

DO MIRACLES REQUIRE FAITH?

Faith and miracle: this is a complex topic. Consider, for instance, the statement in Mark 6:5 (Jerusalem Bible) concerning Nazareth. Jesus said, “A prophet is only despised in his own country ...” And then Mark observes, “Jesus could work no miracle there, though he cured a few sick people by laying his hands on them. He was amazed at their lack of faith.” I’m surprised in the first place that healing a few sick folk is not considered a miracle, and even more surprised that Jesus’ ability to do miracles depends on the faith of people in Nazareth.

Add to that the report in Luke’s passion narrative (Luke 23:8) that Herod had been wanting to see Jesus for a long time “because he had heard about him and was hoping to see him perform some sign” or miracle. For Herod, miracle is rooted in curiosity.

So, we begin by asking what is a miracle? Is it something we cannot explain? In that case, what happens when we find an explanation? Bonhoeffer wrote in one of his letters from prison that we are in the habit of using God to explain the things about life that we do not understand. We have a core of knowledge about our world, and we assign to God the things beyond our understanding. But, with the growth of science and education our body of knowledge has expanded, with the result that God is pushed more and more to the margins of life. Bonhoeffer called us to find God in the center of life rather than at the fringes.

The Bible contains enough on faith and miracle to occupy a doctoral dissertation. One thing is clear, however, Jesus’ amazing actions did not generate faith in the spectators. With some, they generated anger and opposition, with others, curiosity. Thus, my work in this sermon is not finally to solve the puzzle, but to deal with faith and miracle in the light of John 6, and to sharpen the question by asking, do miracles require faith?

In John 6, William Barclay suggests the miracle of feeding of 5,000 people is really a miracle of generosity. He asks, who would start out on a long journey to a deserted place without some morsel of food? And who would open a cloak and start munching in the midst of 5,000 hungry souls? But when a boy, a mere child, generously offers what little he has to Jesus, things change. Seeing him, others are moved to imitate the child’s generous act. Before long the whole multitude begins to share meager rations with each other. Everyone is fed, and twelve baskets of left overs mark the abundance. Thus, Barclay says, this is really a miracle of spreading generosity.

Barclay has an interesting idea, and it’s one way of looking at what might “really have happened.” Add to that the fact that, in the next story, the Greek preposition ἐπι means both “upon” or “beside,” and we have explanations for both passages in John’s Gospel. Jesus may have been walking beside the tumultuous lake rather than upon it.

But, do those explanations really dispense with the miracles? Do they help to explain?

So, we need to make a careful distinction between miracle and magic when we think about faith, or else Jesus ends up being little more than a magician, and we end up asking “How did he do that?” instead of letting the miracle point us to commitment and trust. When we are unable to see beyond the wonder of Jesus’ amazing deeds of healing, feeding the multitudes, calming the storms, and walking on water, then our awe is in danger of deteriorating into curiosity. That is surely what lay behind John 6 and what attracted the crowd to Jesus.

When we think of a miracle merely as something we can’t explain we move over the boundary into magic, into trickery, into deception. And that is the farthest thing from miracle. The trouble with magic, as far as adults are concerned, is that it feeds our need to control. When miracles are reduced to magic we ask, “how did he do that?” Or, “how did that happen?” And we find ourselves in quest of the secret knowledge that will put miracles in our control.

With children, of course, it’s a different matter. Before the loss of innocence magic is related to wonder, to a sense of awe about life and the world. It touches beauty and communicates the sacred. It breathes glory and whispers grace. With children, magic is something to be cherished and prized. But with adults it is different. Magic is part of our quest for control, a tool in the blind attempt to make ourselves all powerful.

Miracles are not magic! There is no trick, nothing to figure out, nothing to explain. Miracles require openness, an attitude of readiness, an acceptance of what God has to say, and to reveal. That is why the Gospel of John calls them “signs,” because they point beyond themselves to something about God. Faith enables us to look, to see where the signs point and to understand what miracles signify. Yes, miracles do require faith, or they dissolve into the mists of magic and become meaningless, pointing away from God and feeding our curiosity or our need for control.

