

Miracle In Motion (pt. II)

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Last week, we began by talking a bit about our dreams. Today, I want to begin by looking not at big dreams, but at big problems. Not big problems in our lives necessarily, but some of the big problems in our society. We only have to turn on our TV or switch on the radio to hear about some of the challenges facing our world. Actually, we probably don't even need to do that. We are probably all aware of challenges or issues that are just on our doorstep – of the challenges we encounter in our day to day lives.

As you may be aware, I'm a psychiatrist. The challenges facing our society when it comes to mental health are many and varied. One challenge that has caught my attention recently is the gap between where mental health services end and where mental wellbeing begins. As you may be aware, mental health services are significantly stretched. The service many provide in this context is admirable – I see day to day those who go above and beyond in caring for their patients. But there is a huge gap between what we can provide as mental health professionals and what really constitutes mental wellbeing. We end up fire-fighting, helping people through crisis, intervening in the worst situations, but where can people learn the skills which take them from surviving to thriving? How can people go from just getting by to feeling great? From just about coping to feeling like they are really succeeding? Mental Health services cannot do that – they barely have enough resources to do the crisis work – how then can we bridge that gap?

Perhaps this is an issue that resonates with you. Perhaps because of personal experience. Perhaps because you've seen these challenges in the lives of others. Research suggests that one in four people will experience a diagnosable mental health problem in any given year. That's a huge number of people. You almost certainly know someone who has experienced this, even if you haven't gone through it yourself. My aim today is to not to solve that problem necessarily, though I hope this message will help – it is more to highlight the huge challenges facing our society today.

Perhaps it isn't that issue that stirs you or catches your attention. Perhaps there are other issues that you're aware of...

Loneliness – as Pastor Tom has said before, we are more technologically connected than ever before, but people feel more socially isolated than they ever have. Loneliness is reaching epidemic proportions in our society today. This is particularly an issue in our city even. Recent research has suggested that Norwich is one of the loneliest places in the UK.

Poverty – another pervasive issue, one which is seemingly growing. The statistics on those living below the poverty line is startling, especially children. I often run through the city centre early in the morning. I am struck by how many people are sleeping rough. Poverty may be a topic very close to home – not quite having enough to make ends meet. Poverty can feel like an area where it is very hard to make progress, or even to know what to do. Debt is another similar challenge – one not restricted to those living below the poverty line. The number of people saddled with unmanageable debt is startling – and for those in such a situation, it can often feel like there is no way out.

These are all quite tangible issues too – what about the more existential issues of our age? Issues of identity, for example. Gender identity particularly feels like it has very much come to the foreground of discussion in recent years. Social media drives changes in how young people see themselves too – with a rise in body image issues. There are those who ask questions too about purpose and meaning in life. Where once people found identity in their jobs, we now change jobs so often it is hard to base our sense of who we are on what we do. We see on social media people who seem to be making a difference or living a great life – and many find themselves asking why it is that they are here.

Today, I want to explore our response in the face of some of these seemingly insurmountable issues. What solution is there to some of these challenges? And how can we best play our part?

To explore this, I want to return to the account that we looked at last week, from 2 Kings 7. If you weren't here last week, don't worry. We'll get you up to speed! In 2 Kings 7, the people of Israel – God's chosen people – are in a dire situation. They're at war with the Arameans and are under siege. They are being starved out by their enemies – with a famine so severe that people have resorted to eating their own children to survive. In this context, the king sends an angry, threatening message to the man of God, the prophet Elisha, asking why he should wait any longer for God to move. Elisha's response is that breakthrough is coming – that within a day, food will again be in plentiful supply. Those with the king express their doubts, with one official stating ““Look, even if the Lord should open the floodgates of the heavens, could this happen?”. But Elisha doubles down, telling the man that he will see it, but will not eat of it himself.

What happens next is both unusual and remarkable. Let's read together from verse 3...

