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John 9:1–12, NRSVue, abbreviated.

9 As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. ² His disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” ³ Jesus answered, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him.” ⁶ When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man’s eyes, ⁷ saying to him, “Go, wash in the pool of Siloam” (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see. ⁸ The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask, “Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?” ⁹ Some were saying, “It is he.” ¹⁰ They kept asking him, “How were your eyes opened?” ¹¹ He answered, “The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, ‘Go to Siloam and wash.’ Then I went and washed and received my sight.” ¹² They said to him, “Where is he?” He said, “I do not know.”

Signs.

In my last message, we talked about the miracles of Jesus, noting that a common word for “miracle” in the New Testament is “*dynamis*”, which means “*deeds of power*”. The typical explanation of why Jesus performs miracles is that they illustrate his power, his authority, his position as the Messiah. They reflect the miracles of the Old Testament, in particular, the acts of God creating the universe and feeding the Israelites in the desert, and prophets who defied nature with their acts. The miracles make it clear that Jesus is God, and that he is the promised Messiah of the Old Testament. They are to be taken literally, as real acts, because

only God, and not some would be fake Messiah could perform these *deeds of power*. But, as it turns out, while this is a reasonable argument with respect to the miracles of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, in the Gospel of John, the story is a bit different. John treats the miracles in a more subtle and theologically deeper fashion. Importantly, John uses a different word, the Greek word "*semeion*" to refer to miracles; the word means "*sign*". This implies much more than if the author of the Gospel of John had simply used a true synonym for "miracle", like *dynamis*. The word *semeion* doesn't mean miracle at all. In John, the miracles of Jesus are presented as showing that Jesus has power, that he is the Messiah, that his authority is vastly greater than that of the Pharisees and the Sadducees. They also contribute directly to the central teachings of Jesus. In John, the miracles are indeed signs. Remember that the parables are only told in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Well, John makes up for this a bit, because in that Gospel, the miracles or signs of Jesus are like visual or living parables. The miracles of the Gospel of John - and there are only approximately seven of them, depending on exactly how you count the miracles - tell us moral or spiritual truths. And indeed, in the Gospel of John, a lesson typically follows each miracle or sign. We will start with the healing of the man born blind. We read about it at the beginning of Chapter 9. This is abbreviated:

9 As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. ² His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" ³ Jesus answered, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him." ⁶ When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man's eyes, ⁷ saying to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see. ⁸ The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask, "Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?" ⁹ Some were saying, "It is he." ¹⁰ They kept asking him, "How were your eyes opened?" ¹¹ He answered, "The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, 'Go to Siloam and wash.' Then I went and washed and received my sight." ¹² They said to him, "Where is he?" He said, "I do not know."

Notice that this begins with the Apostles thinking that the blind man or his parents must have sinned for him to be born blind. This was a common belief at the time, that disobeying the tenets of the Old Covenant must be the reason for someone to be hit with tragedy. Jesus counters. He subtly, as he so often does, says two things at once. First, no, this is the New Covenant and God does not punish the innocent. Second, God did this so that I could cure him in front of all these people. Then, possibly in a way that would make people think back to the Hebrew Scriptures, and how God made humans out of the dust of the Earth and his own breath, Jesus uses mud and his own spit to cure the man. Jesus then sends the man to the Pool of Siloam, which was built around 700 B.C. The Pool of Siloam was a place where Jews went to be spiritually purified during the Holy Festivals of Passover, the Feast of the Tabernacles, and Pentecost, and at other times. During the time of Christ, about a

million Jews would make the pilgrimage to these festivals, and so the pool, which was about the size of two large swimming pools, would have been well known. Jesus is making this obvious reference to a holy site of the Old Covenant because eventually, he will be making it clear that he is the Messiah of the Hebrew Scriptures. Then, after the people around him are amazed by this “sign” (not miracle), Jesus slips away and cannot be found. We see that often, early in his ministry, Jesus does not want to be overtly public in what he does, so that the Sadducees and the Pharisees don’t come after him – yet.

Here is what is important. Let’s look at what happens next. The Pharisees find out about this man. They get angry because Jesus performed a miracle on the Sabbath. Remember that there were very strict Old Covenant laws forbidding innumerable forms of work on the Sabbath, including lighting candles and carrying anything that any weight at all. They use this as an excuse to condemn him. The blind man, much to the anger of the Pharisees, and remember, they are the officials of the many local synagogues, says this, and again, this is abbreviated:

“Here is an astonishing thing! ³¹ We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. ³² Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. ³³ If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.”

Jesus later confronts the blind man, the Pharisees and others:

³⁵ Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him he said, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?," ³⁶ He answered, "And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him." ³⁷ Jesus said to him, "You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he." ³⁸ He said, "Lord, I believe." And he worshiped him. ³⁹ Jesus said, "I came into this world for judgment, so that those who do not see may see and those who do see may become blind." ⁴⁰ Some of the Pharisees who were with him heard this and said to him, "Surely we are not blind, are we?" ⁴¹ Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, 'We see,' your sin remains.*

John does this often with miracles, the things he calls "signs": he appends a lesson after a sign. Jesus does much more than simply heal then convert this man to the new faith. In this case, Jesus is his usual self, using language in a very clever, poetic fashion. He is using physical blindness as a metaphor for spiritual blindness. Jesus says that he has come into this world to be judged and executed. This is so that he can take those who do not yet see the truth of God, of the New Covenant, and make them see what it means to have faith. He tells the Pharisees that although they think they can see, they are in fact totally blind.