We face a dilemma, caught between ways of life. That’s what we find time and again in the Bible: two ways of life. A life filled with miracle, or a life devoid of wonder. We can’t create miracle, and when we try, we enter the realm of magic and leave the realm of faith and religion far behind. We can’t create miracle, but we can cultivate receptivity for miracle. We can cultivate a sense of wonder that opens us to what God is ready to do in and for us. And that sense of wonder makes the most of miracle. It recognizes miracle. It builds on miracle till we find ourselves full and surrounded by growing faith.

That’s what Carol was talking about last week. The Book of Deuteronomy presents Moses’ speech just before the children of Israel move in to the Promised Land. Two ways are set before them: blessing and life, or curses and death. Choose then, which to follow. That is not to return from the “nevertheless” of God, to the “if” of conditional obedience. But it is to recognize the “nevertheless” of God’s love, and to choose to live in response to God’s initiative of grace.

If I were in charge of the universe I would ordain that miracles provide a cure for

cancer, that broken families be healed with a hug, that the chains of addiction be broken, and a whole list of other things. But I'm not in charge, not even in charge of my own life. I'm subject to the vagaries of time and circumstance, and miracles do not take away my hurts and anguish.

Life, by its very nature, is a fluctuation of joys and sorrows, of successes and failures. And the curious thing about miracles is that though they don't make life less painful and difficult they are tailored to our individual needs. Very often they occur at the moments of our deepest distress. The hymn writer said it well. Hear the promise of God in the third verse of *How Firm a Foundation*:

When through the deep waters I call thee to go,
The rivers of woe shall not thee overflow;
For I will be with thee, thy troubles to bless,
And sanctify to thee thy deepest distress.

That hymn, I believe, provides the continuing context for miracle: God's unfailing love and care. God does not promise to remove our deepest distress, nor to make us happy in spite of pain, but to sanctify, that is to make holy, all the pain and struggle of our deepest distress.

I've been pondering my own deepest distress. The first of those distresses is tied up with the people I have loved and lost.

But another deep distress is tied to my ministry over the years. I remember one church I served a long time ago. It's like one minister said, "I left that church because of illness: I was sick of them, and they were sick of me." For a long time I couldn't understand why my ministry in that place felt like such a failure. My tenure there lasted four long years, and then I was gone. The most charitable thing to say is that the church and I were not a good fit, and I wondered month after month, if and why God had called me to such a place. Had I misunderstood God's call?

But ten years later, I discovered that God doesn't make mistakes, and my deep distress had been sanctified. God made holy, that experience of pain and failure. When I began work as Presbytery Executive in Western Kentucky, I discovered that I had a different perspective on the problems of pastors and churches because of that failure and pain. I now believe the experience made me a better pastor to both pastors and churches.

What have been your deepest distresses? Will you allow and look for God to sanctify them for you? Will you allow those experiences of deep pain, grief and sorrow to be made holy in God's sight and in your life?

We could point to wonderful miracles of healing in our own congregation, in the choir and elsewhere. But we also know the pain of those who have not been healed, and we learn, once again, that we are not in charge.

Here's a different kind of miracle. Picture a family assembled to watch beloved

grandsons graduate from College. Ten family members are gathered in celebration. The parents, aunts and uncles are all there in the stands. Grandmother has been living alone, a widow for twenty years. And the graduation happens to fall on the anniversary of the very day her beloved husband died. She still misses him.

It is a beautiful day, not a cloud in the sky. The temperature is comfortable in the stadium where they gather. And then, surprisingly, out of a clear blue sky a few drops of rain fall on the beaming faces of the woman and her daughter. While not a baptism, those drops are a sprinkling of grace, a reminder of love, now lost, but strangely present. There is no natural explanation for the drops that caress their cheeks. The sky is clear. And yet, the water refreshes, renewing memory of a life partner gone these many years, and yet present, attending the family assembled in pride and joy to celebrate.

That is a miracle. It doesn't mean as much to others in the family. And yet, to one, lonely grandparent and her daughter it is a miracle, a comfort, a consolation, a reminder, a coincidence that on this, of all days, for a brief moment, the circle is unbroken. God's grace overflows. A miracle, she says. And so say I.

Faith doesn't create miracles, but it does enable us to recognize them, to be surprised by grace, and to make the most of it. Likewise, miracles do not create faith. Miracles open our eyes to wonder and awe, open us to the work of grace, and faith makes the most of that new vision. My prayer for you is that your eyes may be opened to miracle, and being opened, they may recognize the wonder and power of God's grace which is already at work all around us.