

Acts 9:36-43

36 Now in Joppa there was a disciple whose name was Tabitha, which in Greek is Dorcas. She was devoted to good works and acts of charity.

37 At that time she became ill and died. When they had washed her, they laid her in a room upstairs.

38 Since Lydda was near Joppa, the disciples, who heard that Peter was there, sent two men to him with the request, "Please come to us without delay."

39 So Peter got up and went with them; and when he arrived, they took him to the room upstairs. All the widows stood beside him, weeping and showing tunics and other clothing that Dorcas had made while she was with them.

40 Peter put all of them outside, and then he knelt down and prayed. He turned to the body and said, "Tabitha, get up." Then she opened her eyes, and seeing Peter, she sat up.

41 He gave her his hand and helped her up. Then calling the saints and widows, he showed her to be alive.

42 This became known throughout Joppa, and many believed in the Lord.

43 Meanwhile he stayed in Joppa for some time with a certain Simon, a tanner.

"Sent Out"

We often have the sense that the time of extraordinary things, of miracles and wonders, in the Christian Church is in the past. We read about Jesus earthly ministry and the many miracles and think those things are well behind the modern church. Jesus healed the sick, multiplied resources, cast out demons and raised the dead, but such things seem to be too extraordinary for us here in boring, modern America.

In fact, many modern scholars and seminarians deny the entire existence of demons and Satan, let alone the exorcisms Jesus performed. Scientists and theologians alike have offered rational explanations for the things Jesus accomplished. Surely it was just the placebo effect when he healed the sick, or perhaps he happened to stumble across a certain kind of mud which has medicinal qualities. Surely the feeding of the multitude was just a symbol, or the apostles simply failed math class. Demons are explained away by mental illness or just eccentric personalities. And the dead rising?

No, just a swoon that was aroused by a cool hand or ancient Jewish smelling salts yet unknown to modern archaeology.

If the miracles of Jesus are not rationalized to death and stripped of their wonder, many simply believe that was a different time, a different disposition some might say, but such things are over and done.

Of course, tell that to the apostles, who did amazing things for God. They, too, healed the sick, raised the dead, and cast out demons. They spread the Gospel to the ends of the known world, and saw dramatic conversions and growth like most of us have never seen.

And lest we think the miracles ended there, the early church mothers and fathers were full of such stories. Augustine recorded a blind man who had his sight restored. When Polycarp faced dying at the stake for his faith, it was widely reported that he glowed like gold in the furnace and the air filled with the smell of incense, and he survived until he was pierced by the sword. Irenaeus reported a man raising from the dead with much prayer and fasting of the church. Perpetua, one of the oldest documented reports of female martyrs, and Pertua herself being one of the first female Christian writers, received visions while in prison and were supernaturally saved from illness. Even later, in the Middle Ages, Julian of Norwich would receive visions which comfort many to this day.

Even so, many people believe that these belong to the past, much like legends of dragons and druids. The time of miracles is believed by many to have passed. We sometimes think the only work left to the church is committee meetings or the occasional picnic. Many of our brothers and sisters don't see themselves as in the same class as Peter and the apostles. We in the presbyterian church in particular are often quick to shun talk of miracles which are sometimes unpredictable and challenge our love that which is done decently and in good order.

But God never intended for the time of wonders to come to an end. Before his ascension Jesus instructed his disciples to go, preach the Gospel, make disciples. Jesus even told them that they would do works like this, healing the sick and raising the dead and see greater things still. Before his earthly ministry ended, Jesus transformed the disciples from students, to teachers, and sent them out into the world with a mission. The word apostle means "one who is sent off," or "sent ones" for short. When Peter raised

Tabitha he was fulfilling his call and mission in the world, to go, preach, make disciples, and care for God's people.

But these instructions, sometimes called the great commission, were not meant for just the twelve apostles. Very quickly the Christian Church grew from the twelve to reach the far corners of the world, and where the Gospel took root, people saw the wonders I mentioned earlier. This tradition continues to today. We, too, are sent ones, instructed to go, preach the gospel, make disciples, and care for God's people.

Now, some of you may be thinking that this is all well and good but miracles just don't happen like that anymore. You might think wonders like seen in the early church and even commonly into the Middle Ages are quite impossible and just don't happen today. You might say that you've had no luck feeding five thousand, raising the dead, or causing miraculous catches of, well, anything, but certainly not people or fish. And I would say to you that you might be putting the horse before the cart.

