

Sermons at  
First Lutheran Church (ELCA)  
Reggie Denton, Pastor

October 24, 2021 (Proper 25, Year B)  
Mark 10:46-52

“Jesus, have mercy on me!” “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!”

Then Jesus said to him, “What do you want me to do for you?”

This is a story about healing. And today is our Service of Healing.

You have heard bits and pieces of my family’s story, but considering this text from the Gospel, I think that it’s time to tell you the WHOLE story.

I want to tell you about a miracle. In 2017, my wife Wendy started to notice a pain in her neck. And then some difficulty swallowing, and then some issues with her balance. She knew something was wrong. She didn’t wait for her next physical exam. Like blind Bartimaeus, she didn’t take no for an answer. In January of 2018, she went to her doctor and asked her to schedule an MRI for her.

This is what it found.

Show the MRI

THAT is what they call a meningioma. It’s not cancer, but it WAS growing. They’re actually fairly common, and usually not that serious, but this one, as her neurologist later put it, was “misbehaving.” They usually happen on the outside of the brain. THIS one was at the CENTER of Wendy’s brain, pressing against her brainstem. That’s WHY she was having trouble doing BASIC functions, like swallowing and walking.

The neurosurgeon at the U called it the Mount Everest of brain tumors. That location made it nearly impossible to get to, and it was growing in FINGERS in ALL directions, so they weren’t sure what they would FIND IF they got in there. But there was no choice. If they didn’t, this tumor would eventually KILL her. It HAD to come out.

They scheduled it as soon as possible, and on February 28<sup>th</sup>, it began. The only way in was to DRILL, through the THICKEST, HARDEST part of the skull, the SIDE of her head. A millimeter at a time, ALL DAY, a 12 hour surgery, the WORST day of my life.

But during that day, Jesus said, “Call him here.’ And they called the blind man, saying to him, ‘Take heart; get up, he is calling you.’” Jesus’ disciples brought me to Jesus. The council president of my church drove to the Cities to SIT with me during the surgery. He stayed the whole 12 hours, right up until the surgeon came out. Wendy’s sister LeAnna, was there too, and came to see her every day at the U. We saw Jesus in Wendy’s dad Roger, who came by surprise, and her aunt Susie who drove all the way down from Wadena. We saw Jesus in a coworker, and in our college friend Alanna Oswald, who took care of our kids while we were in the Cities. We saw Jesus in all the visitors, even Emily, one of Wendy’s high school friends who we hadn’t seen in 20 years. Jesus was in all the people who prepared meals for us, and helped us with gas money and groceries.

But we were just beginning. Even after a 12 hour surgery to remove it, they were only able to get to 40% of the tumor. A SECOND surgery was scheduled for August 8<sup>th</sup>, and I’ll be honest, we were scared.

You see, the journey UP to that day had NOT given us much confidence. Her FIRST surgery left her unable to breathe on her own for several days, and unable to swallow on her own for WEEKS. She spent 2 weeks in the hospital and 3 weeks at Miller Dwan inpatient rehabilitation in Duluth learning to swallow again and walk again. She required 3 MORE procedures over those 5 weeks. But she was a warrior and fought her way ALL the way back, and even HEALTHIER than before. Her best friend from high school gave her a Wonder Woman pillow because those are also Wendy’s initials, WW (Wendy Wangerin).

But in late June, she had a series of tests at the U that left us reeling. We ALREADY knew that she needed a SECOND brain surgery, but that day we found out that, not only had she lost her HEARING in her left ear, she also seemed to have lost her FACIAL nerve that controls the MOVEMENT on the left side of her face. She couldn't smile and she couldn't close her eye. But that was just the FIRST appointment that day. We also met with a plastic surgeon who told us that the muscles in her face needed SOME kind of stimulation or they would DIE, so she would need ANOTHER surgery to try to SAVE them and get SOME movement back. AND we learned that her SECOND surgery would be SO extensive that it would take 2 DAYS. AND she needed a procedure as soon as possible to allow that eye to close. And so, we went to the Cities planning for 1 more surgery and came home preparing for 4. And she'd already HAD 4.

