

Sermon: C.S. Lewis On Miracles
Scripture: Matthew 14:13-21
Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans
Date: July 31, 2011

We can always speak metaphorically about the miracle stories in our scripture. We can say of the virgin birth what is needing to be birthed in us from our own place of purity and innocence. And we can say of Jesus' healing of blind Bartimaeus, where are those places in our lives where we are blind, not seeing clearly because of our own perspective and our own biases and how do we need to be awakened to the truth. Or we can take them at face value, as the way it really happened, suspend whatever skepticism we may have for a moment and consider what can learn from them.

The great English thinker and writer C.S. Lewis explains how the miracle stories in the New Testament can be understood and not merely explained away metaphorically. He challenges the modern tendency to explain away the miracles by saying that the ancient writers took the supernatural for granted and didn't know enough about natural laws - that science has since taught us - to know that what they called a miracle actually had a natural explanation. C.S. Lewis though says this non-sense, that the ancient people who wrote the pages of scripture were very aware of the basic laws of nature, otherwise they wouldn't know to even call a miracle a miracle. So for instance when Joseph shows up at home after work one day and his betrothed says to him, "um Joseph, I'm, uh, pregnant!" he goes to hide her away because of the shame of the infidelity that her pregnancy was obviously evidence of. He really could put 2 and 2 together. Eventually, however, he comes to call it a miracle...not because he was clueless about what was actual and possible and what was fairytale and impossible but because he knew the regular laws of nature enough to know when they had been suspended by something greater for some greater purpose. So C.S. Lewis makes the case that we can't write off the miracle stories as a case of these ancients not knowing any better and us being more enlightened. They knew that you don't just get pregnant and that you don't just multiply loaves of bread like (snap!) that. And yet this is what they wrote in their accounts. We have a choice to either believe them or not, but we can't say patronizingly that they simply didn't know any better. They knew that a spade was a spade and they called it such. It was as strange sounding to them as it is to us and yet they included them in their accounts of Jesus' life.

Lewis explains how the miracle stories; the multiplying of loaves and fish, the healings, the raising from the dead, etc... are quite consistent with the whole Christian claim of the incarnation; that the creator of the universe became enfleshed in one human being. If this is in fact the case, then it makes sense that this tiny single human being was able to take the immense processes of the natural world and do the same kind of things that God does on a universal scale but just at a quicker speed and on a smaller scale. And here I just have to read extensively from what Lewis says because it just can't be paraphrased or said any better. Consider this:

God creates the vine and teaches it to draw up water by its roots and with the aid of the sun, to turn that water into juice which will ferment and take on certain different qualities. Thus, every year from Noah's time till ours, God turns water into wine. That, men fail to see. Either like the Pagans they refer the process to some finite spirit like Bacchus or Dionysus; or else like the moderns, they attribute real and ultimate causality to the chemical and other material phenomenon which are all that our senses can discover in it. But when Christ at Cana turns water into wine, the mask is off. The miracle only has half the effect if we see it merely as evidence that Jesus is God but the full effect if whenever we see a vineyard or drink a glass of wine we remember that here works He who sat at the wedding party at Cana. Every year God makes a little corn into much corn: the seed is sown and there is an increase, and men, according to the fashion of their age, say "it is Ceres, it is Adonis, it is the Corn King" or else it is merely the laws of nature. The close-up, the translation of this annual wonder is the feeding of the 5,000. Bread is not made there of nothing. Bread is not made of stone, as the devil once suggested to our Lord in vain. A little bread is made into much bread... He multiplied the fish as well as the bread. Look in every bay and almost every river. This swarming pulsating fecundity shows God is still at work.

You see what he is saying? Jesus' miracles are a microcosm, an immediate, quick glimpse of what God is constantly doing on the large scale of creation itself. And that is the gift to us, the reminder that behind all of this remarkable natural process is a personal presence. That's the radical and scandalous claim of Christianity, that the creator of the universe, the Presence who lies behind all that is and all the processes that cause what is to be, became identifiable in a Jewish man from Nazareth so that we would know the Creator of universe as personal. And the claim that there are miracles is that the supernatural presence reaches into the natural world to effect things. CS Lewis reminds us that this is the truth of the matter in the very real processes of what is happening every second in nature as well as those more remarkable moments when there is a sudden increase in speed or density of the natural processes and a healing happens or something else miraculous. I've got to read you one more section of Lewis' book on Miracles that I find beautiful to consider. He says this:

No miracle is more significant than the virgin birth. What happens in ordinary generation? What is a father's function in the act of begetting? A microscopic particle of matter from his body fertilizes the female: and with that microscopic particle passes, it may be, the color of his hair and his great-grandfather's hanging lip, and the human form in all its complexity of bones, liver, sinews, heart, and limbs, and prehuman form which the embryo will recapitulate in the womb. Behind every spermatozoon lies the whole history of the universe: locked within it is no small part of the world's future. That is God's normal way of making [the human being] – a process that takes centuries, beginning with the creation of matter itself and narrowing to one second and one particle at the moment of begetting. Once, though (this is the Christian claim of the virgin birth) God did it directly, instantaneously; without a spermatozoon, without the millineums of organic history behind it. And this time he was not simply creating a person but the person who was to be Himself. The process which leads to the spermatozoon has carried down with it through the centuries much undesirable silt; the life which reaches us by that normal route is tainted. To avoid that taint, to give humanity a fresh start, God once short-circuited the process.

Life itself is a miracle but occasionally, we might say rarely, we experience something in our own bodies, or in the life of the world, that is hard to explain in any way but that it's a miracle taking place in condensed form within the general miracle that is life. If we went around the sanctuary today there would be those who would be able to give an account of an intensified miracle in their lives and there would be others who would speak of the general miracle of life, but each and every one of us can attest to this profound sense that life is not just random firing chemicals that just happen to come together in astoundingly beautiful and purposeful ways but that all of this has at its core, at its heart, at its source an intentional Creator who creates with abundant generosity and love.

Pastoral Prayer:

We thank you God for this most beautiful of days and for the incredible gift that is this world and this life. We thank you for the mystery of it all that we can unlock at times as we grow in knowledge and awareness, but that for the most part we must simply let be. May we be persistent and committed to seeking You in all things but may we also be still, quiet and patient enough at times to realize that you are seeking us as well. May we do everything we can in all the situations we can to serve You by being compassionate to those around us, but also realize that it is not all up to us and that this earth and each child upon is held by You in love....