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## THE MISSIONARY JESUS: "HE WENT ABOUT DOING GOOD"

IMAGINE JESUS, AFTER HIS LONG SLOW TRIP DOWN THE JORDAN VALLEY FROM Galilee, as he stands watching the prologue of his life's drama. A spiritual revival is taking place on the banks of the Jordan, just above the Dead Sea. Every day people are flocking to hear the rugged desert prophet, John the Baptist. He is announcing tremendous news: The Messiah is finally coming, and he will baptize his people with the fire of the Spirit. In preparation, John baptizes them in the waters of the Jordan as a sign of their repentance.

Jesus sees the new people of God being formed, and he loves them. He walks into the water to be one with them. John at first refuses to baptize him, apparently because of long acquaintance with his cousin's holiness. But Jesus insists. He is an observant Jew eager to share all the practices of good Jewish life.

As Jesus comes up out of the water, he sees the sky "rent in two" in fulfillment of Isaiah's prayer that God rend the heavens and come down (see Isaiah 63:19—64:3). Jesus sees the Spirit, in the form of a dove, come and rest on him. The dove, which referred to the Israel of old, is the sign of the new Israel, the new people of God coming up out of the water in a new Exodus as they once came through the Red Sea to freedom.

A voice from heaven thunders the fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah about the Suffering Servant to come: "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased" (see Mark 1:9–11). God had said, in Isaiah:

Here is my servant whom I uphold,  
 my chosen one with whom I am pleased,  
 Upon whom I have put my spirit;  
 he shall bring forth justice to the nations. (Isaiah 42:1)

Then the Spirit *drives* (see Mark 1:12) Jesus into the hot and barren Judean desert. Alone with the wild beasts, he faces the devil. What kind of Messiah will he be? Why not a powerful one, Satan urges. Just a practical little beginning would do—like, say, turning stone into bread to still his hunger.

Not that? Well, Scripture says that the Messiah shall not even so much as stumble on a stone. What is to prevent a spectacular leap off the pinnacle of the temple? *That* would bring followers!

The final practical way to go, of course, is political. The devil offers Jesus the world, his kingdom, for a simple price: a Faust-like selling of his soul.

Unlike the old Israel that was often unfaithful in its forty-year sojourn in the desert, Jesus stands unmoved. He is totally given to his Father (see *Catechism*, #535–540).

**THE GOOD NEWS.** Now one career ends and another begins. John the Baptist is suddenly silenced in prison by a vengeful Herod and will soon be put to death. Jesus now steps into the public eye, knowing he faces the same dangers as John. Mark says, very simply, "Jesus came to Galilee proclaiming the gospel [good news] of God" (1:14b).

What was—and is—the Good News? It was that God was making the long promised "move." Now God would decisively defeat the powers of evil in the world and *definitely*, once and for all, establish the Kingdom.

This may sound very warlike and political. It took Jesus a long time to convince people (relatively few people) that victory would come through defeat and life through death, and that the Kingdom was not a place or even a people, but exclusively God's powerful saving and loving action—God's *reign*.

Jesus therefore says, in so many words, "This is it. The time God set is here. All promises will be fulfilled. God will rule! My Father will destroy evil and fill you with his life, his love and his power. Believe this Good News! Change your whole way of thinking and acting!" (see *Catechism*, #543).

Remember that Mark, like all the Gospel writers, is looking backward from the time after the Resurrection of Jesus. By then it had become obvious that *Jesus himself was the Good News*. He was God fulfilling an eternal plan. He was the Promise fulfilled, the Gift of God. He was God.

**JESUS' TWO GREAT ACTIVITIES: HEALING AND PROCLAIMING THE GOOD NEWS.**

The simplest way to describe Jesus' life is to use Saint Peter's words: "He went about doing good works and healing all those oppressed by the devil..." (Acts 10:38b). There is danger that in trying to summarize Jesus' teaching, miracles and proved mastery over the devil (see *Catechism*, #548-549), we may end with another "butterfly on a pin," a list of events as dead as a newspaper index. But let us try.