2 Kings 7:3-4 - 3 Now there were four men with leprosy at the entrance of the city gate. They said to each other, “Why stay here until we die? 4 If we say, ‘We'll go into the city’—the famine is there, and we will die. And if we stay here, we will die. So let's go over to the camp of the Arameans and surrender. If they spare us, we live; if they kill us, then we die.”

So there are four men with leprosy, who come to the conclusion that their best hopes lie not with the people of Israel, but with the enemy. As I said last week, people with leprosy were outcasts. No-one was feeding them in a famine. So they decide they're better off taking their chance somewhere else.

2 Kings 7:5-7 - 5 At dusk they got up and went to the camp of the Arameans. When they reached the edge of the camp, no one was there, 6 for the Lord had caused the Arameans to hear the sound of chariots and horses and a great army, so that they said to one another, “Look, the king of Israel has hired the Hittite and Egyptian kings to attack us!” 7 So they got up and fled in the dusk and abandoned their tents and their horses and donkeys. They left the camp as it was and ran for their lives.

As the lepers approach the enemy camp, something remarkable happens. We don't know how – this doesn't tell us – but somehow the sound of their approach is amplified to a mighty roar. Convinced that a huge army is approaching, the Arameans make a break for it.

2 Kings 7:8-9 - 8 The men who had leprosy reached the edge of the camp, entered one of the tents and ate and drank. Then they took silver, gold and clothes, and went off and hid them. They returned and entered another tent and took some things from it and hid them also. 9 Then they said to each other, "What we're doing is not right. This is a day of good news and we are keeping it to ourselves. If we wait until daylight, punishment will overtake us. Let's go at once and report this to the royal palace."

To cut a long story short, that's exactly what they do. It takes a little while to confirm it has really happened as they said, but before long the people of Israel are eating freely again, feasting on their enemies' food. God has indeed done the miraculous. His promise fulfilled. A nation saved.

As we talked about last week, God provides in a way that is entirely unexpected. He brings a breakthrough no-one could have predicted or foreseen. He does so too through people who are entirely unsuitable. No-one had four lepers down as the heroes of their story. They would've expected the breakthrough to come at the hand of a mighty warrior or their brave king or through a miracle act of the man of God. Yet as we so often see in the Bible, God uses the unsuitable to achieve the impossible. And what is it that triggers this breakthrough? What is it the four lepers actually do? It is remarkably simple actually. We see it in verse 5, where it tells us that "they got up and went". As we discovered last week, God moves when we move. We may expect our miracle in the moment, but oftentimes find our miracle in motion – it is as they went that God intervened.

Today, I want to drill down on how they got moving. What were the key factors in these four lepers making any progress at all? I want us to look at that in part because it this may be key if we are to put into practice that which we explored last week; but also because it strikes me that the solution to their nation's problems was found in their breakthrough. What if we, by moving forwards ourselves, can move towards some solutions for our society too?

So what are the key factors in their forward movement?

1) Leave behind safety to step into opportunity.

The account tells us at the beginning that these men were gathered by the city gate. The city for them represented safety. When the enemy attacked, they would run through those gates into the safety of the city's walls – protected from attack. These men too would likely have been beggars. As we said earlier, suffering from leprosy would've made them outcasts from normal society and likely rendered them unable to work. The city gate then was a place of provision, in theory, a busy place in which to beg. Except, there wasn't actually any food. These men had to leave behind this place of apparent safety, and theoretical provision, before they could step into the opportunity that God had for them.

I wonder what that place of safety might look like for us. Chances are, we're not huddled near a city wall, expecting an attack. Our sense of safety is more likely about the way we

think than an actual place. It might be our routine – the pattern of our day to day lives. It might be our job or our friendship group. It perhaps isn't too much of a stretch to suggest it might be what makes us feel comfortable, as well as what makes us feel safe. It might be what we're used to. We may find safety in a set sense of how we see ourselves and how we see the world; our perception of who we are and how the world works. What might it look like to step away from that? What if we need to step away from it to get moving? What if we need to get outside of what's comfortable and safe if we're to see God move?

