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Matthew 13:54–58, NRSVue.

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Deeds of power.

Let’s start with the Gospel of Matthew, Chapter 13, verses 54 to 58:

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In this passage, we read the words “*deeds of power*”. This is only one word in the original Greek of the New Testament, and the singular of this word is “*dynamis*”.

In some English versions of the Bible, it is translated as “*mighty works*”. This refers to the miracles of Jesus. Jesus returns to Nazareth. He is doing what he often does, preaching in the local synagogue. People marvel that this neighborhood kid, this

builder's son, the child of Mary, is performing miracles. How could this inconsequential person be doing this? The people of his hometown are so surprised, they're offended. Jesus remarks that the Old Testament prophets were most likely to be rejected in their own hometowns. And because of the way his own people react to him, Jesus does not cure the sick or raise the dead in Nazareth.

Just what are the miracles of Jesus? Keep in mind that the Old Testament is filled with miracles. The very beginning of the world is portrayed as a miracle, with sun rising every morning and the existence of the moon and the stars. Indeed, all of creation is presented as a miracle. There is no physics involved. God does everything. All of existence starts from nothing, including the creation of humans. Then, there are other, individual miracles in the Old Testament: the wandering Israelites getting fresh water at the hands of Moses and God provides manna to feed them. God also provides food for Elijah, who is hiding from King Ahab. Elisha supplies unending oil to a widow. God strikes evildoers, like the Philistines, with diseases. There are many more miracles in the Hebrew Bible.

In the New Testament, not all miracles are attributed directly to Jesus. There are heavenly miracles, with the sun hidden and darkness covering the land as Jesus is dying on the cross. Other people perform miracles. In the Book of Acts, Peter and Paul, empowered by the Holy Spirit, perform multiple miracles. Peter, along

with John, heals a lame man. Paul cures a man who has been unable to walk since birth. There are miracles directly performed by God in the Book of Acts, such as Ananias and his wife Sapphira falling dead after concealing the profits they made from selling land and not giving all of it to the destitute believers.

But we will be concerned here with the miracles of Jesus. There are approximately 37 if them recorded in the Gospels. We can break them into categories. First, Jesus performs about 4 exorcisms, where he silences and casts out demons. Very early in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus establishes himself:

²³ Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, ²⁴ and he cried out, “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.” ²⁵ But Jesus rebuked him, saying, “Be quiet and come out of him!” ²⁶ And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. ²⁷ They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, “What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.”

Second, Jesus performs approximately 10 healings. Consider Mark, 8:

²² *They came to Bethsaida. Some people brought a blind man to him and begged him to touch him. ²³ He took the blind man by the hand and led him out of the village, and when he had put saliva on his eyes and laid his hands on him, he asked him, “Can you see anything?” ²⁴ And the man looked up and said, “I can see people, but they look like trees, walking.” ²⁵ Then Jesus laid his hands on his eyes again, and he looked intently, and his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly. ²⁶ Then he sent him away to his home, saying, “Do not even go into the village.”*

Notice that Jesus tells this man, after he has been healed, to stay out of the village.

We have talked about this before. Early in Jesus’ ministry, he is secretive about his

gifts and the fact that he is the Messiah. He is delaying the inevitable envy of the religious authorities of the day, so that he can establish the New Covenant before he is tried, tortured, and brutally murdered.

Third, Jesus raises the dead on 3 occasions. This is from Luke, Chapter 7:

¹¹ Soon afterward he went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a large crowd went with him. ¹² As he approached the gate of the town, a man who had died was being carried out. He was his mother's only son, and she was a widow, and with her was a large crowd from the town. ¹³ When the Lord saw her, he was moved with compassion for her and said to her, "Do not cry." ¹⁴ Then he came forward and touched the bier, and the bearers stopped. And he said, "Young man, I say to you, rise!" ¹⁵ The dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother.

