

## MIRACLES OR METAPHORS?

*Proper 5c.07*

*June 10, 2007*

*By the Very Reverend Dan Edwards*

Our Old Testament and Gospel lessons  
are similar stories.

Each tells of the death of a widow's only son.

Each begins in grief.

Then a holy man, Elijah for the Widow of Zarephath,  
Jesus for the widow of Nain,  
restores the boy to life.

If the Bible tells us Jesus taught such and such  
or Moses gave this commandment  
or Abraham wandered the Ancient deserts,  
we say, "Ok that's what happened."

Nothing in our experience or our assumptions about the world  
gets in the way of taking those stories at face value.

But the dead coming back to life  
isn't part of our experience  
and most people don't believe it's possible.

So what are we to do with stories like this?

What are we to make of miracles?

The first thing we need to notice  
is that these stories are in the Bible.

The way we read a story depends on where we find it.

If we read a story in a mystery novel, we take it one way.

If we read it in a history text book, we take it another.

The Bible is neither a novel nor a history book.

It's our sacred text, the ancient wisdom of our tradition.

It's treasure trove of eternal spiritual truths.

Some of the stories in the Bible happened as factual history.

Others didn't.

We can't always tell which is which.

But the spiritual value of the text depends  
on a deeper level than the facts.

For hundreds of years, Christians used the Bible  
to practice lectio divina – holy reading.

They looked to the stories to say something to their souls  
about their lives.

They wouldn't read these stories asking

"Did Elijah really do that?"

The question didn't interest them that much.

They would ask, "How do I feel like a widow?"

What in my heart or in my life is like a dead son?

What would it be like for Christ to restore life in me?"  
And they would pray for the grace in between the lines of the story  
to bless them in their present situation.

That's the difference between Scripture and ordinary stories.  
Scripture tells us something eternal, something that connects to us.  
These are stories from the past, but they are about the present.  
And to get at that level of a story,  
we have to read it as a metaphor, not a news article.

Scholars like Marcus Borg remind us that we miss "the heart of Christianity"  
when we reduce spiritually rich metaphors to flat literalism.  
I decidedly agree with Marcus Borg.  
The heart of the text is in the metaphor.  
We mustn't miss that.

But I have a serious concern.  
Treating miracle stories as metaphors  
works very differently for us today  
than it did for our ancestors in the Middle Ages.  
In the old days, people didn't read the story symbolically  
to tame it or weaken it.  
They read it symbolically to enrich and empower it.

We are more apt to say a story is merely a metaphor, just a symbol.  
For us, this metaphorical reading can be a way to tame the story,  
to keep it safe, to subordinate these sacred stories  
to what we really believe – the modern world view

– a world view in which laws of science are never broken

– a world without spirits, angels, or demons

– a world which will not admit that anything has happened  
unless we can consistently make it happen again  
in a clinical setting

– a world where the blind do not see, the deaf do not hear,  
and the dead stay dead.

Bishop N. T. Wright criticizes the practice  
of reconciling sacred stories with science  
or reducing them to pious fictions as a cop-out.  
He calls it "Christianity renting a room in the house of the Enlightenment"

– a particularly paltry bargain he says in light of widespread rumors  
that our landlord is bankrupt.

To unpack that metaphor of the bankrupt landlord,

Bishop Wright means that the fixed-in-stone assumptions  
of the modern world are now in serious doubt.  
Science has changed strict laws causation to laws of probability

- sometimes the odds are overwhelming
- but hardly anything is absolutely impossible.

The world turns out to be stranger than we could have known a century ago

– stranger, even downright personal in an almost animistic way.  
One of our leading biologists says,

“The world is not only stranger than we knew.  
It is stranger than we can imagine.”

The leading philosophers of today include theists as well as atheists.  
But neither the theists nor the atheists still believe  
the old 19th century view of reality that had no room for God.  
The intellectual world was rocked in 2005  
when Anthony Flew, the foremost atheist philosopher in the world,  
converted to theism.  
He said, he had to “go where the evidence leads.”

In short, Bishop Wright is saying that faith does not need  
to roll over and play possum when reason enters the room.  
So what does that mean for stories about miracles?

It does not mean we can rely on miracles, count on them or plan on them.  
When Robert Shuller says “Expect a miracle,” that is patent nonsense.  
Miracles by definition are the unexpected.  
They are what almost never happens.

What then do miracles have to do with anything?  
They are a kind of revelation if we understand revelation  
the way the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams,  
explains it.  
Revelation doesn't give us a set of tidy little right answers.  
Instead, it blows away the answers that are wrong or too small.

Revelation blows the top off our house of fixed assumptions  
about life, reality, God, and ourselves.  
It opens our hearts and our minds to mystery.  
Revelation takes the limiting things we think we know  
and says “Don't be too sure of that.”

Faith doesn't mean believing any particular miracle  
did or did not happen.  
But it does mean believing it might have,  
and that something like that might happen again.

*Page 4... Miracles or Metaphors?*

Faith sees miracles as reminders of something that is always true,  
but we don't always see it in our daily routine.

Fait reminds us that grace abounds,  
that love is deeper than death,  
and behind our mundane and mortal destiny,  
something awesome and mysterious lies.

If one accepts the possibility of miracle,  
it raises a lot more theological problems than it solves.  
If miracles happen sometimes, then why not all the time?  
Do we think God is a being lurking somewhere outside of nature,  
but occasionally putting his oar in?  
Probably not – but if not, how is that miracles ever happen?  
Not just how is it possible scientifically – how is it possible theologically?  
There are lots of questions we don't have time to address today.

But the discreet charm of our faith is that it isn't a set of answers.  
Fundamentalists and atheists both claim to have a complete answer book  
for all life's challenges.  
We don't pretend to have that.  
What few answers we have just lead to more questions.  
That's what keeps it interesting.

*Amen.*

St. Francis Episcopal Church || 432 Forest Hill Road || Macon, Georgia 31210  
Phone: 478-477-4616 || Fax: 478-477-3438

StatCounter - Free Web Tracker and Counter