These "signs" in the Gospel of John are thus physical parables of a sort. Instead of Jesus telling stories that have layered meanings, Jesus lives out stories in the real world. And, as we saw with the parables, these signs are about the Kingdom of God. This is another way in which we see how different, and in some ways, how much deeper the Gospel of John is than the other three Gospels. The other three use a lot of shared material and they focus to some degree on parables.

The Gospel of John frequently portrays Jesus as discoursing in a theological fashion. That's why the miracles are portrayed as special "signs". It is a more thoughtful, reflective Gospel. Rather than focusing on a biography of Jesus, the author wants us to fully understand exactly how a witness to the life of Jesus would have been very deeply, spiritually impacted and inspired. I am not saying that the miracles of the other three Gospels do not portray spiritual lessons. It is a matter of emphasis, and it is often subtle. There is no denying, though, that the author of the Gospel of John wants us to consider the miracles as "signs" of important theological truths rather than as "deeds of power" by a deity.

Rather than reading the other six signs that are described in the Gospel of John, I'll just quickly describe the purpose of the other six and leave it to you to read them. I would strongly encourage you to read them yourself. Remember that the sign we just looked at is from Chapter 9, and, as it turns out, the seven signs are spread throughout Jesus' ministry, from Chapter 2 to Chapter 11, just before Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem on a donkey, in Chapter 12.

1. Turning water into wine, in John, Chapter 2.

In the first sign, and this happens early in Jesus' ministry, Jesus turns water into wine. He thus reveals himself as the source of a new life, a New Covenant. John

says this: ¹¹ *Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee and revealed his glory, and his disciples believed in him.*

2. Healing the Official's son, Chapter 4.

An important man approaches Jesus and begs him to heal his young boy. Jesus tells him to go home, and before the man even gets home, he is told that his son is healed. This is a long-distance sign – and Jesus shows that there are no boundaries to his power as the Messiah. Before healing the boy, Jesus says this to the powerful father: *“Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe.”*

Jesus is not speaking just to this man. He is addressing us, telling us that we need to believe without having to witness miracles. That is the sign of true, deep faith.

3. Healing a man who cannot walk, Chapter 5.

This also involves a healing pool, this one called Bethesda. Jesus cures a man on the sabbath, a man who has been unable to walk for 38 years. Jesus is now showing his authority over time. Even the most long-standing illness is something he can easily cure. The Gospel writer tells us this: the Jewish authorities *“were seeking all the more to kill him, because he was not only breaking the Sabbath but was also calling God his own Father, thereby making himself equal to God.”* Thus, Jesus is using this sign to show the world that he isn't just someone who can heal: he is the Messiah of the ancient Jewish Scriptures.

4. Feeding the 5,000, Chapter 6.

Jesus takes five loaves and two fish and feeds 5,000 people who have come to hear him. This sign shows us that Jesus can nourish us not just physically, but spiritually. This also shows that he is indeed the Messiah, as the people who are fed remark this: *“This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world.”*

5. Walking on Water, Chapter 6.

Jesus shows us that the laws of nature, even ones that we are certain are absolutely unwavering, are nothing to him. His Apostles are out on a boat and are terrified in the middle of a storm. Jesus shows up by walking up to them. Jesus says this: *“It is I; do not be afraid.”* This sign shows us that with Jesus, we have absolutely nothing to fear in this world.

6. Resurrecting Lazarus from the dead, Chapter 11.

The last sign shows Jesus bringing Lazarus, the beloved brother of Mary and Martha, back to life. This sign foreshadows his own death and resurrection, which is not far off. Jesus does what he often does. He speaks cleverly, with a double entendre: *“I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live,²⁶ and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.”*

There are, in truth, three more “signs” in the Gospel of John, and they consist of Jesus appearing to various Apostles after he is dead. The resurrection itself is a

very important sign. At the tail end of the Gospel of John, Jesus appears to seven of his Apostles; this is the third and final appearance. They go out fishing at night, but they catch nothing. Just after daybreak, Jesus is seen standing on the beach. Peter declares "*It is the Lord!*" Suddenly, their net is bulging with fish. The Gospel author tells us this: "*Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them.*" We see the story of Jesus coming full circle, with Jesus's death ending the way it began, with him sharing a meal with his disciples.

When you read the Gospels, there are things that stand out. The parables of Matthew, Mark, and Luke tell us much about the Kingdom of God. As it turns out, the miracles, especially the signs of the Gospel of John, tell us about the Kingdom by telling us about the Messiah. John, in a sense, deemphasizes the miracles as acts of otherworldliness. They are, instead, powerful statements about Jesus, who he is, and why we should have faith. I would urge you, when you read the Bible, to do what I try very hard to do, and that is to read it spiritually, and not just literally. Don't get caught up in the mystery and the excitement. Don't let the signs themselves blind you to their real meaning. Remember that what Jesus says and does often lives on two planes. The miracles cure physical wounds, raise the physically dead, and take command over physical nature. But they also cure our

spiritual wounds, raise the spiritually dead, and lead our spiritual natures into the Kingdom. Please pray with me.

God, we have your Bible. We have the Gospels, with their deeds of power, their signs. Help us, when we read Scripture, to fully understand what it means and why you have preserved it for us. Amen.