

Let's Talk Miracles -- Pent+18B

As James Adams has pointed out, “Modern people like us are inclined to think of miracles as temporary suspensions of the Laws of Nature, but that could not possibly have been true of the ancients. The Laws of Nature hadn't been discovered yet. A miracle was a wonder, a surprise that pointed beyond itself to a particular realization.” So we must accept that the wonders of the Bible might have been historical events, or they might have been literary devices employed to add the elements of surprise and delight to their narratives. But either way, the purpose of the miracles in these stories was to pass along to the listener the evangelists' sense of awe and wonder in considering God's presence in the world.

We think of miracles the same way today: on the one hand, concluding that since Jesus is no longer here in the flesh, Jesus is no longer performing miracles. Like Jesus did for Doubting Thomas, we remind each other that those who have not seen and yet believe are truly blessed. Just as often, we often characterize the good things that happen to us as miracles: a new baby, an unexpected rain, straight 'A's,' a saved life, a successful operation. We long for the sense that God is taking action. Nobody is walking on water these days, not without lots of carefully photographed plexiglass and paid sexy models to help, but lots of things are going on that can and do remind us of God's power. When that power surprises us in a positive way, it's a miracle. Unlike in Jesus' time, lots of the Laws of Nature have been discovered by now, so most of our miracles may have scientific explanations. But God established the Laws

of Nature; God is Nature. So when good things happen, we rightly attribute them to God and call them miracles, large and small. When good things don't happen, or bad things happen, we say that God is with us in them, but not that God caused them. But wait, if God is Nature, aren't natural disasters God's doing too? The truth is that God set Nature in motion, but does not intervene in its progress, just as God set human consciousness in motion and does not interfere in its behavior.

The influence God does provide, however, is mighty indeed. The stories we tell of miracles, ancient and new, are themselves the power of God at work in the hearts and minds of humankind. The stories, reminders of the goodness and possibility that exist in Creation, are the miracles we so eagerly seek. Good science, good planning, and good luck, not miracles are what can prevent some natural disasters. What happens before and after natural disasters: planning, prevention, rescue, relief, rejuvenation, and hope, those are what make for miracles, those are the indwelling presence of the living God. Miracles result when God's presence is known.

Take, for example our psalm today, a miracle story: If the Lord had not been on our side —let Israel now say— If the Lord had not been on our side when our enemies attacked us, then they would have swallowed us up alive when their anger was kindled against us. Then the flood would have swept us away, the torrent gone over us; over our heads would have swept the raging waters. Blessed be the Lord, who has not given us as prey to their teeth. We like a bird have escaped the snare of the fowlers; the snare

is broken, and we are free. Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth. The miracle is not in the winning of the war – bad guys win wars all the time – the miracle is the story that is born when whatever is won engenders strength, hope and joy in the face of violence, mortality and fear.

The task of God's people is to tell such stories and make such meaning of them. This is why James extols prayer for the suffering, song for the cheerful, anointing for the sick, fresh starts for the sinful, because the stories created thereby will heal us. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective. And if anyone wanders from the truth and is brought back by another, whoever does the bringing back will save the sinner's soul from death and cover a multitude of sins.

Now about the story that we heard attributed to Jesus today, a story that seems to have lost its savor even when taken with a whole block of salt, a deeply un-miraculous sounding story about the drowning, self-maiming and immolation in store for those who stray from the ways of truth. This seems decidedly un-miraculous, as stories go, not to say off-putting and downright disgusting.

In the passage, the word we have translated as 'hell' was '*Gehenna*' in the original Greek. At the time of Jesus, Gehenna was a specific place outside of town, that served as the Jerusalem city dump. In earlier times it had been a place of human sacrifice to the Canaanite God, Moloch. By making the cult site a dumping ground, the Judeans had thoroughly desecrated what had once been sacred space. We all would agree that a liturgical move away from blood

sacrifice of any kind has been a good thing, whether it be human babies, rams, oxen, doves or even guinea pigs that get sacrificed. But we only have to pick up the newspaper and read about ISIS to see what vicious and wasteful destruction so-called religious fervor can engender. It is a bad idea to dance on the graves of our enemies, or otherwise sully the achievements of others by destroying their art and architecture, even if progress or sensibility has brought their history to a close. Their stories never lose the ability to teach us.

Nevertheless, Gehenna was the city dump in Jesus' time. It's shabby present and sordid past made Gehenna's name live on as a place for degradation and human torment. No one can say for certain what Jesus had in mind when he spoke of Gehenna, but his hearers would certainly have felt the metaphor of the garbage dump, with its perpetually smoldering fires and rot-inducing organisms of all kinds. His repeated use of Gehenna in our passage from Mark today tells us he wanted the image to stick, of a terrible destination in store for those who violate basic principles of responsible behavior. "...it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. It is better for you to enter life lame than to have two feet and to be thrown into hell, and to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell, where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched." We in turn must decide whether to think of Gehenna, and Sheol and Hades as the residences that exist for sinful souls, with precise criteria about getting in and getting out of them, or think of

them as Jesus and his listeners must have done, as metaphors for feelings of despair and life gone astray.

Jesus wants us to make story miracles for each other, to ponder the metaphors – to pray without ceasing -- by imagining ourselves in a world improved, set free of fear-based ugliness: whole. The ancients knew violence. They saw it regularly. So when somebody used a violence metaphor, they knew it for what it was, and that it was not real. Did Jesus use this violence as metaphor? Scholars differ. Many say that the violent images were added to Jesus stories to make them more affective, but do they?

We are at once further along and further behind. We have more than we know what to do with of technology and scientific awareness of the Laws of Nature and what's behind miracles but far less than we need of the spiritual appetite and facility for feeding it that produces miracle stories. So we tell each other more violent stories instead, becoming, as a people increasingly epistemologically malnourished – starved of story.

When we see violence on the tv news and on our tv shows, in our soldiers' stories and in our video games, on our cities' street corners and in our kids' graphic novels (what we used to call comic books) can we tell the difference? Is one reality and the other metaphor? Has our spiritual ability to distinguish between the two kept up with our technological ability to put the images in front of us? And if we contemplate these images all day long, all throughout our childhoods, adolescence and young adulthood, when, oh when will we have the time and energy and emotional space and psychic room to visualize

peace? If such an enormous proportion of our population spends such a large percentage of its leisure time contemplating violence – however fictional or metaphorical or specially effected, when oh when will we have time to contemplate the possibilities of a peaceful existence, to dream of a day when mutual care is more interesting than and familiar than mutually assured destruction, to imagine all the people, living for today?

There is not room in the human mind or heart to contemplate both, so thank you Jesus, or, more likely, whoever you are that thought these violent metaphors would help us become better, but we have to turn away from them. Not only will we not be cutting off any hands or feet, or gouging out any eyes today on the road to happy destiny, we won't be holding these images in our hearts either. We won't be imagining ourselves on the trash heap of Gehenna or the fires of Sheol or Hades or any place where anybody's worm never dies. We want to be like you, and therefore we will be imagining ourselves like you, and dreaming of the Kingdom, where we bring our prayers to the throne and go in peace to love and serve one another. We will acknowledge the limitations of our attention and imagination and turn away from violence as metaphor, as entertainment, as frame of reference, as role model, and start dressing up like saints and talking miracles instead.