

World of Wonders

In his marvelous novel, World of Wonders, Robertson Davies offers this observation: “We have educated ourselves into a world from which wonder, and the fear and dread and splendor and freedom of wonder have been banished.”

Do you think that is true?

I recently read the hypothesis that the enduring popularity of the Harry Potter novels is due in large measure to element of fantasy that appeals to those who seek something more akin to wonder in their humdrum, day in, day out lives.

Miracle stories – like our Gospel today – are stories of wonder. Yet, I wonder if we have banished wonder from our interpretation of these miracles.

I suspect our loss of the ability to understand miracles can be pinned on modernity, the industrial revolution and the scientific method.

We put God under the microscope and thought we could figure it out. It didn't work, *because we asked the wrong questions*. As a result, theology took some wrong turns. We began to question whether or not the Biblical stories were really true. Now, questions are good. Most, if not all of our great advances in understanding have come because of questions. Questioning the Bible is a good thing. But we have to ask the *right* questions.

It helps if we start with what the author of a biblical text *meant* for us to see.

Nineteenth century theologian Rudolph Bultmann suggested we could get to the heart of a story by stripping away everything but its essence. He suggested that there is a *kerygma* (the Greek for kernel), that lies at the heart of the story that is what is most important. One would shed the form of the story and just concentrate on its message. The story could even be factually false and theologically true.

So, we would determine that Jairus, his daughter, the disciples, the crowd, the woman with the flow of blood – none of them are important. It's only what's *theologically* true that matters. In this way of viewing theology and the world and faith, a miracle is that which cannot be explained by present science, but doesn't need to be because it's the theology that counts, after all. My friend Brian Blount critiques that view this way: “That means simply, we don't understand it *today*. One day, it is assumed, science will be able to explain it... Psychologically, a miracle is an object of distrust, something people *thought* happened, but certainly *did not*

happen in the way that they think. It's more of a mental occurrence or a mental observation of an occurrence that could objectively be explained in a non-miraculous fashion."¹

Which is fine unless you are Jairus, his daughter, or the woman with a flow of blood. Then the form of the story suddenly becomes a great deal more important!

Then, Dr. Blount states that in fact, we *cannot* divorce the meaning of the story from the miracle, *not if we want to be true to Mark's intent*. Miracles are how Mark sees the story. Nearly a third of his gospel is dedicated to stories about the miracles of Jesus. If we want to understand the Gospel according to Mark, we must live in a world of wonders.

Learning to live in a world of wonders could challenge us.

Living in a world of wonders requires not so much the suspension of disbelief as the reorientation of how we approach God's activity in the world.

For moderns, miracles are suspension of the natural law. Science says it happens this way. It didn't; it must be a miracle. That's modern.

But the ancients had no distinction of natural law – their understanding of the day-in, day-out life in the physical world was one that presumed a faithful love of God for God's people.

Natural law then, just wasn't a part of the equation. God's action was presumed. That's why if we want to understand the miracles of Jesus, we must be willing to live in a world of wonders. Since modernity lends itself to skepticism, we must continually entertain the question, "What if it really happened?"

To do so, we have to recognize our limitations. For instance, it's not helpful to ask *why a miracle at this time and not at another?*

For Calvin and other pre-modern theologians, interpretation of this text encountered no such problem. *Of course* God intervenes in physical ways – and when God does not intervene it's no skin off our noses. Mark must have had Calvinist streak, because he's not concerned with when miracles did not occur; he's telling us the story of when they did.

To step into a world of wonders is to step into the miracle of a world sustained by God. This doesn't mean attributing divine causality to all events, such as availability of parking spaces to natural disasters, but rather recognizing it all takes place under God's watchful, benevolent eye. To step into a world of wonders is to rest in the assurance of God's gracious love toward us.

Which returns us to our story today. Mark's intent in telling it is not simply to attribute the characteristics of power over disease and death, but rather to indicate that Jesus who does these miracles is the very incarnation of God who creates, redeems and sustains human history.

¹ Blount, Brian K. From a lecture delivered at Davidson College Presbyterian Church

And as the chaos of wind and water represents a challenge to creation, so, too, does Brian conclude, “Jesus’ stilling of the stormy seas and winds demonstrate God’s action through Jesus to reclaim the creation that has so chaotically gone astray...the miracles are not proofs of the kingdom. They don’t guarantee that the kingdom may come, they are one of the demonstrative means by which the kingdom *has come*.”²

If you are Jairus or his daughter, the crowd or the disciples, or the woman with a twelve-year flow of blood, *these miracles are the breaking-in of the kingdom of God*.

