

**Mark 6:1-13**

Jesus left that place and came to his hometown, and his disciples followed him. <sup>2</sup>On the sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astounded. They said, “Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands! <sup>3</sup>Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?” And they took offense at him. <sup>4</sup>Then Jesus said to them, “Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house.” <sup>5</sup>And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. <sup>6</sup>And he was amazed at their unbelief.

Then he went about among the villages teaching. <sup>7</sup>He called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits. <sup>8</sup>He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; <sup>9</sup>but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics. <sup>10</sup>He said to them, “Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place. <sup>11</sup>If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them.” <sup>12</sup>So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent. <sup>13</sup>They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.

On one hand, the reason why the people of Nazareth reject Jesus in Mark 6 seems a bit odd to us. I think more of instances where small towns celebrate, perhaps even exaggerate their connection to, the success stories of locals who have made it big. Or, I am sure we all know someone who claims they are related to someone famous – I, for instance, went to school with a guy who claimed Bo Jackson was his third cousin – and we all thought that was the coolest thing ever.

We think more of the famous being celebrated by their hometown, though for those who are prophets, I think we can safely say they are usually rejected or at least resisted during much of their life time. Being a prophet means you are bringing a message that is not popular – being prophetic means you are speaking truth to power – it means you are speaking against the way things are, because they are not in-line with the ways of the Kingdom of God. And, of course, speaking against the way things are is not usually appreciated by those in power – by those who benefit from the way things are. And so, Jesus – like Elijah and Deborah and the prophets before him – like King and Dorothy Day and Ida B. Wells and prophets after him – Jesus faced much rejection, rejection from his own people, those of Nazareth where he grew-up; those who were religious leaders and quite uncertain of this new message he was bringing.

Conversely, I think we can generally say that if someone is not being at-least partially rejected and scorned for the message of change they are bringing, they should probably not be considered a prophet; if someone's message is bringing them wealth and fame and a life of luxury, I think it is safe to say that their message is not of the prophetic kind.

It is not until much, much later that we begin to acknowledge and welcome the message of the prophets of our time – after the hard work of change has begun – after polling data tells

leaders that popular opinion has changed and they can now publically get on-board with the message of the prophets. Sometimes, if we are luckily, we get there at the end of their lives, but usually this doesn't happen until long after these prophets are dead and buried. Nazareth is now happy to claim and prophet financially from being the hometown of Jesus. And we are happy to rename streets and give holidays to our prophets of old, domesticating their message and forgetting the ways we previously rejected and fought against their messages of justice, love, and the full humanity of each of God's children.

So, in this way, we should not be surprised that Jesus is rejected in his hometown of Nazareth – we should not be surprised that they, upon hearing his message which challenges some of their ways of living – his message which upsets the powerful and uplifts the lowly – that they begin to discredit him. Rather than pausing to consider whether this uncomfortable message is a word of truth they need to hear – rather than allowing the message of newness to come into them and have its way with them – rather than allowing for the possibility that this message, no matter how hard it might be to hear, is from God – they do what we so often do, they seek to discredit the messenger:

-Isn't this guy just a carpenter?

-I sat next to this guy's brother in shop class, he wasn't anything special

-Isn't his mother a widow? Shouldn't he be at home taking care of her rather than traveling the country-side trying to take care of others?

-Wasn't their some question to who his dad was? I remember some rumors flying around about his mom before she was married?

These are the ways they dismissed Jesus' message, rather than allow it to challenge and change them.

What I find quite perplexing in this passage is not that Jesus was rejected in Nazareth – he continues to be rejected and challenged his entire ministry, right up to the point where they kill him. What perplexes me is verse 5, “and he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them.”

The author of *Mark* seems to be saying that Jesus' abilities seem to be limited, that somehow, in the mystery of God, Jesus being in a place that is rejecting him – a place not open to his message – is limiting what he can do. Prior to this time in Nazareth, Jesus has: Healed a man with a withered hand, healed a man who was paralyzed, and healed a man who the scriptures say was demon possessed – casting the demons into a herd of swine. If this was not impressive enough, he also calmed a storm (even the winds and rain seem to listen to him), and brought back to life a young girl who had died (even death is not beyond his power). As the gospel is progressing we see this extraordinary person who has power never seen before (or since), but now *Mark* sneaks in this one line about how, there in Nazareth where many don't believe in him, he is unable to do such miraculous deeds.

*What are we to make of this?*

There was a time where this passage was misused to say that it is only with enough faith that people can be healed – here we have an example, the town of Nazareth did not have faith and thus the power of God did not work. But this does not seem to be in-line with much of the rest

of the gospel of Mark. While some do seek Jesus out for healing, most times faith has nothing to do with healing or a miracle: it is not by the faith of the storm that Jesus is able to calm it, in fact he calms the storm while at the same time chastising the disciples saying, “have you still no faith?” And when Jesus heals one who is thought to be demon-possessed, it has nothing to do with the person’s faith – they don’t have the ability to have or not have faith if they are possessed by a demon; the same with the man who has a withered hand, Jesus seeks him out and he is reported to have said nothing at all during the interaction. Further, Jesus is dogged/surrounded by critics his entire earthly ministry and this does not seem to stop him from doing the miraculous. I would say that those who are claiming that “enough faith is required for healing” to take place are practicing a form of theological mal-practice.

