

Miracles, Nature, and the Kingdom

Mark 1:40-45

February 15, 2009

I.

Today's Gospel is a story of healing that shows how Christ took on a leper's burden and restored him as he struggled with life. In two months, we will celebrate Good Friday and Easter Day when Christ took on all of our burdens to offer us restoration for eternity.

And in reading how Jesus healed the leper, I was reminded of the story of a woman who went to her doctor's office, and was seen by one of the new younger doctors. After about four minutes in the examination room, she burst out screaming and ran down the hall.

One of the older doctors stopped her and asked what was wrong, and she told him. The older doctor immediately went to the first doctor and said, "What's the matter with you? Mrs. Jones is 64 years old, she has four grown children and six grandchildren, and you told her she was pregnant?" The new doctor smiled smugly, and said, "Cured her hiccups though, didn't it?"

Well, Jesus was more serious about his healing work. When he healed, it was by miraculous power, and it showed a glimpse of God's kingdom, both of which I will discuss in a moment.

II.

As I prepared this sermon, I thought of the TV series and later movie called *The Untouchables*. You probably remember the story of Eliot Ness and Al Capone during the years of prohibition in Chicago. And the good guys were called untouchable because they could not be bribed.

In first century Palestine, however, being called an untouchable had a serious and often deadly connotation. The untouchables of that time were the lepers who were quarantined from society and forced to live alone in rural areas away from the cities.

But first, some background. Today, leprosy is called Hansen's disease, a condition caused by bacteria that affects the peripheral nerves and respiratory tract, with some outward symptoms. It can be treated, and contrary to early myths, it does not make your arms and legs fall off.

But those myths and beliefs prevailed two thousand years ago before there was treatment. And lepers probably included people who did not actually have the disease, but rather other types of skin lesions and infections as well. According to the old religious law of the Jewish people, anyone suffering from one of these conditions was unclean, untouchable, unwanted, and outcast.

The Bible states, "The person who has the leprous disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head be disheveled; and he shall cover his upper lip and cry out, 'Unclean, unclean.' He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease; he is unclean. He shall live alone; his dwelling shall be outside the camp" (Lev. 13:45-46). It also was unlawful to touch a leper (Lev. 5:2).

So, within this context, a leper came to Jesus for healing, and Jesus touched him and he was healed. And by touching him Jesus broke the Jewish law, which he did in on occasion and is another sermon. But then, Jesus immediately told the man to obey the law and go to the priest, who had authority to declare him legally healed in order to be readmitted to his community.

III.

That's a good story with a happy ending. It's a sign of the gospel of salvation because Jesus took the man's uncleanness upon himself, just as he later took our sins upon himself on the cross. And in that sense, when we think about the hereafter, this reading reaffirms our Christian hope.

But what about the here and now? Is there anything in the reading that can encourage us today? I think there is, and we find it in two things. One is our acceptance of miracles in the Bible, and our belief that miracles can occur today. The other is knowing that Jesus' miracles momentarily revealed God's future kingdom, which is coming into the world but is not fully here yet, and which will be the end result of the process through our broken world will be fixed.

Let's talk about miracles first. Jews in first century Palestine easily could accept the idea of miracles. They were living under Roman oppression with no hope of changing anything on their own. Indeed, under the circumstances, God was their only hope, and for many Jesus was the fulfillment of their messianic expectations.

And stories of Jesus' miracles remained credible for centuries until the Enlightenment, which was an eighteenth century movement in European and American philosophy also called the Age of Reason. It was a time when all things were thought to be explainable by reason, science, and laws of nature. If something was not understood in that way it was rejected as not believable.

You can imagine how people of that time must have changed their ideas about biblical miracles. The classic objection perhaps was advanced by the Scottish philosopher, David Hume, who held that miracles could not exist because they were violations of the laws of nature. He obviously also denied a God who controlled the laws of nature.

That skepticism is changing today. Notwithstanding evil in the world, I believe there is a growing recognition that God also is at work in the world. Miracles have made a comeback, perhaps miraculously. But there are slightly different ways in which people understand miracles.

