

Date: June 20, 2021 (Pentecost 4)

1. Texts: 1 Samuel 17:32-49; Ps. 9:9-20; 2 Corinthians 6:1-13; Mark 4:35-41.
2. Subject: proclamation of Jesus as Lord.
3. Topic: miracles proclaim Jesus as Lord.
4. Aim: educate.
5. Proposition: "When we ask God for miracles, we better be prepared to proclaim Jesus as Lord."

MIRACLES ARE NOT FOR OUR BENEFIT

We've all prayed for miracles. Usually such prayers are for the miraculous healing of other people. But we've also prayed for jobs or housing or cures for addictions. We've prayed that relationships might be healed and that some lost soul might find his way back to God. We've prayed against racism and terrorism. We've asked for miraculous changes to our society and in some person's daily life. We almost never pray for miracles for ourselves, but we desperately want them for other people.

Yet, miracles almost never occur. People are still dying of cancer and Covid-19. Racism and anti-Islamic acts of violence are still seen in our society. Our children are still jobless or homeless or without faith. Most of us don't see many miracles.

So, either God is really stingy with his miracles, or there is something else going on, something bigger than our desire for miracles. I really think the latter is much more likely.

Jesus was asleep in the boat. The storm came up and he calmed the wind and the sea. "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?"

Ten lepers are healed, and one returned to praise God.

The healing of the centurion's slave is taken as a sign of Jesus the Messiah.

There has to be something bigger than our good desires for others going on.

First of all, the purpose of miracles is not the benefit of the recipient. People receive a miracle not because they need it or not because we're unselfishly praying for someone else. The purpose of miracles is to proclaim Jesus as Lord. Proclamation is the purpose of a miracle. Miracles point to the identity of Jesus. We recognize who God is through miracles. We see God in Jesus because of miracles.

But, when you and I pray for miracles, that's not what we're praying for, is it. We're praying because we want to help someone. We're praying because we want to change someone's circumstances or life. We're praying in the hope that God will bless someone else with something good, with some kind of new life. Our prayers for miracles focus the attention on the circumstances of others.

In this way, our prayers do not match up with God's purpose. So, it probably shouldn't surprise us that we see few miracles. God's purpose is bigger than our own desires, and we're not really praying that his will be done in our lives.

Now, let's add to the mix another aspect of the miraculous.

The Gerasene demoniac went on to proclaim Jesus as Lord. So did the lame man at the Beautiful Gate. So did blind Bartimaeus. So, perhaps our willingness to be used as witnesses to Jesus as Lord and Saviour is part of the bigger picture about miracles.

Such willingness to be used as ambassadors by God lies not just on our shoulders but on the shoulders of the people who receive the miracles. It is not enough for you and me to recognize Jesus as Lord, but the recipients also are compelled to proclaim Jesus as Lord.

This is getting complicated. No wonder we don't see many miracles.

But let's add one more thing.

Human beings are created in the image of God. Genesis makes that clear.

And just as clearly, that doesn't mean physically. The image of God has little to do with gender or physical wholeness or anything like that. The image of God goes straight to our abilities to love, to forgive and to act with compassion. The image of God is all about our capacity for emotions and self-reflection. It is about intellect, will and the freedom to decide. In the end, the image of God is about our characters, our qualities and our souls.

This means that God is not primarily interested in our physical circumstances. His emphasis is not on what's happening *TO* us, but on what's going on *IN* us.

Yet, when we pray for miracles, we're almost solely focussed on what's happening to someone. Again, our prayers seem to be aimed contrary to God's will. "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." So, our prayers need to shift to the reconstruction of our souls according to the image of God in which we were created.

In addition, the impact of miracles is to improve the image of God within us. This means again that miracles are much more aimed at the recreation of our character to better reflect Christ than they are at our physical circumstances.

This is complicated—and there's a little more to come.

Miracles bind people to Jesus, to the Christian faith and thus to the Church. Miracles create intense relationships amongst the recipients and the varying aspects of Christianity. It rather seems that those who receive miracles have to be open to such renewed relationships.

Lastly, human beings are frequently in danger of becoming dependent on miracles. This frequently occurs when the miracles are interpreted as a sign of God's approval or as proof of righteousness. Think of it like this: your spouse starts a habit of bringing home flowers every Friday evening. You take it as proof of love and of a healthy marriage. Then, one Friday your spouse is running late and can't pick up the flowers. This upsets you and you begin to fret about your

marriage. When miracles become the proof of God's love for you or the validation of your faith, their potential for spiritual harm increases.

No wonder we don't see many miracles. Miracles are not for our benefit, but to proclaim Jesus as Lord. Those who witness miracles and those who receive them are actually obligated to proclaim Jesus as Lord. We were created to reflect God in all that we are and in all that we do. In support of this, God aims his miracles at what's going on in us and not what's going on around us. The impact of his miracles is to enable us to reflect Jesus more accurately. Such processes of proclamation and recreation bind us more intimately with Christ and with his Church. And it is only from within the faith and the Church that we will be able to resist the temptation to rely on miracles for proof.

When we consider all this together, it makes sense that we don't see many miracles.

The way out of this is *not* to stop asking for miracles. We still need God's direct intervention in all of the serious and tragic things that happen around us. But when we ask for miracles, we need to shift our prayers according to God's purposes. We focus our prayers not on the physical circumstances of those we love, but on the image of God within them. We pay attention to character, faith, and salvation. We ask for the grace and courage to proclaim Jesus as Lord, even without receiving a miracle. We pray that God will unite us all in his great fellowship of love and salvation. And give him thanks if he should use a miracle to achieve this.

I don't think such an approach will increase the number of miracles that we witness. We can't earn God's miracles through our understanding or prayers. But at least we'll be cooperating with God, which will give us the strength and wisdom to face whatever it is that prompts our need for God's intervention.

AMEN.