

Preaching on Miracles

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Miracles command attention. The possibility of the miraculous both fascinates and scares people. The fascination feeds on the human yearning to have, at last, some objective evidence of the supernatural, some proof that God exists. The apprehension echoes our reluctant reckoning that, even if miracles do happen, they don't always, and for every need, every time. When the time comes that we need it most, they won't, we fear.

The dimension of the miraculous has always captivated human imagination. Our times are no different. Extended exposure to the "electronic church" makes that clear, as radio and TV hucksters exploit our fearful fascination. It's confirmed by the prosperity of those sects which emphasize healing, and the influential presence of "charismatic" congregations and charismatic cells within congregations of the "mainline" denominations.

One can join the Society of St. Luke, a national support group for a healing ministry. *Guideposts* lures new subscribers through television spots which promise "stories of modern day miracles." Oral Roberts converts our fancy for the miraculous into big, corporate business. Pamela Hamilton's plight as a pathetic pawn pulled between civic, legal accountability, and religious trust in the miraculous evokes equivocal sympathies within us.

Lurking behind these phenomena in our culture is the irresistible persuasion that access to the miraculous provides the surest, quickest, most dependable, and permanent solution to adversity. Miracles are the best, most spiritual answer to human calamity.

When we become ill we can take medicine, or submit to surgery, and follow the doctor's advice and instruction. That may help, in time, at least partially, perhaps.

But if we pray to God and trust in Jesus we can be healed immediately, *right now*. Others have.

Of course, others haven't too. Skulking, dreaded, in the wings of our imagination are all of those qualifications which dilute our confidence. *If* we have strong enough faith—, *if* God is listening—, *if* he isn't too busy elsewhere to attend to our pleas—, *if* he's really willing to overlook our previous sins—.

What this amounts to is the transformation of our appreciation for the dimension of the miraculous into a primitive scientism.

Such a scientism is constructed on seemingly sound orthodox foundations. We live in a world which is fundamentally out of control. Natural disasters, political unrest, war, economic injustice, social disorder, rampant immorality, and most immediately, our vulnerability to sickness and death all testify to the world's fallen condition. God, and only God, can make right what's wrong with our world and with our lives. That's what he has done and is doing in Jesus Christ.

People find prime evidence to nurture this hope in the miracle stories out of the ministry of Jesus which are recorded in the canonical Gospels.

The story of Jesus' healing of the paralytic is the best, most Christian, and most complete solution to the paraplegic they say. The story of his healing of the woman with a flow of blood is the best, most spiritual response for hemophilia or for bleeding ulcers. The stilling of the storm promises balm to our urgent longings when a hurricane hits the Gulf coast. His exorcisms of demons provides the Christian answer to psychosis.

Such a use of these stories poses some of the toughest situations with which a pastor has to deal. If Jesus could cure ten lepers why can't he or won't he deal just as swiftly and effectively with my carcinoma? If Jesus could raise the centurion's servant from the dead, why must I suffer the loss of my teenage daughter who had so much to live for when she was run over by a drunk driver?

It is an understandable and an irresistible temptation. I suppose people always will want to read and to use those stories in that way. But my purpose in this article is to suggest that when we read and use those stories in this manner we are appropriating them for different purposes than those for which the synoptic evangelists included them in their narrative portraits of the life and ministry of Jesus.

When we hear these stories moving in a different direction, we are freed from the inclination to reduce them to a capricious, spiritual scientism. We are encouraged to broaden our awareness and to discern the true dimensions of the miraculous in our own spiritual experience.

Early Christians probably told and retold the miracle stories with multiple motives and for mixed purposes, too. Some of them were more defensible than others.

The primary reason that they told them, and the primary reason that the synoptic evangelists included them in their narratives, was not because they gave the Christian solution to otherwise difficult and even insoluble human problems.

Mark didn't write about Jesus' exorcism of a demon so his community would know what they should do when someone in their fellowship acted crazy. He didn't tell of Jesus' rebuking the fever in Peter's mother-in-law so his community would have the Christian solution when somebody caught the flu. Luke didn't describe the resuscitation of the ruler's daughter to give his community the best, most Christian solution to parental grief.

They included the miracle stories not because they clarified something fundamental about human experience and the human condition. They told miracle stories because they said something irreplaceably precious about who Jesus was and what God was about in this world through him.

Miracle stories for the synoptic evangelists were not religious solutions to anthropological misadventures. Rather they were ringing Christological affirmations.

Early Christians believed that their world was in trouble, too. But describing it as fundamentally out-of-control doesn't quite get it. Rather they saw their world caught up in a colossal power struggle. The basic issue was: who

would have control?

They perceived their world to be caught up in a great cosmological conflict between God and his host, his supernatural agents, the angels, and a host of supernatural forces opposed to God. They had learned from the apocalyptic tradition of late Jewish piety to refer to those unearthly forces which were contending with God as Satan and her demonic host.

If human sin didn't inaugurate the conflict (though Paul and other early Christians would argue that's precisely what did inaugurate it) it certainly escalated and intensified it. Because God gave humanity dominion over the rest of creation, when human beings chose to set themselves over against God they aligned themselves with Satan's side.