One understanding is that miracles are supernatural events. People with this view believe they fully understand the laws of nature, and that miracles, which cannot be understood, therefore must occur outside those laws.

In this sense, miracles are treated as mysteries and accepted through faith. One does not try to place them in a thought structure based on the perceived natural order of things.

Another view, however, is that the world is not a closed system of the laws of nature as we know them. The world operates as it does because God created it, and when miracles happen it merely is because God chose that creation would operate in a special way at a particular time.

In this view miracles are not mysteries or violations of laws of nature, but instead are examples of how nature works in accordance with God's will; not according to our limited human understanding. Miracles are examples of the way creation actually is, and are entirely consistent with the idea that God continues to create in the world. The laws of nature are God's laws not ours, and miracles simply are part of the package.

In a way the two approaches are opposite sides of the same coin. The first, however, contains a danger to be avoided. That is the notion that God is merely a "God of the gaps." This idea suggests that God is a supernatural force behind those things we cannot understand, but the danger is that it ignores God in those things that function normally within our everyday lives.

Said another way, the danger is that we look to God to explain what we don't understand, but rely on ourselves as the source of wisdom and knowledge for everything else.

I don't believe we can limit God to that which is in our ignorance. We cannot restrict God's presence, power, and activity to only those things that are extraordinary or not otherwise explainable. Through the centuries, for example, humanity has eliminated many of the gaps in science. Does that mean that God's presence also has been reduced?

I don't think so. God was, is, and always will be everywhere in creation. I am drawn to the idea that miracles are not mysteries beyond a system of nature as we understand it, but rather that miracles operate as a normal part of a system of nature as God created it.

IV.

So, does this mean that miracles occur today? I believe they do. Today, unlike the first century, Jesus is not physically present and so the connection between miracles and the divine life might not be as obvious to us as it was to the people in today's Gospel reading.

But yet, we all have seen them. Several years ago a close friend of ours was diagnosed with a slow growing form of cancer that doctors said eventually would take his life. One Friday night Susan and I, and our friend and his wife, went to a healing service where the celebrant laid hands on him and anointed him. The following week he had a medical examination with no sign of the cancer. Seven years later it still is gone. Was it a miracle? I think it was.

And even apart from miraculous healings or unexplainable improvements in medical conditions, we see God at work in our everyday lives.

For example, what about the person driving down the street approaching an intersection and a dog runs out in front of the vehicle? The driver puts on the brakes to slow down, only to then look to the left and see a large truck run the red light and flash through the intersection in front of him. If that dog had not been there the driver would not have slowed down and would have been in the intersection when the truck came through.

Did God's ministering angels put the dog there at that time? I can believe miracles operate in that way. We all probably have experienced things like that. They may not be miracles in the biblical sense, but they certainly are examples of God showing us that life is not just a series of random chances. And doesn't it also show that God is everywhere, and not just in the gaps?

One final point should be made. How do we deal with the inconsistency between the idea that with God all things are possible, and yet sometimes the miracles we most earnestly desire do not happen? Why are some people healed and others are not?

In some ways miracles, especially healing miracles, show us what God's kingdom will be like, but miracles aren't guaranteed. God's kingdom began when Jesus was born, and will be completed when he comes again. Right now, however, this kingdom on earth is a work in progress. And miracles can be visions of the future; previews of coming attractions, so to speak.

But previews aren't the entire movie. It has not yet been released. The kingdom is on the way but not here yet. And for now, we are called to distinguish between being cured and being healed. We are promised that while cannot always be assured of a physical cure through miracles, we can count on being spiritually healed through faith.

V.

So here we are, with a Gospel reading about one of Jesus' miracles, and hopefully an understanding of how those miracles hold out hope for us today. What do we do next? Perhaps the central point to grasp is that we are in God's hands, and we can participate in the beauty of creation that has been given to us, including all of the miracles that are part of it even though they are beyond our full understanding.

That's why we pray. It's why we have faith. It's why we come to church on Sunday or to our healing service on Wednesday. It's why we believe we are loved by God our creator, redeemed by Jesus Christ our savior, and sanctified by the Holy Spirit who guides us. Through this faith we, like the people of biblical times, share in the miracles that surround us every day. *Amen.*