Did he believe they believed more than the rest, and that he needed all the possible power of believing with him? Sometimes believing is a communal act. We believe more together.

When they entered the house everyone was weeping and wailing. Jesus said, “Do not weep, for she is only sleeping.” The text captures their response: “They laughed, knowing she was dead.”

They laughed. There are all kinds of laughter. There is healing laughter, the laughter close to joy and to tears. The kind of laughter Anne Lamott calls “carbonated holiness.”

But there is also another kind of laughter, a brittle, sharp kind of laughter. The laughter of cynicism and derision.

This is the kind of laughter that has given up on the power and goodness of God, or of life itself, that has already decided what is possible and what is impossible. Too many unanswered prayers, too many ship wrecks, too much disappointment. The Psalmist speaks of death not only as the physical end of life, put as a power which can oppress us. So Psalm 116:3 says, “the snares of death encompassed me”.

But Jesus marched through the snares of death and took the girl’s hand and said, “Little girl, arise!”, and she got up! And Jesus said to those in the house, “Get her something to eat!”

Sometimes we feel that we are all but dead. There’s more death than life in us. But Jesus comes and says, “Arise!”.

Nobel Prize winner in literature Czeslaw Milosz tells of going into a church and hearing this story read as the gospel lesson for the day. Later in a poem he wrote about the experience:

This is for me. To make me rise from the dead  
And repeat the hope of those who lived before me.<sup>4</sup>

### Conclusion

“Do not fear; only believe”, he said to the father, and now to us. And now we are back to that word “faith”. Most times in the gospels “faith” is a *verb*: *believing*. It is what saves us when death encamps around us.

In his great novel, *A Soldier of the Great War*, Mark Helprin has a character say:

As long as you have life and breath, believe. Believe for those who cannot. Believe even if you have stopped believing. Believe for the sake of the dead, for love, to keep your heart beating, believe. Never give up, never despair, let no mystery confound you into a conclusion that mystery cannot be yours.<sup>5</sup>

We believe, we whisper to God, help thou our unbelief.

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1. Christopher Morse, Not Every Spirit: A Dogmatics of Christian Disbelief (Harrisburg Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International, 1994)
2. L. Frank Baum, *Rinkitink in Oz* (Chicago: The Reilly & Lee Co. 1916), p.26.
3. T.S. Eliot, “Little Gidding”, in T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets* (N.Y.: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1971), p. 57.
4. Czeslaw Milosz, “With Her” in *Selected Poems, 1931-2004* (N.Y.: Harper Collins, 2006), p. 197.
5. Mark Helprin, *A Soldier of The Great War* (N.Y.: Harcourt, Brace, Jovonavich, 1991), p.726.