

No Faith, No Miracles

What Jesus Asks of You

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Introduction

You probably have heard the joke. A man is sitting in his house when floodwaters begin to rise rapidly. He immediately prays to God to save him. Soon a rescue worker comes by in a rowboat and tells the man to get in. The man refuses, stating that he has prayed to God to save him. Not long afterward, with the water now up to the second story, another rescuer—this time in a motorboat—comes by and tells the man to get in. He refuses, saying that he is sure God is going to save him. Later, with the man now standing on his roof and water up to his neck, a helicopter flies overhead and drops him a ladder to climb to safety. Again he refuses, saying that he has prayed to God and he knows God will save him. Shortly thereafter, the man is swept away in the floodwaters and drowns. When he arrives in heaven he complains loudly to God. “I prayed to you, and you didn’t save me.” God looks at him incredulously and says, “I sent you two boats and a helicopter. What more did you want?”

And there you have it. Oftentimes we pray to God for something, and he offers solutions—miracles, even. But we reject those offers, thinking there is something bigger and better. We fail to see the ways in which we need to cooperate with God so the miracles we desire can occur—or the miracles that God desires for us.

When we cooperate with God, miracles happen. Time and again in the gospels, Jesus encounters people and situations that are in need of his healing, transforming touch. But if we reflect closely on those accounts, we see that Jesus doesn’t act alone. The people receiving the miracle (or assisting in some way) are invited to participate. And not just invited, but their participation is necessary for the miracle

to occur. They need to get in the proverbial boat or climb the ladder to the helicopter that God is offering.

Oftentimes we wait for miracles in our lives as though they are dependent entirely upon the whim of God. Not so. We have a part to play in those miracles. There is an absolute faith in the power of God that we must demonstrate, abandoning all reason and believing wholeheartedly that God can, indeed, provide what we need. Doubt and disbelief are impediments to God's power in us. Witness Jesus' inability to perform miracles among the people of his hometown "because of their lack of faith." It certainly wasn't something lacking in Jesus! They simply didn't believe he had miraculous powers or was any different than they. Their unwillingness to cooperate with Jesus in the making of miracles resulted in an inability on his part to carry them out.

The direct opposite of this lack of cooperation can be seen in our Blessed Mother. These reflections herein begin with the annunciation—not a miracle performed by Jesus, but it was Mary's cooperation with God that resulted in Jesus' very Incarnation, from which all the other miracles flow. Without Mary's "Yes," salvation history would have hit a significant roadblock. Maybe God had a Plan B. Thankfully, we'll never know.

This need for cooperation continues into the very first of Jesus' "signs," found in the Gospel of John, at the wedding feast in Cana. "Do whatever he tells you" was Mary's instruction to the waiters there. In the miracles that follow, and in those throughout the other gospels, we continue to see instructions and invitations as to what people must do to co-create their miracle, what their part is in releasing the power of God. In doing whatever he tells us, we cooperate in the miraculous.

The chapters here are stand-alones and have no particular sequence. They are meant to be read individually, in any order, then reflected upon to see how the miracle story applies to one's own life. There are three reflection questions or insights offered at the end of each chapter to help you do this. Finally, at the end of each reflection, there is a closing prayer.

What is most important is that sufficient time be given to each section so that you have a prayerful, meditative experience rather than attempting a continuous reading from chapter to chapter or cover to cover. Use each miracle story as a daily reflection, or even a weekly one, allowing it to unfold in your heart and mind. Although this is not a novel, in total it tells a wonderful tale of God's love, mercy, and transforming power, and each story does so in a very unique way.

Jesus performed "signs and wonders" to demonstrate that God was in our midst, that the kingdom had arrived, that the promises made to the Israelite people were being fulfilled on him. My hope is that a prayerful reflection on these miracles will help us to realize that God is still in our midst, still offering opportunities to cooperate with him in the making of miracles.

As a disclaimer, let me just say that there is no attempt here to give a scholarly analysis of the miracle accounts. I leave that to others who are far more qualified. These are merely the reflections of someone who wants to grow in understanding of how God relates to us and works in our lives. I hope these meditations are an aid in your own spiritual journey as well.

Arlene McGannon

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Pittsburgh

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CHAPTER 1

A Virgin Named Mary

LUKE 1:26–38

The beautiful account of the annunciation is found only in the Gospel of Luke. We know the story. A young virgin named Mary was betrothed to a man named Joseph—which, at that time, meant that they were already legally bound to one another. Unlike our present-day engagement period, which creates no legal bonds, once a couple was betrothed back then, a formal divorce was necessary to nullify the betrothal. There was also a required time period between betrothal and the actual marriage ceremony. Mary and Joseph had not yet completed this requirement, so they were not yet married or living together.

