

**A Finger Pointing to God  
Mark 4:35-41**

**John W. Vest  
January 30, 2011—4:00 Worship  
Fourth Presbyterian Church**

Do you believe in miracles? Brace yourself for some brutal pastoral honesty: I don't. At least I don't believe in miracles as they are typically defined, namely, as "a violation of a law of nature by a god."<sup>1</sup> Let me explain.

If we understand miracles to be instances of God intervening in human history in supernatural ways, then I think miracles are beyond the experience of most of humanity. I suppose, by definition, that this makes sense—if miracles occurred all the time, they wouldn't seem out of the ordinary or in any way special. But, when we encounter story after story of such miraculous interventions in the Bible, one is pressed to wonder why such things don't occur more frequently today. Is God less interested in intervening in human affairs? Are we less worthy of miracles than the people of the Bible? Or, as Jesus' disciples say to him on the boat, "Don't you care that we're drowning?" Doesn't God care?

With these questions in mind, I've been intrigued by the recent discussions about moves within the Roman Catholic Church to put Pope John Paul II on a fast-track to officially recognized sainthood. Earlier this month it was announced that John Paul would be beatified soon after Easter, the third of four steps in the process known as canonization. In order to be beatified, it must be proven—scientifically and theologically—that a miracle associated with John Paul II occurred after his death. In the case of his beatification, it is said that a French nun

---

<sup>1</sup> Richard Swinburne, quoted by William C. Placer, *Mark (Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible;* Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 77.

was cured of Parkinson's Disease after prayers were made on her behalf for the intercession of John Paul. Another miracle must be confirmed before he is finally canonized and considered a saint.

I must confess that this talk of miracles involving John Paul II seems strange to me. After all, he was such a down to earth pope. He was such a part of my life growing up and into adulthood, it's hard to think about him being associated with posthumous miracles. And the notion of proving such miracles seems bizarre. How much proof can be offered? If these miracles are in fact proven, wouldn't that demonstrate beyond any shadow of doubt that God and the saints exist? If that could be done, shouldn't all questions of faith have been settled thousands of years ago? And if a heavenly John Paul II could heal one or two people, why not more? Why would the most compassionate and hardest working pope in recent memory stop with the bare minimum needed to prove his sainthood?

I must admit that all of this seems far removed from the reality of my life. My experience is characterized more by the *absence* of miracles than the presence of miracles. I have known far too many people who have died premature deaths, despite sincere and countless prayers for miracles offered on their behalf. I have known too many people who died suddenly, with no chance for a miraculous intervention. I have known too many people who have suffered from a variety of illnesses or tragedies that could have been averted by a miracle. But they weren't.

Still, I've also known people who claim to have experienced miracles. I can't necessarily discount or disprove their experience, but I can say that this has not been my experience, and I think my experience is probably the most common. I've lived a blessed life, I think, but I've

never experienced anything I could legitimately call a miracle. I think that most of us have not experienced a miracle, at least as miracles are commonly understood.

Last week, when we talked about demons, I suggested that context matters when we read Mark's story of Jesus. The worldview of the Bible is quite different from our worldview today. We no longer believe that the earth is flat, with a celestial heaven somewhere above and a fiery hell somewhere below. We no longer believe that the earth is the center of the universe. Many of us no longer talk about a cosmos populated with angels and demons. So it stands to reason that our perceptions of what is "miraculous" will be different as well.

The late theologian Bill Placher points out that the ancient Christians who first heard these stories of Jesus would simply not comprehend our definition of a miracle as that which God causes to happen beyond the laws of nature. For them, there wasn't a "law of nature" to violate. Instead, *everything* happens because God causes it to be so. According to their understanding, God sometimes does things differently, and dramatically, in order to get our attention. These events were out of the ordinary, to be sure, but they weren't "supernatural" in the way we understand this term. They were part of the natural order of things, a natural order controlled at every level by the will of God.<sup>2</sup>

Several hundred years after the time of Jesus, the ancient and influential theologian Augustine argued that when such occurrences lead us to faith, they should be considered "miracles" or "portents".<sup>3</sup> It seems to me, then, that we might better define the miraculous as *something extraordinary that happens in life which opens our eyes to the presence of God in a new and profound way*. Though our explanations for how the world works are quite different,

---

<sup>2</sup> Placher, *Mark*, 77.

<sup>3</sup> Placher, *Mark*, 77.

this experience of God's presence is common to both the ancient world and our contemporary world. Yet because we do explain the world very differently, how we understand miracles will be different as well. To operate with an ancient understanding of miracles in our world today thus seems anachronistic.

My son was born by C-section because he was too big to be delivered naturally. It occurred to me on that incredible day that had my family been around several hundred years ago, it is likely either he or my wife—or both—would have died during this ordeal. But contemporary medicine enabled him to be born and my wife to survive. To me, that is a remarkable miracle. It was *extraordinary*, but not supernatural. It was an *extra-ordinary* instance of the world as we know it today. And it did indeed point me to God. I believe that God was deeply involved in the birth of my son. I believe that God is deeply involved in the process of developing medical techniques that make it possible for such a birth to occur. Had it been left purely to nature, my wife or my son—or both—would be dead. So I thank God for the miracle that prevented that tragedy from happening.