The picture of Jesus in Mark's Gospel is that of a man *totally available*, totally generous, almost always in the middle of a pressing crowd. Almost the first thing told of him is that he went out into the street to help people in need. Mark spends little space on what Jesus said. He is concerned to show Jesus immediately curing a man possessed, healing Peter's mother-in-law and welcoming "...all who were ill or possessed by demons" (Mark 1:32b).

He is doing much more than being sorry for people. But Mark will never let us forget that he was sorry for them, pitied them, suffered with them. Jesus is moved at the sight of a leper and cures him (1:41). Then the fuller secret begins to appear when he heals both soul and body of a paralyzed man (2:1-12).

Then a new element (3:1-5): Dare he cure on the sabbath? No question. A good deed does not violate the sabbath.

He goes over into pagan territory and releases a wild man from the devil's power—a graphic short story (5:1-20); he comes back across the Sea of Galilee and raises a little girl back to life, adding the touching instruction that they take care to give her something to eat.

A trembling woman is cured just by touching his garment, and he gives her his peace. He looks around at the crowd following him and pities them, "for they were like sheep without a shepherd" (Mark 6:34b). Mark begins to be overwhelmed by his task, so he simply says, "Whatever villages or towns or countryside he entered, they laid the sick in the marketplaces

and begged him that they might touch only the tassel of his cloak; and as many as touched it were healed" (6:56).

And always the great crowds—from Galilee in the north to Judea in the south.

Except for one chapter of parables, there is hardly a line of teaching in the first half of Mark's Gospel. That section ends with the climactic declaration of Peter that Jesus is the Messiah (Mark 8:29). The first explicit teaching, which immediately follows, is the doctrine of the cross (8:34–38).

This is not to say that the teaching of Jesus is unimportant, but to emphasize that Jesus put first things first: He first showed his love, unmistakably, in concrete actions, and then taught people its source: the infinite love of his Father.

His greatest act was to restore peace to hearts miserable in sin—the paralytic, Levi, Peter—but he was also concerned about empty stomachs and sightless eyes, leprosy sores and crippled legs.

**THE MEANING OF JESUS' "SIGNS."** Jesus once reproached some people for "seeking signs and wonders." Yet he himself performed many "signs." He told those who wanted a razzle-dazzle Messiah that they would not believe even if someone were to rise from the dead. Yet he rose from the dead as the greatest "sign" of our hope.

Evidently, then, there are signs and there are signs. The danger seems to be that we expect *extraordinary* signs, miracles "coming through" from God, and we sometimes forget that love alone can see the real miracles.

Science has enriched our lives, no doubt. But it has taken away our childlike excitement at everyday wonders. We know the chemical composition of violets and how a sunset looks on radar. Jack Frost depends on isobars and sunspots, and we can write "music" with computers.

Not so boringly overinformed was the biblical person. If it rained, God sent the rain; thank God. If we lost the war, we were being punished. God told the sun, every morning, to get up and do it again.

So the "miracles" of the Bible are not much more marvelous to the Hebrew than sunrise over the desert or the birth of a deer. It would never have occurred to a contemporary of Jesus to worry about whether he

should call a cure "natural" or "supernatural," or if the man possessed merely had epilepsy.

God's greatest "sign" is Jesus. Not just certain things Jesus did, but simply Jesus—whatever he did or said or was—then and now.

Jesus is, above all, *the* "sign" or "sacrament" of God. As Jesus himself said, "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9b).

He is the Word made flesh. He is, in fact, God's last word. In Jesus God expressed and continues to express divinity as perfectly as possible in human form, word and action. So Jesus' "signs"—whether the extraordinary ones we call miracles or the "ordinary" ones like putting the infinite love of God into a simple "good morning"—are the openings through which human love sees God and receives divine life.

Many people saw Jesus' signs—raising a widow's son from the dead and asking a Samaritan woman for a drink of water—but the signs did not register. I don't know why. Maybe they were looking for entertainment. Maybe they wanted God to prove something. Maybe they wanted someone who could smash the Roman army.

But those who let God create a disposition to receive, to be healed, to be liberated—they read the signs.