Fourth, Jesus performs what are typically called nature miracles, such as turning water into wine at a wedding, multiplying loaves and fishes to feed a vast crowd, making a fig tree wither and die, walking on water, and calming a storm. These miracles show that Jesus has control not just over life and death, and good and evil, but also over all of nature. Here is perhaps Jesus' most wacky nature miracle, from the Gospel of Matthew, Chapter 17:

²⁴ When they reached Capernaum, the collectors of the temple tax came to Peter and said, "Does your teacher not pay the temple tax?" ²⁵ He said, "Yes, he does." And when he came home, Jesus spoke of it first, asking, "What do you think, Simon? From whom do kings of the earth take toll or tribute? From their children or from others?" ²⁶ When Peter said, "From others," Jesus said to him, "Then the children are free. ²⁷ However, so that we do not give offense to them, go to the sea and cast a hook; take the first fish that comes up, and when you open its mouth you will find a coin; take that and give it to them for you and me.

It's an intriguing question as to what this is all about. The Romans collected a tax from the Jews and then gave it to the Temple in Jerusalem to maintain the Temple. Peter tells the tax collectors that indeed, Jesus does pay this tax. But Simon, who is Simon Peter, that is, Peter, is not told by Jesus to take money from the collected assets of Jesus and the Apostles, that is from their money bag, to pay their portion of this tax. Instead, Jesus performs a miracle and has the money for the tax appear inside the mouth of a fish that Peter catches with a single hook. Jesus does something clever here. He makes it clear that they do not have to pay an Old Covenant tax, the tax for the Temple in Jerusalem. But Jesus also avoids enraging the Roman authorities by having the tax money appear miraculously.

What do we, as modern Christians, make of the miracles of Jesus? First, they provide continuity between the Old and the New Testaments, and as the miracle performing in the New Testament is done primarily by Jesus, this further establishes him as the founder of the New Covenant, as the person who introduces the Kingdom of God. Jesus uses miracles to usurp the power of the prophets of the Old Covenant. But modern people are often not impressed the way people of the ancient world were impressed. That's because most modern people, when it comes to the Bible, have their biggest biblical problem with the miracles. Our society sees nature as in control of the universe, not God. Miracles embody the

most obvious and tangible conflict with reason, science, and mathematics in the Bible. This conflict dates to the emergence of science and philosophy in the west, and specifically to the thinkers of the 18th century. David Hume, the Scottish philosopher, argued heavily against the miracles of Jesus being real. A very common belief is that Jesus did not perform miracles, that he was a common preacher, a wise man, someone with an incredible vision of peace and forgiveness, and only long after he died did followers of Jesus incrementally deify him. The argument assumes – without proof – that the Gospels all date to long after Jesus and his Apostles were dead, in other words, that the Gospels were not written by contemporaries of Jesus. Most New Testament scholars believe that the Apostle John wrote the Gospel of John, and some believe that the tax collector the Apostle Matthew wrote the Gospel of Matthew. But if we believe in this theory, that the miracles are a later addition to the story, Jesus was turned into the God of the New Testament to sell the new faith to later generations. The miracles thus turned a wannabe Messiah into what is seen as a real Messiah.

There is a huge problem with this argument, even if we are to take this perspective. The miracles of Jesus do not at all appear to have been inserted into his story after the fact. First, the Old Testament is filled with miracles. Jesus, or the writers of the Gospels did not invent the idea. Second, miracles are woven into

every aspect of the New Testament story; in particular, the Gospel stories of Jesus' life and ministry and execution are permeated with miracles. The tale of Jesus is itself is a miraculous one. If we try to surgically remove the miracles from the Gospels and from the rest of the New Testament, under the assumption that they were inserted later, we are left with a pile of tiny, fragmented storylines. More subtly, the backbone of the Gospel story is the miraculous nature of Jesus' ministry.

