

God At Work
Mark 1:40-45
February 12, 2012

I.

Our Gospel reading is a nice little story, isn't it? Jesus healed a man suffering from a horrible disease that, at the time, had no cure. Jesus did not preach anything. He did not call anyone to do anything. No one was challenged to a higher standard. The story doesn't even make us feel guilty. And there was a happy ending. So, what are we supposed to do with a reading like that?

As I pondered that question, I recalled 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 lepers quarantined from society and forced to live alone in colonies away from the cities. Hebrew law made them unclean, untouchable, unwanted, and outcast.

That Old Testament law, given by God to Moses on Mt. Sinai, clearly states, "The person who has the leprous disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head be disheveled; and shall cover his upper lip and cry out, 'Unclean, unclean.' He shall live alone; his dwelling shall be outside the camp" (Lev. 13:45-46). It also was unlawful to even touch a leper (Lev. 5:2).

But yet, a leper came to town to see Jesus, and Jesus touched him and he was healed. And so, to return to my earlier question of how we can understand this story, a typical approach is to see it as a sign of the Gospel of salvation. Just as Jesus took the man's uncleanness upon himself and restored him, he later took our own sins upon himself on the cross and restored us.

II.

But this story also can introduce the larger subject of miracles, generally. We recall that Jesus also made a blind man see, fed five thousand people, and walked on water, just to name a few.

The Old Testament also records God's miracles. There is the parting of the Red Sea, the burning bush, the miraculous healing of Namaan in today's first reading, and many others.

And we should begin by distinguishing between miracles and spiritual gifts. Only God can do miracles. Spiritual gifts are exercised by us, although they come from God. And when people deny that miracles occur today, we sometimes find they actually are questioning whether spiritual gifts exist today. I believe we do receive spiritual gifts, but that is another sermon.

So, do biblical miracles happen today? Yes and no. If some of the spectacular events in the Bible occurred now there would be round the clock coverage by CNN and other networks. It is likely there would be either riots and chaos, or the world would be transformed on the spot. Neither seems to be within God's plans, at the moment, and so his miracles work in other ways.

If a TV show today would do a news story on miracles it might cover the woman who visited her doctor and was seen by a new younger doctor. After about four minutes in the examination room, she burst out screaming and ran down the hall.

An older doctor stopped her and asked what was wrong, and she told him. So that doctor immediately went to the younger 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?"

That was a clever cure for hiccups, and it might be at the level of some current news reporting, but it is not a miracle. So, is there anything else that might encourage us about miracles now?

Let's begin by examining miracles over the centuries. Jews in first century Palestine easily could accept the idea of miracles. They were living under Roman oppression with no prospect of changing anything on their own. Under the circumstances, God was their only hope, and many believed Jesus was messiah who would deliver them from bondage.

And, of course, Jesus actually was physically present on the scene, and so there was a real and tangible connection between his miracles and his divine life.

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

You can imagine how people of that time changed their ideas about biblical miracles. A leader was Scottish philosopher, David Hume, who argued that miracles could not exist because they were not based in science, reason, or laws of nature. Thus he concluded that biblical miracles never happened. He would have denied the possibility of many ordinary aspects of modern life.

III.

That skepticism is changing. I believe there is a growing recognition and acceptance that God 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 that humanity fully understands the laws of nature, and that miracles, which cannot be understood, therefore must occur outside those natural laws. This is the origin of the word, "supernatural."

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, can be drawn from the thinking of St. Augustine, widely recognized as one of the Church's greatest theologians. He said, "Miracles do not contradict laws of nature, but rather only contradict what we know about the laws of nature."

St. Augustine would say that the world operates as it does because God created it all, and when miracles happen it merely is because God chose that his creation would operate in a particular way at a particular time whether or not we actually understand it.

This would mean that miracles are not violations of laws of nature, but rather are examples of how nature works in accordance with God's plans instead of our limited human knowledge. Miracles 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.

Now, you might ask, what makes the difference? Miracles are miracles, you might say, and I'm fine with that. God is involved either way.

The distinction, however, and its importance, rests in how we might view God's involvement. The first option, which is that miracles are outside of the laws of nature, contains a spiritual danger to be avoided.

And that danger is the belief that God is a "God of the gaps." This suggests God is a supernatural force behind things we cannot understand, and some people use the idea to prove God exists. But the danger is that it can lead to excluding God from those things we do understand.

And if we do that, then as knowledge and understanding increase, the gaps become smaller, and therefore God's presence also would diminish. But I don't believe we can limit God to only that which is in our ignorance. God was, is, and always will be everywhere in creation. He is the God of gaps, non-gaps, and everything in between

So, St. Augustine was right. Laws of nature are not limited to our knowledge. Rather they are what God created whether we understand them or not. And miracles are not mysteries beyond nature, but rather are a normal part of nature as God created it.

IV.

And we all probably have seen things we cannot grasp logically. Several years ago a close friend was diagnosed with a slow growing 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 prayer leader laid hands on him and anointed him. The following week a medical examination showed no sign of the cancer. Nine years later it still is gone. Was it a miracle? I think it was.

And we can see God at work in other ways. For example, assume you are driving toward an intersection and a dog runs in front of you. You slow down, only to look up and see a large truck run the red light at the intersection ahead of you. If that dog had not been there you 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 spectacular miracles of the Bible, but they certainly are examples of God showing us that life is not just a series of random chances. And it also shows that God is everywhere, and not just in the gaps.

One final point should be made. How do we deal with the idea that with God all things are possible, and yet sometimes the miracles we most earnestly desire and pray for do not happen? Why, for example, in cases where all medical options have been exhausted are some people still healed and others are not?

One answer is that miracles, especially healing miracles, show us what God's kingdom will be like when it comes. They are visions of the inbreaking of the kingdom; previews of coming attractions, so to speak. But the previews are not the entire movie. It has not yet been released.

So, we draw hope from the ways in which God intervenes in our lives to carry out his will. And in my view, these interventions are not mysterious or contrary to the laws of nature, but rather are part of the laws of nature. And they truly are miracles now just as much as they were two thousand years ago.

V.

So here we are, with a reading about one of Jesus' miracles, and hopefully an understanding that they hold out hope for us today. If we know that we are in God's hands we can participate in the beauty of creation, including the miracles that are part of it, even if we don't know why.

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.*