Enter the angel Gabriel. Imagine the sight of this heavenly being! Luke tells us that Mary was “greatly troubled” by the angel’s appearance and greeting. Who wouldn’t be? Gabriel told Mary not to be afraid because she had found favor with God. Easy for him to say! It’s not every day that a personal messenger from God comes calling. It is unlikely that what Gabriel was about to say even entered her mind: that she would soon be pregnant by the power of the Holy Spirit, thus making the child the Son of God. She was to name this boy Jesus, and God would give him the throne of David. To emphasize that this was all quite possible, Gabriel went on to tell Mary that her

relative, Elizabeth, had also conceived a son despite her old age, “for nothing will be impossible for God.”

Now, if we can just place ourselves in Mary’s situation, let’s imagine what our response would be. Here was a very young woman, already betrothed to Joseph, looking forward to fulfilling the period of betrothal and starting her married life with him. She hears she is about to become pregnant, not by Joseph, but by the power of God alone. She has been specially selected to bear this child, who will go on to rule over a kingdom that will never end. Who among us would have said, “Oh, OK. If that is what God is asking of me, then let it be done?”

Not this girl, for one! I picture myself asking a million and one questions, running down a list of the numerous reasons why it was not a good idea, not convenient right now, not what I had planned for my life. But thanks anyway, Gabe.

Mary had a powerful awareness that her cooperation with God was essential if the plan described by Gabriel was to become reality. She risked everything and said yes. Luke leaves out Joseph’s response to any of this. But Matthew tells us that Joseph, “a righteous man,” after learning of Mary’s pregnancy, decided to divorce her and end their betrothal. That would have been the right thing to do, given the fact that she was expecting a child whom he had not fathered. Quite understandable, given what little Joseph knew of the situation. Presumably Mary had recounted to him the circumstances of her pregnancy, but it must have been just a little too much for Joseph to accept. To save Mary any additional public embarrassment, Joseph wanted to complete the divorce as quietly as possible. It took the direct intervention of an unidentified angel, verifying Mary’s story, to convince Joseph otherwise. He summoned the courage to go forward

with the marriage. Not only did he cooperate with God by staying with Mary, Matthew tells us that when the child arrived, Joseph named him Jesus. He cooperated completely with every detail of the plan.

Both Mary and Joseph did so at great cost. Undoubtedly they were the object of scorn from others as it became obvious that Mary was pregnant before their marriage. The courage and fortitude they had to have to remain faithful to what God asked of them is astounding. Not to mention the ongoing challenges and difficulties they would experience as Jesus grew up and became an increasingly polarizing and controversial figure. Finally we see Mary, now alone, following her “Yes” to its agonizing apparent end at the foot of the cross—only to have God transform her pain and confusion into unimagined joy yet again.

Such is the level of faith and fidelity required if we are to cooperate with God in the making of miracles.

For Reflection

Put yourself in Mary and/or Joseph's place. Try to imagine how overwhelmed they must have been when God turned their lives upside down. Pray for the grace to have even a small portion of the faith and trust they had in God.

To take the risk they did in moving forward with their relationship, Mary and Joseph must also have had a deep love and respect for one another. If you are married, reflect on the many times in your married life when you took a chance together, when you cooperated with something that God was asking of you, and the unimagined blessings that resulted.

"Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word." We are but servants of the master. Mary is the quintessential example for us of what that really means. Ask her to help you to grow in holiness.

Prayer

Hail, Mary!

You gave your life

so that Christ could be born into this world.

Despite your fears and your troubled spirit,

you agreed to allow God to use you for that purpose.

God asks the same of me,

but I am so reluctant to give myself over to him.

Holy Mary, Mother of God,

pray for me

that I might have the courage to give my "Yes,"

to allow God to use me

so that Jesus can be born anew

in this oh so troubled world.

Amen.

CHAPTER 2

Changing Water Into Wine

JOHN 2:1–11

We are familiar with the account, found only in the Gospel of John. There was a wedding taking place in the town of Cana in Galilee to which Jesus, his mother, and the disciples were invited. Unfortunately, “the wine ran short,” which would have been a great embarrassment to the bride and groom—as it would be today for a couple to run out of food or drink at the reception.