There is literature outside of the New Testament to support the reality of Jesus' miracles. There is a famous Jewish man named Josephus, who lived from the year 37, around the time Jesus died, to about the year 100. He was a soldier and a historian who happened to write about the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in the year 70 A.D. He also wrote about the hostile and violent acts performed by Pilate against the residents of Jerusalem. Josephus – who was not a follower of Jesus – wrote that Jesus was a “*doer of startling deeds*”, certainly referring to the miracles of Jesus. The Talmud, a central text of Judaism which contains material on Jewish law, ethics, and history, says that Jesus was executed because he practiced magic. This is a very telling statement, as it comes from post New Testament, core Jewish writings. This clearly indicates that Jesus at least attempted to perform supernatural acts. Origen, who was born in 185 A.D., and who was one of the early church “fathers” and a famous theologian quotes a contemporary of

his, a Greek philosopher and fervent opponent of Christianity, his name was Celsus, as saying that Jesus had magical powers. Now, none of this proves that Jesus literally performed miracles, but it certainly shows that there was a widespread belief among contemporaries of Jesus, and people who would not want to promote Christianity, that Jesus was well known as a miracle worker. This without a doubt greatly damages the claim that the miracles were added to the biblical story after Jesus and his Apostles died. And while some of the miracles can be explained away as misunderstood acts of nature, such as the man who was dispossessed of a demon could simply have been a man having some sort of seizure, the vast majority of the miracles performed by Jesus cannot be explained away.

My goal today is simple: to take head on a common complaint, perhaps the most devastating criticism of the biblical Jesus, and that is that the miracles are clearly nonsense. Many people who have been raised as Christians but who now say they are “spiritual, but not religious”, point to the miracles as a key reason for their total loss of faith. But the miracles are, historically, far from ridiculous.

When I was in grammar school, we were of course taught the miracles of the New Testament were unquestionably factual. This traditional approach to Christian faith has had, over the many centuries, a huge impact on the faithful. It has done more than just make us true biblical believers. It has made us very

unique as spiritual people. When I was born, I was very sick. My mother baptized me herself right after I was born, using water provided by a nurse. My formal baptism, in a church, was performed at a younger age, much closer to my birth than standard Catholic infant baptisms of the day. This was all misdirected, of course, as the Catholic Church has now rescinded its notion of Limbo, that cold, gray place to which unbaptized dead children were supposedly condemned for eternity. However, my mother, just after I was born, also sent away for water from Lourdes, the home of a shrine in the foothills of very southern France. The point is that she threw everything at the problem, everything possibly miraculous at her sick baby. She poured that water on my forehead. When I was an older boy, she told me she didn't even tell my father that she had done this, for fear he would disapprove. My mother didn't pick and choose when it came to faith. She didn't buy the pigs, but not the cornfields. She bought the whole farm. It made her faith invulnerable. So, when she needed it, when she had to turn to God and lay her biggest worry at his feet, she was well prepared. I am not telling you that if you are a true believer, you cannot question the miracles. Please don't interpret this message as proclaiming a fully literal view of faith. Everybody's path is a bit different, and I do not question anyone's path. Certainly, as a pastor and a chaplain I have learned that we do not all believe in the exact same fashion.

However, a fragmented faith, a selective faith is almost always a weaker faith. That's all there is to it. Don't be "spiritual but not religious", which are in truth politically correct code words for saying that God might or might not be real, but the Bible certainly is not. They are code words for saying that I have philosophical beliefs, but not faith. Give the Bible a chance. When in doubt, don't throw it out.

Remember, above all else that early believers would have seen continuity from the miracles of God and the Prophets in the Old Testament. The miracles of Jesus illustrate his power and his authority, and they show that he is indeed the long-awaited Messiah. For us, whether we believe them in a literal sense or not, they show over and over that he cares about people who suffer enough to cure them. And as we will see in my next sermon, the miracles show us that he can cure us, too, and cure us in the most important fashion – spiritually. Please pray with me.

God, we thank you for Jesus and for the true story of his ministry. We thank you for touching our lives with a story that is both fantastic and nonfiction. May our story of faith live within us and gives us the power and the strength to see us through a life on Earth and into a life in your Kingdom. Amen.