

# **We've Never Seen Anything Like This**

Mark 1:21 – 2:12

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“We’ve never seen anything like this.” And, yet, stories like this recur. Such as in fifth century Ireland.

The early Celtic Christians fought slavery and intertribal warfare. They practiced virtues of hospitality, generosity, and peace and developed a distinct Christian tradition. There are many stories handed down about St. Patrick and the other early Celtic saints -- legends full of miracles and amazing signs and wonders. We are most familiar with the legend of St. Patrick driving the snakes from Ireland, but all the early Celtic saints were known as healers and miracle workers. One of those was Saint Brigid. I am particularly fond of one story where she turns water into beer for thirsty priests and bishops.

In one of the stories told about St. Brigid, we read:

A certain woman brought some apples to the Saint, at which time there came some lepers to beg alms of her: the Saint dealt these apples among them. The Woman hearing it, [took] her apples away saying; I brought those apples for your self, and your virgins and not to be given to lepers; whereat the Saint being not a little offended, she answered: You have done very ill in hindering us to give alms, therefore your trees will never more produce any fruit. The woman going forth into her orchard, which she left full of apples, found none at all, and so it remained fruitless always after.

These sorts of legends are not limited to ancient Christianity. In the early 1700's in Africa a young woman, Kimpa Vita, received visions from the saints that led her to speak out against the colonial churches and governments. Much like Joan of Arc, when her movement against the colonial powers began to grow, Kimpa Vita was burned as a witch and a heretic. But she began a tradition of independent African Christian churches.

Twentieth century Africa saw many such movements arise, calling for independence and freedom from the colonial powers. In the teens of the last century, William Wade Harris, a Liberian, had a vision while in prison. In this vision, he was instructed by the archangel Gabriel to be a prophet. The angel told him to quit wearing Western clothes and to dress, instead, in traditional African clothing. Harris wore a white robe and turban, carried a bamboo cross, a Bible, and a gourd rattle. Barefoot, he traveled extensively in West Africa preaching Christianity. Unlike the missionary churches who viewed the traditional witchcraft with skepticism, he attacked it. Stories tell of “pagan shrines burst[ing] into flames as he approached.” In just a few years, Harris had converted over 100,000 people. He taught that black and white should be equal, and his churches survive today, especially appealing to the

poor. Harris should be known as one of the most important Christian leaders of the twentieth century.

On April 9, 1906 in Los Angeles, during a prayer meeting of the Azusa Street Mission, pastored by the Rev. William Seymour, one Edward Lee, a janitor, began to speak ecstatically during a time of prayer. He was experiencing glossolalia, or what is more commonly referred to as “speaking in tongues.” The ecstatic experiences Lee had spread among the members of the small prayer group of “cooks, janitors, laborers, railroad porters, and washwomen.” One historian has written,

At times they shouted their acclaim for all to hear, at other times an awesome hush descended. Some fell into trances for three, four, or even five hours. Unusual healings were reported. Clusters of people outside whispered reverently that God’s power was falling again as in the book of Acts.

In just a few days, this group swelled to hundreds. It was the birth of the Pentecostal Movement. Richard Foster, the Quaker minister, records this story in his book *Streams of Living Water*. He writes,

A surge of interest brought huge crowds from virtually every race, nationality, and social class to Seymour’s congregation. . . . The inside of the building overflowed with perhaps eight hundred persons, while four to five hundred more stood on the board sidewalk outside, squeezing together at the windows and doors in an attempt to see inside. These meetings continued unabated for three years. The miracle Seymour had been seeking happened: by the power of the Spirit, a revolutionary new type of Christian community was born . . . “The ‘color line’ was washed away in the blood.”

As Foster tells it, the miracle of Azusa Street was not the signs and wonders that occurred, but the new kind of Christian community that was born. The Rev. William Seymour preached the power of speaking in unknown tongues because Seymour understood that this spiritual practice would break down racial barriers. His reading of Acts 2 is that on the historical day of Pentecost, in ancient Jerusalem, once the gift of tongues had appeared, reconciliation occurred among the races.