There is an old Zen Buddhist saying: don't confuse the finger pointing to the moon with the moon itself. The saying relates to Zen *kōans*, which are paradoxical or otherwise ambiguous or mysterious stories or statements that are intended to perplex rational thinking but be accessible by intuition or enlightenment. In this respect, a *kōan* is quite similar to a miracle story. The saying, don't confuse the finger pointing to the moon with the moon itself, is a warning not to become fixated on the *kōan* and its interpretation—the finger pointing to the moon. Rather, the significance of the *kōan* is what it points to. The same is true, I believe, when it comes to stories of the miraculous. These stories are fingers pointing to God. We miss the

mark when we fixate on the story, because the really important thing is what the story points us to: God.

What, then of this remarkable story of Jesus calming a storm at sea? Is this a miracle as I've tried to define it today? Is the point of the story Jesus calming the storm? Or is this a story that points us to God?

First of all, we have to understand that the historicity of this story—whether it happened as it is narrated—is beyond our ability to know. Unlike the arcane process of beatifying Pope John Paul II, there are no proofs we can offer, or hope to discover, for this incredible story. It is a story passed down orally by the followers of Jesus, written down decades after his death. So we must encounter it, first and foremost, as a story.

We must also understand that the mere telling of this story doesn't prove anything about who Jesus was or is. There are countless stories like this from the ancient world, and it seems as if "supernatural" stories are still quite prevalent in our world today. So we shouldn't turn to this story simply to *prove* something about Jesus.

Rather, this story—as story—*invites* us to consider who Jesus was to the people that first told and heard such a story. It also invites us to consider who Jesus might be for us today.

On a purely metaphorical level, this story of Jesus calming the storm suggests to us that Jesus can be a calming presence in our lives. In the midst of the storms of life, as we are tossed about by waves of anxiety, suffering, fear, loneliness, or hopelessness, the way of Jesus leads to balance, healing, security, peace, and community. We are not alone in this world. And we are not without hope. We have before us a way to restored wholeness, a way to personal salvation from the struggles and terrors of life.

At the same time, Bible scholar and popular teacher Marcus Borg reminds us that a historical appreciation for what this storm imagery might have meant to ancient Jews and Christians leads us to something even more profound. In the Hebrew Bible and in the Jewish traditions that followed, the sea was the embodiment of chaos. In primordial myths, the sea represented cosmic forces in opposition to God. And it was Israel's God—and only Israel's God—who was capable of defeating these dark forces. So, in the mythological language of the ancients, Israel's God was envisioned as the one who mastered the sea.<sup>4</sup>

Jesus' first followers—the ones pictured here in this storm-tossed boat—and the followers of Jesus who told and retold this story would have all been quite familiar with these traditions. They would have quickly associated Jesus' mastery of the sea with the ancient understanding that it was God alone who mastered the sea. Yet here is Jesus, this very human man from Nazareth, doing what only God should be able to do.

Remember, now, that the point of this is not necessarily to prove something about Jesus. And the point is not that God capriciously alters the laws of nature on a whim. For ancient Jews and Christians, this wasn't a supernatural occurrence. This was an extra-ordinary event that shakes us from our normal rhythms and draws our attention to God's presence.

Ultimately, that is what this story is about. In this incredible story of Jesus calming the storm, and in the other stories of healings, exorcisms, and extra-ordinary acts that Mark narrates at the beginning of his story of Jesus, we are confronted with a remarkable claim: in some way, God is vividly present in the life and work of this man, Jesus of Nazareth.

---

<sup>4</sup> Marcus J. Borg, *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time: Taking the Bible Seriously But Not Literally* (HarperSanFrancisco, 2001), 208-09.

When Jesus announces the arrival of God's kingdom, when Jesus invites us to get on board and be a part of this emerging new reality, he is not simply another prophet or preacher. In him, God is present in a remarkable way.

You'll notice that I'm stopping short of claiming that Mark is presenting us with a nuanced christology of Jesus as God incarnate. I'm not saying that because that is not what Mark is doing. For me to suggest otherwise would be a betrayal of the genius of Mark as a storytelling theologian. You see, Mark could have developed a systematic theology of who Jesus is and what it means for us to recognize God in him. He could have provided theological and philosophical justifications for the notion that Jesus is God incarnate. Mark could have written down a list of doctrines for us to memorize. He could have suggested that the only way for us to be saved is to confess our belief in this list of doctrines. But Mark didn't choose any of these paths. Instead, he simply told a story of Jesus. And this story is more powerful than any list of doctrines or systematic theology ever could be.

We must not confuse the finger pointing to the moon with the moon itself. It took the church four hundred years after Jesus to make a definitive statement about his relationship to God. For sixteen hundred years after that, we've still been arguing about it. We confuse the finger with the moon. We miss the point.

Mark isn't interested in this kind of theology. Mark is interested in telling a story about Jesus. In this story, Jesus appears on the scene announcing the emergence of God's kingdom and inviting us to be a part of this new birth. In stories of incredible deeds we are confronted with the possibility that the one making this invitation has a special relationship with God. We are invited to consider that God is present in this man in a remarkable, extra-ordinary way.

This man is on a journey, a journey that is far from done, and we are invited to continue this journey with him.

Amen.