Sensitive to this, “the mother of Jesus” brought the situation to her son’s attention. (It is curious that John never uses Mary’s name throughout his entire gospel. There could be a number of reasons for this: since the Gospel of John was written late in the first century, it would not have been necessary to use her name because the believers would have been well aware of her identity. Or perhaps the evangelist saw it as a sign of respect.) Not seeing any particular connection to himself, Jesus asked his mother why the problem should concern him. Although he surely knew that he had the power to rectify the situation, Jesus explained to his mother that he did not believe it was time yet to begin any public display of his divine nature or wondrous deeds.

Mary knew differently—more on that in a moment—and she said to the servers, “Do whatever he tells you.” Put on the spot by his dear

mother, Jesus acquiesced and directed the servers to take six large stone water jars, on hand for Jewish ceremonial washings, and fill them with water. The evangelist makes a point of telling us that they “filled them to the brim.” Jesus next instructed them to draw some of the water out of a jar and take it to the head waiter, who pronounced it the best wine of the celebration. The waiter commented how unusual it was to serve the best wine after guests had been drinking a while, when they couldn’t appreciate the quality of the wine as much as when they were more sober. Yet the water-turned-into-wine was a high-quality vintage.

This is one of the few miracles where the effect is in a “thing” (water) rather than a person. But what Jesus did does not appear to be as significant as that he did it. This was “the beginning of his signs,” John says, and that has all the significance it needs. It was the first glimpse into Jesus’ “glory,” his true identity, his divinity. What must have seemed like a magic trick to the servers was really the manifestation of the presence of the Messiah—it doesn’t get much bigger than that.

It is fascinating to see the role that Mary played in this miracle. It was she who was aware of the potential of the moment, who recognized the hand of God in the situation, and she acted on that awareness. It is reminiscent, I think, of the annunciation, when the angel informed her of what God was asking and she found herself at that profound moment when one must decide whether to cooperate with God or not. As incredible as the request sounded, as ridiculous as its timing seemed, Mary realized the need to say “Yes.” And at Cana in Galilee, she recognized such a moment in the life of her Son. Her statement to the waiters was such a poignant one. Who better than Mary to know fully what it means to do whatever he tells you?

She had done that her whole life, and here we see her encouraging others to do the same.

The first person who had to cooperate in the making of this miracle was Jesus himself! Had he stood his ground and put his faith in what his rational mind and his own comfort level were telling him—that the “hour had not yet come”—the wedding celebration would have gone dry and the beginning of his public ministry would have been evaded. Instead, he summoned the humility and the courage not only to consider Mary’s not-so-subtle prodding but to act in harmony with it. Reluctant or not, he put his faith in what she was asking and responded affirmatively.

Likewise the servants, whom we can imagine looked at one another, shrugged and rolled their eyes a bit when asked to fill the water jars. But they did, and not haphazardly but to the brim. They cooperated fully, first with Mary’s command and then with Jesus’ instructions, even though they couldn’t have understood the point of it all. They also drew some of the water-now-wine from the jars as Jesus asked, and took it to their boss for a taste test. Imagine their astonishment when they heard that the water they had drawn only moments before was now the best wine of the celebration! The servants’ participation is extremely significant; they are the verifying element in the act. Jesus could have looked at the jars and filled them with wine if he wanted to. But he engaged the servants in the miracle so there would be testimony to its validity. In that way, the sign did not go unnoticed and the opportunity to inspire faith in others was increased. Look at the gospels—there were no private miracles.

The combination of all of the actions in this account led to the first public realization that Jesus was capable of doing something truly astounding. Mary trusted her inspired intuition. Jesus was

obedient to her. And the wine stewards carried out the simple tasks that would confirm it was indeed water that was now wine. Salvation history took a giant step toward its climax—that's how significant it was that Mary, Jesus, and the servants all cooperated with the Father in that moment. Indeed, the hour had come, in the middle of a wedding reception. If we but have faith in what God can do in a situation, as Mary did, anything is possible, anywhere. Jesus can take the ordinary and make it into something better than anything we have already tasted.

For Reflection

We see in this account how Mary intercedes with her Son to effectuate the miraculous. How often do you rely on Mary for such intercession?

Jesus turns the ordinary into the extraordinary. What are some times in your life when the waters of confusion or pain or despair have been transformed by the power of God into the rich wine of growth and greater spiritual maturity?

"Do whatever he tells you." Do you? Is there something in your life that you know God is asking of you but you have not yet cooperated? What is hindering you from filling the jars to the brim?