

Miracle worker: Mark 6:1-6

by [Jim Callahan](#) in the [June 21, 2000](#) issue

After the remarkable healing of a woman who had suffered for 12 years from hemorrhages and after the raising of the dead child of Jairus, Jesus goes home to Nazareth accompanied by his disciples. He teaches in the synagogue on the sabbath, and the people are amazed both at his teaching and at the murmured accounts of the healings. For a moment or two it would appear that a warm celebration of “hometown boy makes good” is about to erupt. But not so. What is about to happen is rejection, the same kind of rejection that would dog his trail all the way to Good Friday. “He could do no mighty work there . . . because of their unbelief.”

Strange how “mighty work” and “belief” are so solidly linked. Strange how hardened hearts can cut even God off at the pass.

“Where did he get all of this?” “Whence all this ‘wisdom’?” The Nazarenes respond with good old horsesense: “Is not this the *carpenter*, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon (and aren’t his sisters in the band at Hebrew High)?” So it went, and they took offense at him.

It’s easy enough to deal with this under the heading of “familiarity breeds contempt.” Jesus even invites that spin with his “A prophet is not without honor, except in his own country.” Yet there is an issue here that runs much deeper and with greater, even devastating import. The issue is the scandal of the incarnation. It hounded Galilean hearts and minds then, as it hounds us now. “The word made flesh” is both our only salvation and the greatest bugaboo of modern piety.

Yes, by God! He *was* the carpenter. He *was* the brother of James and Simon. The grand wonder of the incarnation is that that is precisely how he gets to be your brother and mine. But downtown Nazareth was having none of that. And downtown Carrollton and downtown Chicago aren’t all that comfortable with it either. The mystery of the incarnation holds our greatest solace and comfort, namely that wherever we go in suffering, in hurt and sorrow and despair, God has gone there first, goes with us, shows up (!), and is glad to be there with us and for us.

It is amazing that the first great heresy in the church was not the denial of Christ's divinity, but the denial of his full humanity. The Nicene Creed addresses that heresy (docetism). Yet we still struggle with it, maybe with less justification than did Nazareth. We want a two-fisted God who comes up like thunder, and we are offended by one who puts himself/herself at our mercy and who now and then looks a lot like our Uncle Fred.

Yes, his mama was Mary, and he had sisters and brothers with names and faces and backaches. The Gospels proclaim that God was his father, and he proclaimed that God is your father and mother too, and mine everyone's. When we begin to really believe that, when we seek God in the ordinary, daily wash of things and find God in nothing more complicated than each other and in God's beautiful, dangerous, gorgeous creation, "mighty works" begin to happen. Works of mercy and compassion. Works of healing and commiseration. Works of forgiveness and understanding and of great laughter. Frederick Buechner was right, I believe, in asserting that miracles do not evoke faith so much as faith evokes miracles.

What that poor crowd of Nazarenes was cutting off at the pass had to do not only with God, but with their neighbors and spouses and children, and whatever they knew of community. It was probably a world where anyone who cooked was just a cook, any tradesman just a competitor, any lawyer just a crook. Anyone's wife was just a woman, anyone's daughter was a nuisance. It was a bleak world, with no wonder, no enticing mystery, no great expectations and precious little hope. They seem to have suffered not only a loss of nerve (which may be another word for faith) but also a loss of awareness—of consciousness.

When Emily Webb, in Thornton Wilder's play *Our Town*, comes back from the dead to the town of her childhood and finds her mother and father and all her long-dead acquaintances still "alive" and the town and its environs the same as when she was a child, she begs to go back to the grave. The sheer beauty and wonder of it all—every sight and sound, every tender grace of things, every gesture of love and devotion—is overwhelming. It is too much for her to bear, for she had never realized the miracle of her life when she was living it.

Maybe that was the case in Nazareth. Maybe most of the time that's the case with us too. Maybe we need to go back to our lessons from safety patrol: Stop, look and listen! Know a prophet when you see one; learn the wondrous truth when you hear it. Maybe that's the way we get to let God cut *us* off at the pass and then lead us into the eternal life which begins in the here and now of realizing the wonder we see

in each other's faces.