They saw Jesus' Father assuring them of his love, and definitively breaking the power of evil, sin, suffering, death and the devil. They saw signs of love and signs of power. They accepted the reality behind the signs—God's own life and love—and they were saved.

**JESUS' POWER OVER THE DEVIL AND ALL EVIL SPIRITS.** In the Bible evil and good spirits are simply taken for granted. In the New Testament the devils form a kingdom opposed to the Kingdom of God and manifested in the enslavement of human beings. The church teaches that God created Satan and other devils to be good by nature, but that they chose evil by their own free will. The Bible sees these evil spirits as *personal*.

If we are to be moved to faith by Jesus' power over the devil, we had better ask whether we really believe there is such a thing. Some, after seeing "cute" devils on Halloween and being persuaded to buy lighter fluid by red-suited creatures with "devilishly" attractive mustaches, have relegated the devil to a sideshow in Disneyland. This temptation not to take the

devil seriously is a phenomenon explored with deadly perception by C.S. Lewis in *The Screwtape Letters*.

Saint Paul reminds us that our warfare is against "principalities and powers" (see Ephesians 6:12). *The Good News Bible* translates this passage: "We are not fighting against human beings but against the wicked spiritual forces in the heavenly world, the rulers, authorities and cosmic powers of this dark age." These, according to the *Theological Dictionary*, have been "vanquished in the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ, but their impotence has not yet been laid bare; they still saturate the atmosphere of 'this world,' so that it exposes Christians to temptation and leads to their persecution."

One of the clearest "signs" of the devil I have seen is the picture of grinning soldiers driving little sticks into Vietnamese children's eardrums. I believe it was the same group who shipped severed human ears back to their families.

Some references to "possession" in the Bible may refer to human illness such as epilepsy. This is probably the case, for instance, in Mark 9:14. But the New Testament writers often attribute disorders to the devil. This comes from seeing the devil, sin, death, suffering and all human ills as the miserable inheritance of sin. Jesus is God's final, definitive destruction of all evil, and those who let Jesus possess them will be liberated from all evil.

The synoptics place Jesus' head-on confrontation with the devil at the very beginning of his public life, immediately after his baptism. Mark almost immediately relates an incident which shows Jesus' power over the devils. In the synagogue at Capernaum "was a man with an unclean spirit; 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!' Jesus rebuked him and said, 'Quiet! Come out of him!' The unclean spirit convulsed him and with a loud cry came out of him. All were amazed and asked one another, 'What is this? A new teaching with authority. He commands even the unclean spirits and they obey him'" (Mark 1:23–27). In Mark's "typical day's ministry" in Capernaum (1:21–3:5), Jesus' expelling demons is referred to twice in the first thirteen verses (see *Catechism*, #550).

In Luke's Gospel the seventy-two disciples Jesus sent to cure the sick and proclaim the Kingdom exclaimed upon their return, "Lord, even the



demons are subject to us because of your name!" Jesus replied, "I have observed Satan fall like lightning from the sky" (10:17b, 18b).

When Mark's Jesus sends forth the Twelve into the whole world after the Resurrection, he says that one of the signs that will accompany *those who have professed their faith* is that "in my name they will drive out demons" (Mark 16:17b).

An essential part of Jesus' saving work in Matthew is the conquering of "the devil and his angels" for whom an everlasting fire is prepared (see Matthew 25:41). All who give Jesus their lives are safe. No evil can touch them, even though they die on crosses, as he did, or suffer the humiliation of hatred and misunderstanding.

But nothing is automatic. If a person's new cleanliness is merely external, if one does not let the power and love of God possess the soul as totally as any devil ever possessed the human heart, then the unclean spirit "goes and brings back with itself seven other spirits more evil than itself, and they move in and dwell there; and the last condition of that person is worse than the first" (Matthew 12:45).

It is the height of irony—and of the diabolical—that Jesus himself is accused of being in league with the devil. After Jesus frees a mute, some Pharisees say, "He drives out demons by the prince of demons" (Matthew 9:34b); and, later, "This man drives out demons only by the power of Beelzebul, the prince of demons" (Matthew 12:24b).