But Phil, hang on. Didn't the lepers have good reason to leave the city behind? Well, yes. We can hear the logic in their conversation...

2 Kings 7:3b-4 - They said to each other, "Why stay here until we die? 4 If we say, 'We'll go into the city'—the famine is there, and we will die. And if we stay here, we will die. So let's go over to the camp of the Arameans and surrender. If they spare us, we live; if they kill us, then we die."

If we stay where we are, we'll die. That's basically what they're saying. "We may as well take a chance on the going somewhere different, because there's nothing left for us here". But what if the choice facing us is just as stark? What if what looks safe and comfortable now is just as likely to rob us of life? Not of our lives, necessarily, but of a life fully lived. What if our potential is dying within us because we're playing it safe? To throw back to Braveheart last week, as William Wallace put it, "Every man dies. Not every man really lives". We sacrifice how things could be, because we're so stuck in how things are. These men could have stayed where they were, going through the motions until they died. What if we face the same risk? What if we are going through the motions of a life that is less than our best?

But where they were clearly wasn't healthy, you could say. Yes. And how often is the same true for us? These men identified as beggars, outcasts – when they stepped out, they stepped away from that. How many of us have grown safe with a sense of who we are that is less than who we truly could be? How many of us have found safety in a sense of "I'm not up to it", "I'm not worthy", "I'm not capable" or even "I don't have the time"? That's how we see ourselves. But it limits us. Why do we hold onto the old when it does us no good? Maybe there's good reason why you feel that way. Maybe the way you're doing it once made sense. But maybe there is more for us. Maybe it is risky. Maybe we have no way of knowing if it'll work out. Maybe it'll hurt. Maybe it won't end well. But maybe getting moving is better than staying where we are. Maybe it is time to leave behind safety, to step into opportunity.

The city gates would once have been their place of provision, but they weren't going to find what they needed there anymore. It was time for them to step away from the old, worn-out way of living to step into the miraculous, influential opportunity that God had for them instead. Maybe it is time for some of us to do the same.

But what helps these men to do just that?

2) If you want to go far, go together.

As well as the content of their discussion in verses 3 and 4, I think it's notable that they have a discussion. The decision to step away from what was once considered safe is not made in isolation – they make the decision together. They support each other as they step out. Who knows if one leper would've been enough? Maybe one would have not gone alone. Maybe one alone wouldn't have been loud enough to scare off their enemies. It must be significant that there is a group of them, that together they advance into the promises of God.

Community then is so key. The more I study it, the more convinced I am of the change that community can bring in our world. In some ways, the impact of community is pretty obvious. It isn't hard to see how a strong community is answer to loneliness. Indeed that is what we so often crave when we feel alone. But the research into the impact of community beyond that is striking. As I shared a few months ago, research in rats has shown the impact of community when it comes to dealing with addiction. Rats are less likely to seek out addictive substances when placed in the context of community. As the journalist Johan Hari put it when he spoke on the topic, the opposite of addiction isn't sobriety, its connection. There is good reason to think that the same positive influence might apply when it comes to making change in any area. Community too bolsters resilience to stress. Our body has a hormone which enhances stress resilience – bringing down our blood pressure and having an anti-inflammatory effect. Oxytocin. This hormone is released through human interaction – especially tangible contact like touch and when empathy is shown.

As far as I can tell, all of these benefits rely on being physically present. There is some value in interaction via our electronic devices, but they fall short of what community is really all about. You don't find this support of social media – yes, we may experience it cognitively, but it lacks the tangible sense of support. There is nothing like gathering together. Podcasts and YouTube are all well and good – especially if you're serving elsewhere in church – but there's nothing like gathering together in the room. Indeed, serving together will probably do you more good than hearing what I have to say anyway – biochemically at least!