What were to do? After everything we'd been through, were we just going to give IN to fear and despair? Well, honestly, we had gone about as far as our OWN faith could take us. We needed MORE.

And so, we put it in God's hands. We asked for prayer, from everyone we knew, and everyone who would listen. All the Lutheran congregations in our Conference were praying for Wendy, and ALL the churches in the area Ministerium were praying too. Wendy's coworkers at the Moose Lake school rallied around her with prayers and support, and financially too.

And the people of our church ESPECIALLY were AMAZING. They gave me the time I needed to care for Wendy. They provided meals for us when they were needed. They gave us so many gifts to get THROUGH those months. And we felt their countless prayers WORKING in her.

The Sunday before her surgery, they gave us something we will never forget. In worship, they prayed over all 4 of us (the kids too). The whole church gathered around us in a laying on of hands, that blew the Spirit of God right THROUGH us, all the way up to heaven's door. And God HEARD their prayers.

The day BEFORE Wendy's surgery, we went to the U for one last test. They wanted to confirm that her facial nerve was indeed lost. But Wendy already knew something was up. She could tell that her facial muscles were beginning to move. The people who did the test COULDN'T BELIEVE what they were seeing. The nerve had shown NO ACTIVITY WHATSOEVER before that. But it was now! Thank God they did that test, at the last possible moment, because the surgery that was planned would have gone right THROUGH that facial nerve. This changed EVERYTHING!

There was a plan B. A LESS aggressive angle could SAVE the facial nerve and take only 1 day instead of 2, but there was a cost: It would likely get LESS of the tumor, but that was a trade the doctors preferred to make. It was STILL "the Mount Everest" of brain surgeries – the most difficult type there is.

And so, the next morning they began working. This time it was 14 hours and 35 minutes, the LONGEST day of my life. I was the only person left in waiting room when the big board finally read "closing." The neurosurgeon said that he was surprised that, even with THIS LESS aggressive approach, he was able to get ALL of the tumor that COULD have been removed surgically. The SECOND day of surgery NEVER WAS necessary after all. The REMAINING 30 percent of the tumor is wrapped around nerves and blood vessels and could only be treated with radiation.

At 2am the NEXT day, she finally began to awaken from the anesthesia, and to my amazement and relief, she was ALREADY breathing and swallowing on her own. ALREADY! But that was just the beginning.

When the surgeon came to see her the next day, he examined her eye. I'm sure I heard him say, "That's weird." You see, he was SURE, and the other surgeon working with him later confirmed, that they had SEVERED the nerve that controls the MOVEMENT of her left eye. He had EXPECTED it, because the nerve breaks easily, and it happens a lot with this type of surgery. But her eye was working perfectly. Weird. No, DIVINE INTERVENTION; that's what I call it.

And then on Sunday, 1 Sunday after our church prayed over us, and just 4 DAYS after "Mount Everest," they sent her home. HOME. Not to a rehab facility, but HOME. What had taken 5 weeks before, took just 4 DAYS. DIVINE INTERVENTION.

A miracle. But that wasn't the miracle I was talking about as I began this story. The miracle is the PEOPLE, the CHURCH, who MADE it happen. The miracle is the people who lifted us up and held us in the light. Their prayers and support brought us home. God used THEM to make this miracle happen. The CHURCH IS the miracle.

On our OWN, by OWN STRENGTH, by own FAITH, we CAN'T BEAR some of the awful, terrible, TRAGIC things that happen to us in this life, but TOGETHER, as a CHURCH, as a CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY, we can do ANYTHING.

We are the church. Thank you for BEING a miracle. Through you, Jesus says, "Go; your faith has made you well." Amen.