**THE LAST ENEMY: DEATH.** We will reflect, in the next chapter, on the central tragedy of humanity—physical and moral death—and how God liberated us from its enslavement. The Gospels relate three incidents of Jesus raising persons from the dead, but these events are not particularly emphasized by the synoptics. The conclusion of the story of Jesus' raising Jairus's daughter from the dead (Mark 5:21–24, 35–43) is delayed to insert an account of his healing of the woman with a hemorrhage (Mark 5:25–34). Only Luke has the touching story of Jesus raising the widow's son (7:11–17). Death, disease, devils, the forces of nature—all are equally subject to the liberating power within Jesus. To the loving heart, one sign is as good as another.

John's Gospel, however, places climactic emphasis on the raising of Lazarus. It is the last and the greatest of Jesus' special "signs." To quote *The Jerome Biblical Commentary*: "In the narration of this miracle John gives at one and the same time a supreme proof of the Lord's life-giving power and a visualization of the doctrine contained in the conversations of vv. 23-27."

That conversation goes like this:

Jesus said to her [Martha], "Your brother will rise." Martha said to him,

"I know he will rise, in the resurrection on the last day." Jesus told her, "I am the resurrection and the life; whoever believes in me, even if he dies, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die." (John 11:23-26a)

The miracle is "a sign, therefore, both of the final resurrection and of the rising from sin that takes place in the soul of the believer" (*The Jerome Biblical Commentary*).

All the "signs" of Jesus' life lead to the central event of his life and ours: his saving death and resurrection.

### REFLECTION/DISCUSSION STARTERS

- 1) Mark writes that Jesus proclaimed "the good news of God." Discuss what the "Good News" might have meant for those hearing it at the time. What does the Good News mean to you today?
- 2) What is your concept of the devil? Discuss the ways the Gospels treat the devil or satanic forces.
- 3) Discuss some of the "signs" Jesus worked. What was the mind-set of the people toward "miracles"? Do you believe miracles take place today?
- 4) Reflect on the author's statement that Jesus' signs—both "extraordinary" and "ordinary"—"are the openings through which human love sees God and receives divine life." What signs in your life have become openings to God for you?

### SCRIPTURE READINGS

Isaiah 63:19—64:3; the Gospel of Mark.

**SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL**

**Scripture From Scratch:** "Mark's Urgent Message," by Sean Freyne; "Exploring the Synoptic Gospels: Mark and His Careful Readers," by Steve Mueller.

**Books:** *Jesus' Plan for a New World: The Sermon on the Mount*, by Richard Rohr, O.F.M., with John Feister; *Jesus: A Historical Portrait*, by Daniel Harrington, S.J.; *John the Baptist: Prophet and Disciple*, by Alexander J. Burke, Jr.; *Journeys Into Mark*, by Raymond Apicella; *Things Hidden: Scripture as Spirituality*, by Richard Rohr, O.F.M.

JESUS' SIMPLE CORE, EVERY-WORD-AND-MOTION, WAS HIS TEACHING. BUT A SPECIAL PART of his teaching was done in the context of parables. In these religious stories people could recognize situations of everyday life: housekeeping, fishing and farming, wedding celebrations, midnight visits and happy meals, cracked pipes, frogs and thirsty children, planting seeds, boiling food and making wine. Sometimes, no doubt, Jesus' stories referred to a recent happening—a burglary, a discovery of treasure, a rich man's downfall.

The parable has something in common with all stories: We want to know how it comes out. But Jesus' parables often carry you along, controlling the truth of one step after another, until we find that we have been trapped by the truth. What we have so readily whittled down into a conclusion which surprises and challenges us.

The best example of this technique occurs in the "parable" Nathan told King David after the latter had seduced Uriah's wife and then arranged to have him killed in battle. Once, Nathan said, there was a rich man and a poor man. The poor man had only one little ewe lamb, which grew up with him and his children, sharing his food, sleeping in his bosom. The rich man had huge flocks. One day the rich man's servant a neighbor took the one lamb to make a meal. David was furious and interrupted Nathan as he said, "The man who has done this surely death!"

Then Nathan said to David, "Now are the man!" David saw that brought him the reward of judgment on himself (see 2 Samuel 12:1-13).