It is striking too that these four lepers spur each other on to a positive decision. Their interaction enhances their faith. Community alone is of value, but even more value is found in a community of faith. We often talk about this, but we do so because it is so important. The relationships you have will determine the course of your life. I've heard it said this way: "Show me your friends and I'll show you your future". Do the people around you spur you forwards? Do they encourage you to take a chance, to have a go, to be your best?

I spent some time last Sunday addressing the comments of the critic. I hope my words then didn't seem too harsh or too direct. I'm just so conscious of the impact of our prevailing attitudes, of the voices around us, and the impact they have. The words of the lepers here are firmly based in reality, but they're shot through with just enough hope. When we talk about this, we often talk about finding friends that are wired a certain way. I think there is much value in that. But I think there'd be something incredible too if we did as these men did and decided together to press on toward hope, even when we know well the challenges we've faced. Perhaps if your friendship group has lurched toward the negative, you can agree together to stir up some faith and step out again.

So we've looked at how we must leave behind safety to step into opportunity; and of how together, we go can go far, spurring each other on to do just that. But there is a third thing we can see here...

3) Our city, our responsibility

It is not just the interaction outside the city gates that catches my attention, so too does their discussion within the enemy camp.

2 Kings 7:9 - 9 Then they said to each other, "What we're doing is not right. This is a day of good news and we are keeping it to ourselves. If we wait until daylight, punishment will overtake us. Let's go at once and report this to the royal palace."

In the midst of their unexpected success, their minds turn toward others. Yes, in part there is a fear, perhaps, of punishment. But there is also this recognition "this is a day of good news and we are keeping it to ourselves". How easy would it have been for these four lepers to dismiss the city that had rejected them? They were confident when they set out that they would find no relief amongst their own people; yet when they see God's provision, those same people are at the forefront of their mind.

It reminds me of the account we read of Jesus, in Luke 19.

Luke 19:41-42 - As he approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it and said, "If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace—but now it is hidden from your eyes.

Jesus goes on to share a remarkable prophecy of the tragedy that will soon befall the city – a prophecy fulfilled just a few decades later when the Romans tear the temple to the ground. Yet Jesus is moved by the people He sees. He knows that they will soon reject Him, but that only in Him can they find peace.

There is a sense then that when we have found something great, we should share it. That is true for those of us that have encountered Jesus for ourselves. If we know God – know His love, His acceptance; know the peace, the purpose and the value that we find in Him – we should share it with others. The same is true of this community. If we experience something positive here – if we find support as we gather, if it lifts our heads and raises our hope – we should share it with others. When we see provision and breakthrough, we should share it with the people in our world.

I love how these men see their breakthrough as a breakthrough for their people. Their faith unlocks provision, which in turn saves the city and turns the whole nation around. What if we too saw our city as our responsibility? What if we believed that through us God could bring a change? We can often feel hopeless in the face of the challenges faced by our society, but who's to say God couldn't do something miraculous through us?

That's one of things that spurs me on, personally, when it comes to our Heart For Our House offering. I fully believe that the local church is the hope of the world. I believe that through us, God can bring change. When I give, I do believing that it won't just change our church,

but it'll change our city. We have always been an externally focused church – so what happens in our house impacts our world.

The same is true when we serve. We turn our attention away from what we ourselves receive and onto what we can give. As many of us have found, God does something powerful when take the attention off ourselves and look to what God can do for others through us.

We often worry about our ability: what can I achieve? Am I up to it? What difference can I make? But what if what really matters is not whether we have the ability, but whether we take responsibility? What is God's ability to act is prompted by our willingness to move?

God does something in us; so we can do something in our city. If the miracle is in motion, then it must spread out – it spreads beyond our lives, beyond our church, into our city – as we take responsibility God gives us the ability of respond.

