

## **"Rage"**

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Let's open our hearts together in prayer. Let us pray: **Gracious and loving God, help us to know you, through the many signs that you set before us. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.**

There are signs everywhere telling us what to do, or what not to do. But most of them we either don't notice, disregard or don't take seriously. "Do Not Touch" is one example, but how about signs that read "Do Not Litter," or "No Parking," or signs on the 410 that read "Maximum 100km/hr?" Or, how about all the signs from God?

Early in Jesus' ministry, before he returned to his hometown of Nazareth, Jesus performed many miraculous signs in Capernaum. Capernaum is the place where Jesus chose the disciples Peter, Andrew, James, John and Matthew the tax collector. Many of Jesus' healings occurred in Capernaum, including a man with an unclean spirit, Peter's ill mother-in-law, the servant of a Roman Centurion, and a paralytic who was lowered through the roof. The people in Jesus' hometown of Nazareth had heard about the many miraculous signs in Capernaum. They're probably expecting something even more spectacular when Jesus arrives in Nazareth!

In the synagogue on the Sabbath, Jesus tells his hometown friends that the centuries of waiting for God's blessing have ended and that the scripture he read is fulfilled in their hearing. Wow! So far, that sounds great!

Initially, while their hopes are still high, they say that Jesus speaks eloquently. But Jesus soon disappoints them. Jesus suggests that they're thinking, "Doctor, cure yourself." Jesus tells them that "no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown," and he cites the Old Testament scriptures about Elijah and Elisha. Elijah, at God's request, helped a starving widow at Zarephath in Sidon; and Elisha cleansed Naaman the Syrian of leprosy, even though there were many other starving people and many other lepers in Israel. And neither the lucky widow, nor the lucky leper are Jewish; they're gentiles. The people get angry just

as we might get angry: why are some people healed and not others; why are some prayers answered and others seem not to be? The people acted upon their rage and tried to hurl Jesus off a cliff.

They felt rage because it didn't seem right. They each wanted Jesus to cure each of their own individual illnesses and difficulties. Heal a sore back or sore neck; cure a dying relative or family member, deliver an especially productive harvest; and maybe a bag of money would be good too. If Jesus, our neighbour and friend, can make miracles happen, we want some free miracles in Nazareth! And if Jesus won't deliver what we want, we'll kill him! We're feeling rage!

On July 1st, 2003, Reverend Don Hardman visited the First Baptist Church of Forest, Ohio, to conduct an evening revival service. He had just finished his sermon on repentance and was closing with prayer. Apparently, he felt that he hadn't accomplished what he was there for. A storm was raging outside, and as he prayed, he kept asking God what else he needed to say. After one particularly loud clap of thunder, he said that in the Bible, God's voice was often compared to thunder. He looked heavenward and said, "That's right, God! We hear you!"

At that moment, a bolt of lightning hit the church steeple and surged through the electrical wiring. It blew out the sound system and traveled through the microphone to envelope Reverend Hardman in a ball of blue light. It really got the congregation's attention. Church member Ronnie Cheney said, "It was awesome, just awesome!"

Reverend Hardman wasn't hurt and the meeting continued. But 20 minutes later they smelled smoke and realized the church was on fire so they all scrambled out of the church. Were Reverend Hardman's prayers answered? Were the thunder and lightning signs from God? Many who were there thought so. But if they were signs, what were they supposed to mean. Was God just saying "Hi, I'm here," or maybe letting us know that God has power over nature? What would you have thought if you were there?

What would you have thought if you were there in Capernaum to witness Jesus' miracles? What would you have thought if you were there in the synagogue

in Nazareth when Jesus said that he was the fulfillment of scripture? Everyone in his hometown knew him as the son of Joseph, not the Son of God.

In the miraculous healings performed by Elijah and Elisha, the particularity of God's blessings upon certain marginalized gentiles serve as signs. When Jesus draws attention to the particularity of these signs of God's power and mercy it provokes the people's anger. They believed the promises of God to be exclusive covenants with the Jewish people and not their oppressors or the marginalized people in the shadows of society. Jesus urges them to see the radical inclusivity of God's blessing. It's not for us to set limits on God's grace, or to dictate how, or upon whom, signs of God's grace are revealed.

The Bible is full of narratives about God working through and among particular people who are often outsiders to those who consider themselves faithful. God works in Jesus, who is full of the Holy Spirit and performs many signs. Then, through the Holy Spirit, God works in the Disciples who continue Jesus' mission and who witness many more signs. And God continues to work in us through the power of Holy Spirit and we too may witness miraculous signs of God's love. But it's not for us to choose when, or how, or upon whom, these signs happen.

A man was sleeping at night in his cabin when suddenly his room filled with light and God appeared before him in the light. God told the man that he was being called for a special mission. God pointed toward a large rock in front of the cabin. God said that the man was to push against the rock with all his strength.

Day after day, the man pushed against the large rock. For many years he toiled from sun-up to sun-down, his shoulders set squarely against the massive surface of the unmoving rock, pushing with all his strength. Each night the man returned to his cabin, sore and worn out, feeling that his whole day had been spent in vain. There were no further signs from God and the great revelation of God's presence began to seem more and more surreal, more and more improbable, sometimes even impossible. Maybe God's visit was just his imagination and didn't really happen at all.

Seeing that the man was showing signs of discouragement, the devil decided to place thoughts into the man's weary mind, "You have been pushing against that rock for a long time, and it hasn't budged. Why kill yourself over this? You are never going to move it." This gave the man the impression that his task was impossible and that he was a failure. These thoughts discouraged and disheartened him. "Why kill myself over this?" he thought.

One day the man decided to pray and take his troubled thoughts to God. "God," he said, "I have laboured long and hard in your service, putting all my strength to do that which you have asked. Yet, after all this time, I have not even budged that rock. What's wrong? Why am I failing?"

God responded compassionately, "My dear child, when I asked you to serve me and you accepted, I told you that your task was to push against the rock with all your strength, which you have done. Never once did I mention to you that I expected you to move the rock. Your task was to push. And now you come to me, thinking that you have failed. But, is that really so? Look at yourself: your arms and legs are strong and muscled; your back is sinewy and brown. You have grown much and your abilities now surpass that which you used to have. You haven't moved the rock, but your calling was to be obedient and to exercise your faith and to trust in my wisdom. This you have done. I will now move the rock."

The imagery in this parable is deep and many layered. The man has a revelation of God and receives an unusual calling. Then years pass without further signs from God. He becomes frustrated and easily led astray. Prayer reconnects him with God who reassures him, "your calling was to be obedient and to exercise your faith and to trust in my wisdom." Our calling is to be obedient and to exercise our faith and to trust in God's wisdom. We become stronger as we push against the rocks in our own lives and in our society. All of the signs in the Old Testament and all of Jesus' signs point to God's love. And in our faithfulness, miracles happen. They're signs pointing to the faithfulness and love of God. Thanks be to God. Amen.