Seymour taught that this spiritual gift could not be held exclusively for one group of persons. God’s Spirit could come upon anyone in a moment of ecstasy. The movement began among the poor, but soon included the educated and well-to-do. All the races mixed together. And women had prominent leadership roles, long before they did in most progressive or liberal denominations. Seymour stressed that the purpose of this new outpouring of the spirit was the creation of “one common family” united in love.

When Jesus exorcises the demon the Gospel of Mark tells us, “They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, ‘What is this? A new teaching – with authority!’” When the paralytic is healed, the Gospel tells us “they were all amazed and glorified God, saying, ‘We have never seen anything like this!’” The crowds around Jesus, early in his ministry, were just as shocked by healings and exorcisms as you and I might be if we were to witness them.

The stories of signs and wonders are incredible – they always have been so. And they also recur in Christian history, far more examples could be cited than those stories I've shared today. Rather than debating historical and scientific accuracy of these accounts, let's surrender ourselves to the stories themselves and ask the question "What truth do these signs and wonders point toward?"

Richard Foster writes that the signs and wonders show us that God is at work someplace where we don't expect God to be. The signs and wonders are themselves not the point of any of these stories. Instead, the signs and wonder point to something greater, an important message. Which is exactly what "signs and wonders" are supposed to do -- they get our attention and direct us to the message.

So, what is the more important message behind stories like these? In every instance I've cited, the signs and wonders point toward God's reign and its message of liberation, compassion, and inclusion. They challenge the oppressive and exclusive systems of the powers-that-be and open us space for a new community. The story of St. Brigid is one of breaking down barriers of uncleanness and inviting the outcasts into society. The stories of Kimpa Vita and William Wade Harris are about a great revival that included messages of freedom and liberation to oppressed peoples that challenged empires. The initial significance of the Pentecostal movement was the creation of an inclusive community that broke down barriers of race, gender, and class and claimed that anyone could be gifted to speak by the Holy Spirit. It is one reason that the United Church of Christ has gained a significant number of progressive Pentecostal churches in the last decade or so – they share our vision of an inclusive, welcoming community.

Something similar is also happening in the stories of Jesus. The primary plot of the Gospel of Mark is that that heavens have ripped open and God's spirit has been set loose upon the earth and that something radically new and wonderful is happening. In these acts of healing, Jesus, filled with the spirit, is doing that radically new thing.

Jesus isn't healing people and casting out demons just to heal people and cast out demons. Jesus, filled with the Spirit of God, is assaulting the oppressive powers of his day. He is breaking down barriers and including people who had previously been excluded. The mentally ill, the disabled, the diseased, the unclean -- they are people of worth; they are sacred and holy; they have access to God's free spirit. Through these miracles, Jesus is forming a new kind of human community that will include all people.

Remember that in first century Palestine, those who suffered from illness were considered unclean and were cast off from the rest of society. Lepers were ostracized from the towns. The mentally ill wandered alone on the fringes of civilization. The disabled didn't have full access to life. Even temporary illnesses could make one unclean and therefore unworthy to engage in sacred rituals or even unable to go out in public. In some instances, it was considered sinful for a healthy person even to touch a sick person. The culture and religion of the day claimed that you become holy by separating yourself from unclean things.

But Jesus aggressively broke down those barriers and invaded the spaces that separated people. Holiness, according to Jesus, wasn't a matter of separating yourself from the unclean. For Jesus, holiness involves living in solidarity with the excluded and actively working to spread wholeness and well-being.

We still ostracize people because of illness and disability. We continue to deny people full access to civilization, and we even consider some people too unclean or unnatural to associate with.

Jesus has put us on notice in the same way that he put his culture on notice. When we exclude people or treat them as unclean, we are acting contrary to the will of God.

Watch out! God's wild, free spirit, is at loose upon the earth, and things, they are a-changin'. Sometimes way too slowly, but they are changing. A story like this one in Mark will work its power, and one day, we will participate in the beloved community that God created us for.

When Jesus performs these signs and wonders, the people *are* astonished because they've never seen anything like this. Their eyes are opened, and they see who Jesus is, and what he is doing.

May we have our eyes opened, to see God's new work in the world. May our prejudices be revealed. Our barriers broken down. So that God's inclusive community might be created in our midst. And that will be the greatest wonder of them all.