This rebellion swung the world and all its living beings into Satan's camp. Human sin made God's good creation vulnerable to satanic subjugation. And Satan and his host were not about to miss that trick.

God's purpose in Jesus Christ was to free his creation from satanic enslavement, to reclaim it, and to restore his right to rule. The primary evidence for that was not the miracles which Jesus accomplished but rather the supreme miracle which God accomplished, namely the resurrection.

God's ultimate objective is to put right what's wrong in the whole created order. But humanity needed reclaiming first. God really wants to put right what's wrong with our hearts, and heads, and wills so that we acknowledge that he is in control—even in a world which still seems out of whack.

The miracle stories served to clarify and to illustrate the rule of Jesus in God's program of restoration. That was the major reason why early Christians told and retold the miracle stories. That was certainly one of the main reasons the synoptic evangelists gave them prominent place in their narratives.

Jesus was God's supernaturally empowered agent. In his ministry he was inaugurating and effecting God's mighty reclamation project. He was supplanting Satan's usurpation of dominion over God's creation, and reasserting God's right to rule. The synoptic summation of the heart of his preaching and teaching announced: God's kingly rule is at hand. The miracles which Jesus did demonstrated that.

When Jesus exorcized a demon he was driving that supernaturally empowered representative of Satan's rule out so that God's right to rule in that person could be re-established.

When Jesus healed the blind or the sick or the leprous he was reversing those physical manifestations of decay and debilitation which heralded Satan's rule. He restored God's wholeness and health and perfection on his good creation.

When Jesus resuscitated a person who had died (We must not confuse resuscitation with resurrection. Resuscitation is the restoration of a previous vitality which has ceased with death. Resurrection is entry into a qualitatively new order of life.), he was symbolically doing the same thing the Genesis creation account describes as God breathing in the breath of life. Death belongs to the realm of Satan. Restoration of life announces that God has taken over and is in command.

This restoration by Jesus of God's right to rule extends to other segments

of creation. When Jesus rebuked the wind and stilled the sea he was not simply providing an unusual solution to a threatening meteorological phenomena. The storm with its raging winds and turbulent waves evoked recollections of the chaotic waters of Genesis creation account before God's brooding spirit imposed order. The storm testified to a natural order which was out of order because Satan ruled. Jesus restored creation harmony and calm, for through him God was taking over.

When Jesus miraculously fed people he wasn't demonstrating the best, most Christian solution to the grinding poverty afflicting such a horrendous number of God's children. This story not only recalled other occasions when God miraculously provided for the physical needs of people (e.g. the manna in the wilderness) but also reminded Christians of God's provisions in creation for human sustenance. In Jesus he was restoring that aspect of his creation, too.

The synoptic authors used the miracle stories to illustrate their conviction that in the person and work of Jesus God was displacing satanic disorder, chaos, and death with the order, harmony and life of his creation intent.

All stories, but especially brief dramatic stories which originated in an oral culture, have an independent life of their own. They share the significative ambiguity of any creative product.

The miracle stories in the Jesus tradition are no exception. I suspect that miracle stories will continue to mean multiple things to different people, depending on what the listener brings to the story.

In the brief description given above I have not exhausted the rich meanings which the synoptic evangelists found in the miracle stories of Jesus. The scope of this brief essay precludes accomplishing that ambitious goal.

I have simply tried to sketch one major meaning which those stories bore for them. As ambiguous as those stories may remain in independent form, the meaning which the synoptic evangelists found in them must govern and limit how we interpret them as authoritative biblical texts.

If we are to preach the miracle stories in their canonical form, and are responsive to the boundaries which our assent to the formation of the canon and the consequences which that confessional act implies, then we must ask of these stories:

- what do they tell us about Jesus?
- who do they say that he is?
- what do they imply about the source, type and extent of the power which he wields?
- what do they claim that God is doing through him?

Such an inquiry establishes legitimate controls over meanings we may ascribe to those stories as authoritative texts. It also liberates us from allowing our appreciation for the dimension of the miraculous to be limited to first century categories.

We are freed to inquire after the authentically miraculous in our own spiritual experience. We are not limited to longing for and acknowledging only those rare, inherently ambiguous occasions when lame legs are healed and blind eyes are opened.

We are encouraged to broaden the scope of awareness. What events in our spiritual pilgrimage proclaim that God has taken charge? What occurrences—personal, societal, political, cosmic—announce the restoration of God's rule?

Why is the reversal of personal disintegration because one has finally been gripped by the claim of the Lord of the gospel any less miraculous than a demon exorcism? Miracles occur! More than we know. When a deteriorating relationship with another person heals because of Christian love, that's a miracle. When discord and schism in Christian communities are overcome, Christ establishes his right to rule. When God's love calls forth empathy and compassion so that the hungry and oppressed of this world find relief, that is as authentically miraculous as the multiplication of loaves and fish.

Seen in this light maybe *Guideposts* is on to something when it promises us "stories of modern day miracles." At least we should be as creative as those early Christians were in telling our miraculous moments to affirm Christ's role and to honor God's rule.