

**OPENING:**

A few weeks back, Matt Schumann greeted me in the receiving line and said: “You know Charles, I read it, Mark, I read it and it was great.”

This is what every preacher/ priest wants to hear, he had done what I asked:

He had read the Gospel of Mark.

Come to find out, he had done something close to that, he had read *MARKED* which is the graphic novel version of the Gospel of Mark that I had given to his teenage sons for Christmas.<sup>1</sup>

Here's the description on the back:

"In another place and time, people are controlled by the government until a young carpenter gets baptized and begins performing miracles." It's a good read

Here's some more of that type of language:

“We have to be concerned about the mutants.”<sup>2</sup>..... AND

“We are at war with the virus.” .....

Where do you think those statements came from:

Maybe from our gospel reading, Mark talking about Jesus and the demons? Could be. They are actually from a COVID news conference back in 2021.

Talk of “mutants” and “war” with medical diseases today seems kind of fantastical and overwrought today, but those were the words that our modern scientists and leaders often used to try to explain that reality.

“Mutants” ... “War.” The language is pulpy and sensational.

It fits Mark’s Gospel—which is indeed often compared to a Comic Book, with Jesus as its Superhero, combatting evil in a supernatural way.

The Gospel of Mark is known for the directness of its language, its bold and frank tone catches your ear. It’s been said that if Matthew and Luke are our Beethoven and Bach, that means that Mark is Marvel/ DC Comics.

I am going to say that maybe our modern-day leaders using language similar to Mark’s is actually really helpful. It shows that the world of the 1<sup>st</sup> century is maybe not so far away, shows that *their* considerations of illness and sickness and pain and

<sup>1</sup> Ross, Steve. 2005. *Marked*. New York: Seabury Books.

<sup>2</sup> “White House COVID-19 Response Team Briefing” C-SPAN. (February 3, 2021).

[White House COVID-19 Response Team Briefing | C-SPAN.org \(c-span.org\)](https://www.c-span.org/White-House-COVID-19-Response-Team-Briefing)

death are, actually, oh so close to ours, and shows that it might help us with the demons and nightmares of today.

Maybe, then, we can look at Jesus' actions as told by Mark, and get closer to that world and, indeed, closer to Jesus' healing touch.

## MIRACLES

Usually, scenes like the ones described in our Gospel just seem so distant.

Our understanding of medicine and science makes us suspicious of those types of stories. So we ask:

Just *how did* Jesus heal those people?

*What* were they sick with?

What do those *demons* really 'represent'?

These questions come out of our modern worldview. They would NOT have been on the minds of Mark's readers, at least in the same way.

At that time, evil spirits/ demons/ etc. were understood just as a part of that world that people had to contend with them. Healers and sages, like Jesus, possessed the power to drive them out and heal.

Scholars remind us that "Jesus and all healers of that period could only perceive illness and not diseases... There was an almost total disregard for symptoms (something very essential to disease). Instead, there is a constant concern for meaning."<sup>3</sup>

In other words, our biomedical approach places the primary emphasis on symptoms and pathogens where disease affects individuals, and so individuals are treated. That's what we are used to, generally.

The healthcare system of 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestine, meanwhile, places its primary emphasis on the culturally construed causes of illness. Illness is understood as affecting the community, it's a reality of the community, faced by the community, where the illness was also associated with impurity or sin, and meant exclusion from the community in some way.

It's and a different understanding of health and sickness. I am not saying we should not listen to our scientists, please hear me.

It's just the stories are not meant to explain how the world works in a mechanistic, scientific way.

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<sup>3</sup> Pilch, John J. "Healing in Mark: A Social Science Analysis." *Biblical Theology Bulletin*. 15.4 (1985): 142, 149.

So it's mistake to inject our rational explanations into the scene.<sup>4</sup>  
We can say they are wrong, that they are misinformed, they are backwards, primitive etc. for believing what they did.  
But all we gain is an inflated ego that is destined to be popped.  
And, again, it's not really the focus of the story.