We are part of a community that is the answer to loneliness. We are part of a community of acceptance, of faith and of love. We are a people prepared to embrace the “who-so-ever” – to see them restored to health and wholeness through relationship with God. We know the God who cares about the individual. We know God who leans close to hear our prayers and who loves to act on our behalf. We know God who makes a way when the future seems impassable. We know God who brings meaning, purpose and direction to our lives. We know God who loves to do the implausible; for whom the miraculous is His territory; and in whom impossible things comes to pass. What if the people of our city could come to know God as we do? What if in Him they could find the solutions they need? What if His power could change our world? And what if He, in part, could do it through us? Our miracle is still in motion. God moves when we move. When we take responsibility, God gives us the ability to bring a miraculous response.

I hope there has been much we've discussed today that you can put into practice, but as draw to a conclusion, I have one final suggestion about what we can do in response to what we've learnt. For me, this brings together the three strands that we've discussed today – of stepping out of what's safe, of the value of community, of a sense of responsibility for the city beyond our four walls. Perhaps the best application is this: [hold up Christmas Invitation].

The best application is an invitation. It is stepping out of our comfort zone – out of what's safe and risk-free – to invite someone along to church. It is saying “I take responsibility for inviting the people I share life with - in my family, amongst my friends, where I work or study”. It is an opportunity for those that receive it – to experience this transformative community, to be part of something that will bolster their mental wellbeing, and to experience an opportunity to connect with God for themselves.

Our Christmas Concert provides us with perhaps the best opportunity we will have all year to invite someone along. So many people are open to coming along at Christmas time. And as the shops are already decorated, as there are Christmas songs in our ears and mince pies on the shelves, it is time for us to share our invitation too. Where I work, there are already

people saying they're coming to our Christmas concert. People that have never been to church before. They're not coming because I invited them, but because Clare and Louise did. Indeed just last year, Clare invited Louise along – and just two weeks ago Louise was baptised.

If the Christmas Concert isn't quite right, or if the invitation doesn't quite work out, then Dinner Parties are a great option too. They are intended to be informal, casual, relaxed. We've heard so many stories of people who have never been to church before coming to a Dinner Party. We believe for many more. They're happening this week.

Also too, there's our Christmas Hamper Appeal. I think there's something incredible about offering the people we share life with the opportunity to be part of meeting this tangible need in our society. It isn't just those who receive a hamper that benefit – those who help make them happen can be changed by the experience too. There is still time to invite those in your workplace, university or friendship group to be part of it – both bringing items in and when we wrap them later this month.

Each of these is a powerful opportunity – but it begins with an invitation. As Pastor Tom has mentioned recently, lots of the people we rub shoulders with do not realise they can come along until we invite them. They think this is some closed club – until we ask them if they'd like to come along. To quote Pastor Tom too, everyone deserves an invitation. If God can use those four lepers, there is no-one too far off to be part of His plan. And if those four lepers can, in the midst of their breakthrough, think of the city that rejected them, then there is no-one in our world we cannot invite along.

Our best application is an invitation. Let's get out there and invite people along.

As we finish, I began this morning listing the seemingly insurmountable problems that face our modern world. It is easy to look at those challenges and think there is no way we can make a difference, nothing we can do to bring a change. Yet we see in this account in 2 Kings, how God does the impossible – how He brings an unexpected breakthrough through four wholly unsuitable men. Perhaps if we can follow their example, we can see that same impact in our world. Perhaps if we're prepared to leave behind safety to step into opportunity; perhaps if we go together; perhaps if we see our city as our responsibility, perhaps then we will see God bring a change in our world. Perhaps we can see an end to loneliness. Perhaps we can see poverty rolled back. Perhaps those in our world will go from barely surviving to thriving – perhaps we can bridge that gap in mental health. Perhaps people can discover a sense of God-given identity; can find the meaning and purpose that makes life worthwhile. And perhaps that is just the beginning – of the breakthrough we can experience as God moves in our world. We know the answer can be found in Jesus; can be expressed through His church – the change that comes when we begin to move. There is a miracle in motion – it is here, in this community – so together, let's step out, into *our* city – and believe that we'll see many lives transformed.