

Appendix B

OUR GALILEE MIRACLE

Jesus said unto him, If thou canst believe, all things are possible to him that believeth. And straightway the father of the child cried out, and said with tears, Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief.

—Mark 9:23–24

Beginning in August of 2011, my wife, Elaine, our children, Rachel and Samuel, and I lived in the Holy Land for a year while I taught at the Brigham Young University–Jerusalem Center. Experiencing that land and being able to teach the Bible in many of the very places where its events took place was a dream come true for me. For my family, though, it was not always as easy: they needed to adjust to living, shopping, and going to school in very different surroundings. And differences are particularly hard for our son, Samuel. Being on the autism spectrum, Samuel has always found change extremely difficult, so we knew that living in a different apartment rather than in our home, going to a different school, and being surrounded by different people, hearing different languages, and even eating different foods would be terrifying for him.

We worked hard to prepare him, spending months beforehand looking at pictures, talking about Jerusalem, and discussing what would be different but also what would be the same that year. Miraculously, things went much better than we expected. Yes, things were hard and he certainly missed home, but right away he would say and do touching things, such as when we were driving from the airport to the BYU–Jerusalem Center and he asked us when we were going to meet Jesus. As we settled into routines, he grew more comfortable, and the rest of us had special experiences tracing the life and ministry of the Savior.

But that was the very part that Samuel did not seem to be getting. Field trips with the college students were too long, too loud, and too confusing for him to handle with his sensory processing disorder (SPD), a condition that often accompanies autism. The Old City was too crowded, smelled too different, and was too scary for him to visit until the very last weekend we were in Jerusalem. Samuel had a few choice experiences with us, such as a family visit to Gethsemane and a wonderful Christmas Eve singing Christmas carols at Shepherds Field as we looked over at Bethlehem. But as our year went on, I had a growing feeling of sadness and disappointment as I realized that my son was not, by and large, able to understand and appreciate what the rest of us were experiencing in the Holy Land.

One of the highlights of each semester was an extended visit to Galilee, the land where Jesus spent

Opposite: The Sea of Galilee from the chapel at Tiberias.

Courtesy of Eric Huntsman.



Courtesy of Eric Huntsman

Boats such as this one can often be seen on the Sea of Galilee.

so much of his ministry, where he taught, and where he worked so many of his miracles. My family went with me for part of each of these Galilee rotations, but on my third and last trip with the students in July 2012, my wife and children were with me for the entire ten days, and I was anxious for them to experience what I believe is one of the best parts of the rotation, a boat ride on the Sea of Galilee.

I could not see how that could happen for Samuel, however. The boat ride was to be followed by a field trip on a bus with all the students for the rest of the day. That was too many people and much too long a trip for Samuel to endure. Elaine insisted, however, thinking that not only would it be fun for our son but he might learn something meaningful from it as well. So she arranged for the wife of one of the other faculty members to meet us on the opposite side of the Sea of Galilee to drive Elaine and Samuel back to where the family was staying. All that remained was to convince Samuel to go. The night before, in fact, he began to express hesitation about being out on the sea in a boat.

“Are there sharks in the Sea of Galilee, Dad? What if the boat sinks?” he worried.

The next morning we took him to the dock, arriving before all the students to minimize his confusion and fear. He hesitated to get on the boat at first, but after he had made up his mind, he charged down the gangplank, being the first to board. When the boat started to cruise towards the middle of the lake and the sea breeze picked up, he went to the front of the boat and leaned out over the water. I went up to the prow, partly to be with him but mostly to make sure he did not fall into the water.

With one arm around him, I asked him whether he knew what Jesus had done here on the Sea of Galilee. I told him that at least twice Jesus had helped his friends when they were on a boat and a big storm scared them. And then I said that on one of those times, Jesus actually walked across the water to help the disciples. Then ensued a conversation between the two of us that I will always remember.¹

“How did Jesus walk on water, Dad?”

“Well, Jesus can do anything, Samuel.”

“How?”



Courtesy of Eric Huntsman

Our precious Samuel, thinking hard, on a boat on the Sea of Galilee.



Courtesy of Eric Huntsman

Answering Samuel's questions while on the Sea of Galilee.

“He is the Son of God, so he can do anything that Heavenly Father can do, and he uses that power to help us, just like he helped his friends long ago.”

From this simple but actually quite profound exchange we began to experience our Galilee miracle. There on the very sea on and around which Jesus had worked so many miracles, Samuel asked me a stream of questions about Jesus, about God, about blessings, about life and death—so many that I could hardly keep up with them. But somehow I was able to give him a more or less satisfactory answer to each.

One of the features of Samuel’s autism explains why this conversation was such a miracle. As functional as Samuel is in many other ways, he is heavily affected in the area of verbal communication. True, he has gone from speaking and understanding very little when he was four or five years old to being able now to understand most of what is said to him, and he can express himself adequately enough—at least when he chooses to. But he does not easily grasp abstract concepts and rarely asks how, why, and what kinds of questions. Furthermore, conversations rarely go beyond three or four exchanges. But here was a conversation consisting of more than twenty questions, each of them deep.

“How is Jesus the Son of God, Dad?”

“Well, son, do you remember what we talk about at Christmas each year, how Mary had the baby Jesus? His father was God.”

“How did that happen, Dad?”

Try to answer that one for a nine year old! “It was a miracle, Samuel. But it really happened.”

“Why does Jesus bless us?”

“Because he loves us, just like Heavenly Father does, and he wants to help us.”

“Where did Jesus get his power, Dad? How much of it does he have?”

“Jesus has the same power that God does, Samuel. It is the same power by which the world was created, so he can do anything to help us.”

“But how did God create the world?”

“Well, buddy, you know how you like to make things out of play dough? In kind of the same way, God takes dust and gas and stars and space itself and makes stuff out of it.”

“Thousands of people have died, Dad.”

“I know, pal. But that’s why we like Easter so much.”

“But if all those people come alive again, where will they all live?”

Perhaps we are so overwhelmed with the idea of the resurrection that we do not think much about the practicalities of it.

Finally Samuel said, “I know I am asking a lot of questions, Dad. But I just need to know stuff.”

He just needed to know stuff. And so did I. I needed to know that inside my little boy was an inquisitive mind and a sensitive spirit. That God was aware of him and of me. And that he could bring us together for that moment.

And for just a moment it was. In an instant, the miracle was over. Water sprayed up and a bird or something flew over, distracting Samuel. The spell was broken, he suddenly stopped talking, and then he was just a cute but autistic boy again, staring absently at the water as the boat cruised along.



Courtesy of Eric Huntsman.

I am amazed at God's love and mercy for my son and for each of us.



Courtesy of Eric Hantman.

Sunset over the Sea of Galilee.

Elaine came up to us. As I turned to her, the immensity of what had happened hit me. For fifteen minutes or so, Samuel's autism had been effectively suspended, allowing him to ask me questions and me to teach him as I had so longed to do. When I realized that, I could not speak. Finally, through sudden tears, I blurted out, "I have just had the most miraculous experience of my time in the Holy Land. We have been praying and praying that Samuel would have experiences here that would help him understand and know the Lord, and one just happened." I could hardly talk.

Less than ten minutes later, the captain cut the engine so we could have quiet for our traditional devotional out on the Sea of Galilee. Together with my students, I read the account in Mark 4:35–41 of Jesus' calming the storm, and we sang "Master, the Tempest Is Raging."² Then we read in Matthew 14:22–33 about Jesus and Peter walking on the water, and we sang again. But most of all I testified of the miracle that had just happened to my son and of the miracles that can happen to each of us. ∞