Peter did not travel to the town where Tabitha lived with the expectation that he would raise the dead. Instead, he was first and foremost, following Jesus' instructions to go, to preach, and to care for God's people. The things which unfolded from his mission were often miraculous. Peter did not seek dramatic miracles, like some of the modern faith healers that knock their patients to the ground. Rather, Peter was seeking Christ first, seeking to obey and love and worship and be a disciple of Christ, and in following that holy mission, many wonders flowed out from his work.

It is impossible to say what wonders we, too, might see flow out of our work, but the first step is following Christ. Christ has called us to go, to teach and preach, to make disciples and to care for God's people. If we follow that mission, wonders will flow.

Now, I'm not necessarily saying we will see something as dramatic as Tabitha being raised from the dead, though I've learned never to be surprised by what God chooses to do. But we may see other wonders. Many of our brothers and sisters are already aware of this in other cultures.

One of my favorite days in seminary, and trust me there were precious few amid the mountains of reading and dead languages, was when they brought in pastors from different countries to tell us what Christian practice

was like in their home countries. They brought in a Korean pastor who told us of packed churches, so packed that congregants would be given tokens to indicate which service they could attend because each was full to capacity. He also told us of prayer services most nights which were also highly attended. Many in my seminary witnessed the faith of the Korean students first hand when one of the student's wife suffered a tragic illness and was expected to die. It seemed impossible she would ever wake again, let alone survive. All the Korean students gathered at the chapel to pray for her, but not like one of our orderly prayer services. They cried and shouted and wailed to God for her life. She did survive, and recovered faster and more fully than anyone could hope.

A Ghanaian pastor was also brought in and one of the first things he told us was that we wouldn't believe our eyes if we saw how Christianity was practiced in his country. He told us about healings, amazing conversions, and many other things I won't mention here because of just how incredible they sound, though I absolutely believe him.

In every circumstance, God's people were first being the sent ones, preaching the gospel, and trying to love and serve God and God's people to the best of their abilities. The wonders simply flowed out of it.

What wonders might we see as we live ever deeper into our calling as sent ones here at Trinity? What might flow out of our work of preaching the gospel, making disciples and caring for God's people. Perhaps in loving God's people we will see broken, seemingly unsalvageable, relationships healed by God's grace. Perhaps the wounded soul who turns to destructive habits might find some hope and healing in the Gospel. Perhaps by serving and loving those near to us we might see our little corner of Fairfield transformed from a collection of strangers to a supportive community where people can do life together. Perhaps when we share God's love with the community, we will have the sacred privilege of seeing people come to Christ. Perhaps we will see our resources blessed and multiplied by God; Trinity already accomplishes so much in terms of fellowship and mission work for a smaller church. Such wonders, and more, are possible. There is no telling what might flow out of our work in serving God and God's people. Nothing is impossible.

These things are merely the result of our journey, and not the goal however. Peter could not have raised Tabitha had he not first heard and

obeyed God's call to be an apostle, to be one who is sent off. He first had to step out in faith. Once he did, nothing was impossible. God made a way where there was none, and poured out wonders on Peter's ministry. Our Early church mothers and fathers saw much the same; when they followed their faith, God made a way, and empowered and blessed their ministries in ways we can hardly believe. Even today, when our brothers and sisters seek first the kingdom of God, amazing things happen.

When we follow God's call, we will always face challenges, some which seem insurmountable. If we are following God's call, however, God will bring us safely to the other side of whatever challenge we face. It is easy to be discouraged at the obstacles we face, to think we do not have the resources, or there are too many challenges to overcome. We might see a need or hear God's call but are soon met with a mountain in the way. But the first step is not to move the mountain, but to love and serve the Lord, to follow God's call, trusting that God will make a way. I wonder how many ministries failed before they ever got started because they started with the mountain, instead of the Gospel. May we always keep our hearts and minds on God's call, not the challenges, trusting that God will make a way. And may we trust that following God's call, just as our brothers and sisters before us and in other places have, we will see amazing things happen. Let us never forget that the story is not finished, we are merely the next sent ones, called to share the gospel, and as a result, we, too, will see and do wondrous things.

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