

ALWAYS WANTED TO SEE A MIRACLE

(sermon for October 30, 2011)

By Dr. David R. Mains

Subject: Seeing a miracle firsthand.

Desired Response: Not only see but be involved in.

How To: Participate in this call to prayer and fasting.

How Long: Nov. 21 – Dec. 31 (40 days). Start this week.

Sermon in a Sentence: All those who would like to see a miracle firsthand have the opportunity to do so in the near future.

Herod was used to getting what he wanted. Most rulers are that way.

This given Herod was one of the sons of Herod the Great, King of Judea. Actually, four generations of Herods are mentioned in the New Testament. The one I'm talking about is Herod Antipas. He got what he wanted when he married his niece Herodias—this in spite of the fact that at the time she was the wife of his brother.

John the Baptist (Jesus' cousin) called this union sinful. The prophet's accusation eventually led to Herod beheading him.

In Luke chapter 9 Jesus sends out His Twelve and commissions them with power and authority to drive out all demons and to cure diseases. Verses 7 through 9 read:

Now Herod the tetrarch heard about all that was going on. (A tetrarch was governor of a fourth part of a Roman province. So Herod wasn't the top dog over all of Judea like his dad had been, but just a quarter of it. Here's Scripture again.) And he (Herod) was perplexed, because some were saying that John had been raised from the dead, others that Elijah had appeared, and still others that one of the prophets of long ago had come back to life. But Herod said, "I beheaded John. Who, then, is this I hear such things about?" And he tried to see (Jesus).

So this tetrarch had a natural curiosity about this Christ and His followers.

We read a second time about this given Herod interfacing with our Lord in Luke 13. On this occasion it's some Pharisees who advise Jesus to leave Herod's territory because the ruler "wants to kill you."

In verses 32 and 33, Jesus replies by calling Herod a fox. "Go and tell that fox such-and-such." Now, a fox is generally thought of as a relatively weak animal that uses cunning to achieve its aims. So put another way, the lion of Judah was not about to be ordered around by a fox!

Our Lord made this abundantly clear at the third mention of the two men in Luke chapter 23. This takes place the evening before the Crucifixion. Pilate, learning that Jesus was a Galilean and under Herod's jurisdiction, sends Him to see the tetrarch, who is visiting Jerusalem at the time. Here's verse 8:

When Herod saw Jesus, he was greatly pleased, because for a long time he had been wanting to see him. From what he had heard about (Jesus), he hoped to see him perform some miracle.

Used to getting what he wanted, Herod was obviously upset when Jesus refused to even talk to him. To show his displeasure, Herod joined in with his soldiers in mocking our Lord. Then he returned Him to Pilate.

What I'm especially interested in, though, is the statement that Herod hoped to see Jesus perform some miracle. He wanted to be dazzled by an obvious supernatural feat. He was hoping to have the reports he had been hearing substantiated by Jesus pulling off a divine marvel of some sort. But Jesus would have no part in this.

Have you ever wished you could see a miracle?

Have you ever thought as you read the Bible that it would have been neat to have been present when Jesus fed the 5000 with only five loaves and two fish?

How about being in the boat with the disciples on that stormy night when Jesus walked on the water?

Maybe witnessed firsthand the healing of the blind man at Bethsaida, or the ten with leprosy outside the little village who together yelled out, "Jesus, Master, have pity on us."

I don't identify all that much with Herod the tetrarch, but I do admit that I too would like to witness a miracle firsthand. How about you?

And what if in our case the Lord said, "I grant your request." Wouldn't that be something!

Allow me to take this a step further. What if we could not only see a miracle, but also be involved in one? And would you believe that's where I'm going in this unusual sermon?

But allow me to back up some to give us perspective. I want to return in time to November of last year, 2010. The country is Egypt, and its 80 million people are still ruled by strongman Hosni Mubarak.

Egypt is predominantly a Sunni Muslim country with Islam as its state religion. The percentage of adherents of its various religions is controversial, but around 90% are identified as Muslims. Cairo, the largest city and Egypt's capital, is known as "The City of a Thousand Minarets."

Now, there is also a significant Christian minority in the country. They make up 5 to maybe even double that percent of the overall population. The vast majority of Egyptian Christians belong to the native Coptic Orthodox Church of Alexandria. It was established back in the first century by Saint Mark the Evangelist.

Coptic Christians have for years faced discrimination at multiple levels of government. In fact, the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life ranks Egypt as the fifth-worst country in the world for religious freedom. It also includes Egypt among the 12 worst countries in the world in terms of violence against religious minorities, and specifically in terms of social hostilities against Christians. Just to underscore this point, the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom has placed Egypt on its watch list for religious freedom that requires close monitoring due to the nature and extent of violations of religions engaged in or tolerated by the government.