So what then do we make of this? Scholars have sought to understand and explain Jesus’ seeming lack of power and ability in Nazareth.

### **Why few healings/miracles?**

1. Some have concluded that since people doubt that Jesus can heal, few come to Jesus in search of healing. Thus, their rejection of him does not diminish his power, but only **his number of opportunities**.
2. Others have said that it was a choice of Jesus, that as people do not have faith in him healing would be inappropriate – it would almost **be coercive**, showing off in order that they come to believe in him only because of his power.
3. Some scholars remind us that a miracle is **mostly about interpretation**. What some call luck or coincidence, others call a miracle. And so it was not that Jesus’ lacked power, it was that the acts done in Nazareth were not interpreted as miracles but something else.
4. And still others say that Jesus did not perform any large memorable miracles out of **fear of the crowds reaction** – that performing a miracle for a hostile crowd could make the crowd increase their hostility. That in fear or hatred, the crowd could quickly turn violent toward Jesus and his followers if they see an act of power that they cannot explain away. Or, worse, that the crowd

might turn violent toward the one who was just healed – not wanting them to be able to tell their story or stand as a living witness.

5. And finally, there are some scholars who conclude that **we can't really explain this**, but we must notice here that the power in **Jesus is somehow diminished** through the lack of external faith responses. Somehow the ability to make change has some relation to the human partners in the process.

If we don't explain away Jesus' lack of power, if we simply acknowledge this – note that this occurred, it has a few implications, I think.

So, please bare with me now as I get a little theological as we consider a few implications of this reality – if Jesus' power was somehow diminished in Nazareth.

**It seems to suggest that God works with human partners.** That God's all-powerfulness seems to have some limits – that it is at least limited in that it is not coercive. Where God is not welcomed, God does not force God's way in. Where Jesus' work and words are rejected, Jesus does not come in with the full force of an angelic legion to make us see, to make us believe.

While God might seek to persuade us with love and a way of life that leads to flourishing rather than self-destruction, God does not exert unilateral control. It suggests that God has a will – God has a desire for how things will go, but clearly not everything that happens is God's will. In seeing that Jesus could do no deed of power there, we might conclude that *God has a will in everything, but not everything that occurs is God's will.*

Jesus' lack of power seems to suggest that, despite what we sung in Sing the Journey 27 (*God of the Bible*), perhaps God does change. Not the character of God – not the elements of God such as justice and love and goodness and truth. But that God is impacted and affected by us. At least

Jesus certainly seems to be affected by us – throughout the gospel of *Mark* we hear of Jesus emotional responses as he goes about his ministry: anger, exasperation, anguish, distress, and feelings of abandonment. Here in Nazareth his reaction is surprised disappointment. God is not static and uninterested in what is happening – in what we are doing to one another – God is not the unmoved mover, but is very much moved in joy and in pain at how we treat one another, at how we treat God’s creation – God is affected at the events that unfold in our world and in our lives. This seems to imply that there is a relational character to the divine which allows God to experience both the joy and suffering of humanity.

Jesus’ limited power here in Nazareth perhaps implies that God exercises relational power, not unilateral control. Thus God does not step-in to instantly end evil and oppression in the world, but looks for human partners – that God works in relational ways to help guide us to liberation and justice and joy.

It means that when a government starts dropping bombs on innocent civilians, God does not step-in with unilateral power to stop the bombs from going off or ground the planes. God urges human partners to choose a different path, but does not force us. And God mourns the victims. When we were in Northern Iraq, we visited the Kurdish city of Halabja where Saddam Hussein used chemical weapons against the Kurdish city. There on that day thousands of people died. God did not stop those bombs from dropping. But today, they continue to uncover bombs, and in some they have found unexploded bombs – as they uncover those they have found that the mechanism was detached from the explosive device, meaning that some soldiers heard that voice of God whispering a different way in their ears and they disabled the bomb before placing it on

the plane. It means that a few soldiers were willing to put themselves at risk to try and stop what they knew was so wrong and evil.

It means that when a government starts imprisoning whole families for unlimited amounts of time & refuse to allow those seeks refuge into their country – God does not intervene with unilateral control to change laws. God urges human partners to react and change the situation – God urges human partners to act and seek alternative ways of being. And God weeps with the families that have experienced such trauma.

It means that when someone comes into a child's birthday party with a knife and desire to hurt and kill whoever they see, God does not exercise control to stop this tragedy. And God, like us, is not unchanged by this tragic and violent event – God's heart breaks with us; God cries out in pain and anger and confusion with the families and the children.

There is no sense to be made of this. No reasoning that helps us understand. *We know that God has a will in each situation – a desire for how things will be – and we know that much of the time here on earth, what takes place is not the will of God.*

We say in hope with King, that “The arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice. But perhaps it does not bend without help from human partners. Perhaps it does not bend without those of us who hear the possibilities that God is whispering in our ears and act; Perhaps it does not bend without us co-authoring the ending with God; Perhaps it does not bend without our will joining with God's will;

Perhaps it does not bend when we reject the God who Jesus Christ showed us;

Perhaps it does not bend without us offering comfort, love and mercy.

Perhaps God does not bend the arc of the moral universe with force, but by us.