The miracles mean the kingdom has come.

The point of the miracle is to spark faith.

At every turn in Mark, the disciples miss the in-breaking kingdom and Jesus excoriates them for the lack of *faith*. And at almost every turn when the kingdom breaks in, it is some no-name character who represents the response of faith – of trust in the power of God to act. Jairus is a rare exception for having a name.

The challenge for us is clear: We are called to participate in the same kingdom of God of which miraculous activity is seen as the manifestation. Living in a world of wonders is to attune one’s eyes to look through the lens of faith. Living in a world of wonders is an invitation to remember that we are ourselves are to be the manifestation of the kingdom Jesus preaches.

There are twin dangers that accompany this invitation to live as manifestations of the kingdom.

One is to be a kook.

The other is to be an ingrate.

The first is a danger of saying too much.

The second is the danger of not saying enough.

The risk we run when we try to say too much is that we will say it wrong.

The risk we run when we say too little is that we will miss the kingdom at work among us.

Nobody said it was easy, but living in the world of wonders with all its ambiguity is living in the world of faith. It is making room for an enchanted worldview in an often-disenchanted world. It is living in the place where we may see fear and dread and splendor and freedom.

These stories of miracles, you see, open the door for all of these: Fear, dread, splendor and freedom – all in a moment. Mark’s ancient audience would have known that this nameless woman’s touch, elicited from her by her faith, her very touch would have made Jesus ritually unclean: unfit for entering the temple: Fear, dread. And yet, in touching Jesus, in the world of

² Ibid.

wonders, rather than Jesus being made unclean, this woman is instead made clean – restored to full community, restored to wholeness. That’s splendor and freedom.

Mark’s ancient audience would have known as well that in the regular world, it made perfect sense that Jairus’ staff would have called off the call for Jesus as touching a dead body, again, fear and dread, would also have rendered Jesus unfit for the community pending ritual cleansing. And yet, in the world of wonders, Jesus’ answer is to ask a question: Why all this commotion and crying? And casting out the doubters from the house, by his touch, again, faith becomes the manifestation of the kingdom.

In a world where the opposite of faith is certainty, the rival dangers of saying too much and saying too little are not so much tempting as *irrelevant*.

We aren’t required to dictate where and when miracles occur – we’re rather invited to live in faith, trusting we will encounter the grace of God in unexpected ways.

Anne Lamott tells a story about trying to drag herself from the doldrums of faith on her 49th birthday.

She went with a friend on a walk through the desert. The desert didn’t work. (It probably didn’t help that she started it with the observation she hates cactuses.)

Later that day, she won a ham at the grocery store. She doesn’t like ham, but the checker was so excited to give her the ham that she pretended to be too.

She almost suggested that the checker give the ham to the next family that paid with food stamps. But, she concluded, if God was going to give her a ham, she’d be crazy not to receive it. She writes,

“Finally, the bag boy handed me a parcel the size of a cat. I put it with feigned cheer into my grocery cart, and walked to the car, trying to figure out who might need it. I thought about chucking the parcel out the window near a field. I was so distracted that I crashed my cart into a slow-moving car in the parking lot.

I started to apologize, when I noticed that the car was a rusty wreck and an old friend was at the wheel. We got sober together a long time ago and each of us had a son at the same time. She has dark black skin and processed hair the color of cooled tar. She opened her window. ‘Hey,’ I said. ‘How are you – it’s my birthday!’

‘Happy birthday,’ she said, and started crying. She looked drained and pinched, and after a moment, she pointed at her gas gauge. ‘I don’t have money for gas or food. I’ve never asked for help from a friend since I got sober, but I’m asking you to help me.’

‘I’ve got money,’ I said.

‘No, no I just need gas,’ she said. ‘I’ve never asked anyone for a handout.’

'It's not a handout,' I told her, 'It's my birthday present.' I thrust a bunch of money into her hand, everything I had. Then I reached down into my shopping car and held out the ham to her like a clown offering flowers. 'Hey,' I said, 'Do you and your kids like ham?'

'We love it,' she said. 'We love it for every meal.'

She put it in the seat beside her, firmly, lovingly, as if she were about to strap it in. And she cried some more.

Later, thinking about her, I remembered the seasonal showers in the desert, how potholes in the rocks fill up with rain. When you look later, there are already frogs in the water, and brine shrimp reproducing, like commas doing the macarena; and it seems, but only seems, that you went from parched to overflow in the blink of an eye."³

Isn't that the miracle of the faith? From parched to overflow in the blink of an eye.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.

³ Lamott, Anne. Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith. P8-9