Since Mubarak took office in 1981, more than 1500 violent attacks against Copts (or Coptic Christians) have left literally thousands of believers killed or injured. Undoubtedly you have seen on television or read in magazines or newspapers about some of these events.

Well, in downtown Cairo, near the now-famous Tahrir Square, sits the largest Christian church in the Middle East, Kasr El Dohara, with some 7000 members. Now listen closely, in November of last year, the leadership of this congregation called for a 40-day period of prayer and fasting. At this church alone, 1200 people would show up for daily prayer during these 40 days. Well, in typical revival fashion, the movement quickly spread among believers across the nation. Reports coming out are that thousands of Muslims were saved during this season of prayer and fasting, with many now coming to worship Jesus in the various churches. Since then, salvation rates have tripled across Egypt, and in other areas of the Middle East.

As you are aware, what took place in Egypt after the first of the year became front-page news everywhere. In January, mass protests erupted in this most populous country of the Arab world. Before long, on February 11, Mr. Mubarak stepped down, ending 30 years of autocratic rule.

Of course, nothing was mentioned in the secular reporting about the prayer-and-fasting movement. Other reasons were given for what was happening, but this spiritual component was always left out. And the truth is, the future is uncertain and still precarious for church people in Egypt.

American Christians, like Terry and Barbi Franklin of Heart for the World, were so moved by what they saw as a modern-day miracle, that they not only traveled to Egypt to interview the Christian leaders, but also began calling American Christians to a similar period of fasting and prayer.

The dates have been set for November 21 through December 31—forty days, with December 31 being set aside as a day of celebration.

This doesn't mean that you are expected to fast all 40 of these days. Neither does it mean that if you are a concerned Christian, that Thanksgiving and Christmas need to be downers this year. I'll detail what it *does* mean momentarily.

But central to this challenge for us here in the States should be an occasion of more intense praying than normal—first for our nation, which like Egypt stands in dire need of prayer,

then for our brothers and sisters in the Lord in Egypt, also for the entire Middle East including Israel, and for God's Kingdom worldwide. Resaid, it's a time of beseeching God for the privilege of us not only seeing a miracle, but actually being involved in one as well.

You may want to fast one day during the 40. It could be you will feel called to fast one day a week during that almost-six-weeks period. Maybe it will be less, maybe more. That's between you and the Lord. I'll talk more about fasting in messages that follow, and explain how fasting and prayer are closely intertwined.

This Sunday I just wanted to lay out the overall challenge. But let me add that during these special 40 days, we as a church will also be scheduling special times for corporate prayer.

Calendar-wise, I suppose there is never a perfect time to call a 40-day fast. Suffice it to say that even though we are not suffering violence and killings like the believers in Egypt, I believe America is presently wrestling with God, and now is a critical time for His people to come together and pray.

My challenge to you this week, as we start to prepare for November 21, is to fast one meal this week. It could be breakfast, lunch or dinner. You choose the day. Instead of eating, find a place to get alone with the Lord and talk to Him about your concern for America ... and for the church in Egypt with their most-uncertain future ... and the entire Middle East ... and Israel ... and whatever other countries or people-groups are close to your heart.

Do this joyfully. Fasting is not something to endure and act holier-than-thou about. As Jesus taught us, don't make it a show of your great piety. Think this way. I love my country and I love Christ's Kingdom, and sometimes I feel so small and with such little influence. But through fasting and prayer I'm now given the privilege of doing something of significance. For that I'm truly grateful, and I'm happy to take part in this challenge.

So this is not a cheap Herod-like demand. "Come on, Jesus, knock my eyes out. Here's your big chance. Now that I have you here in my impressive surroundings, prove to me that you're so special. Maybe I'll even help you out then. Hey, we could be friends!"

What I'm talking about us being involved in together, stands in stark contrast to that false picture. It's us humbly recognizing that in reality, Jesus is the one who sits on the throne. He wears the crown. He's the rightful ruler; we're His subjects. And we enter His court representing a people who in ever so many ways have not only been disrespectful of His laws, but wicked.

So on our knees we not only ask for mercy, but maybe even prostrate before Him we request His divine help to turn things around, to release His Holy Spirit to help bring America back to her more godly roots ... to also make it possible for Christians in Egypt to worship without fear of bombs exploding in their churches, or angry mobs gathering to beat worshipers when they leave their sanctuaries ... we fast and pray for religious freedom throughout the Middle East ... including for Israel to have the right to exist in peace with her neighbors ... and for the wonder of the Kingdom of God to be able to be manifested in all its beauty in all places of the earth ... for all

this and more we come together as American believers before the throne of God during a 40-day time of prayer and fasting.

Does this sound like something in which you would like to be involved?

I trust so.

Then what I'm telling you is that ... all those who would like to see a miracle firsthand have the opportunity to do so in the near future—maybe even before this year comes to a close!