### **MEANING:**

Instead, here's another way of thinking about these healing stories in Mark's: the question, for us, should not be "Did the miracles happen?" It should be instead:

"What do they mean?"<sup>5</sup>

"What does health/ sickness/ illness/wholeness mean then?"

"What do they mean now?"

Those questions are much tougher than turning our noses up at 1<sup>st</sup> century medicine because they cut right to the heart of our existence. These are the questions that we ask late at night lying in bed when we can't sleep, or in the emergency room, or when we are on our knees

"What does my loved one's cancer diagnosis *mean*?"

"Why was so and so born with that affliction?"

OR (and the further we get away from it I don't know if we are really asking this)

"What did COVID mean?"

Those are much scarier question than "did the miracles happen?"

But in asking it, we do the work to bridge the gap between these 2000 years, because we are all, at least, asking the same question.

What does this illness mean? What does a cure mean? What does healing mean?

### **QUESTION**

Victor Frankl in 1946 published his *Man's Search for Meaning*, and provided three possible answers.

- 1) The first is that suffering is meaningless, merely a combination of atoms and microbes and variables that we have no control over, nor does anyone.
- 2) The second answer is the age-old linkage between your suffering and your behavior. It's punishment for your sin. And, even though, The Book of Job severed this 3000 years ago and Jesus severed it again 2000 years ago, it's the one that I hear most often in my office and in my own heart, if I am honest.
- 3) The third and final one is that suffering is somehow ennobling, speaking from his

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<sup>4</sup> Myers, Ched. 2018. *Binding the Strong Man- A Political Reading of Mark's Study of Jesus*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 143; Culpepper, Alan R. 2007. *Mark*. Macon, GA: Smyth and Helwys, 67-68.

<sup>5</sup> Culpepper, 68.

perspective as a survivor of the Holocaust, Frankl said that the suffering itself could provide the *why*. So that the *how* did not matter. Demons are what they are, but are response to suffering can reveal something about who we are.<sup>6</sup>

Your mileage may vary on that as answer, particularly if you are facing down a demon as you hear it.

## CONCLUSION

Whenever you are in a quandary on sermon, one is taught to always return to the text, to the Scripture at hand. I will do that with the two statements that I began my sermon with. The ones talking about “Mutants” and “War.”

That’s, again, symbolic language that should make us think about our world on a deeper level. It’s language that is trying to summon a narrative that is larger than ourselves.

As Christians, we know that God’s story and plan are larger still, and that the presence of miracles, no matter what you call them, represent that there was hope for those in rural Palestine, even against all odds, just as there is hope for us now.<sup>7</sup> The hope lies in God and in each other.

Both statements also began with: “We.” That “We” is reminder that we are a community, that what your community around you does is important.

We can’t hope to survive living lives that are so displaced from one another. If COVID taught us anything, it was that. We are in this together, we have to find its meaning in some way together, in some sense collectively.

And we struggled to do that. My grandparents’ generation had the metanarrative of the Great Depression and WWII and the triumph, my parents had Civil Rights and women’s liberation. My generation could not put a mask on.

So we need each other, we need God.

It *sounds like* we need a miracle, but luckily we don’t need to perform that miracle, we just need community. We don’t need to create miracles, we need to consider a world larger than ourselves.

“We feel so powerless to make a difference, (to perform a miracle) to transform a life, to heal a wound. We feel powerless because generally we are powerless. (Luckily), our role is simply to bring people into proximity with Jesus, to invite them into his presence and to trust and pray that his transforming love and power will make the difference.”<sup>8</sup>

**AMEN**

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<sup>6</sup> Frankl, Viktor E. 2006. *Man's Search for Meaning*. Boston, Beacon: 67, 74

<sup>7</sup> Myers, 143-144.

<sup>8</sup> David Michael Bender “Pastoral Perspective” (Mark 1.29-34) in Cynthia A. Jarvis, and E. Elizabeth Johnson, eds. 2014. *Feasting on the Gospel- Mark*. Louisville, John Know Westminster, 40.