

“What’s God Got to do With It?”

from the pulpit of
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by
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Reading: John 9:1-41

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Just think, for a moment, how much more simple our lives would be if we could all see things the same way. I mean, if we had the same perspective, the same take, more or less, on events as they develop before us, we could save a lot of time. We would not have to cross examine one another. We would practically eliminate argument. Two people witnessing the same automobile accident would tell the investigating officer the same story. Events in life would be congruent with the way we expect them to be. If the President calls for military action in the Libyan conflict, congressional leaders would all agree that it was the timely and right thing to do or, not the right thing to do.

Think of the time we would save if we didn't have to read both sides of a story about events around the country and around the world. How much more clear would be our explanation of what caused a nuclear disaster in Japan two weeks ago if we could all understand and predict the extended impact of a tsunami in the Pacific Ocean?

But this is not the way it is, is it. Even when Uncle Walter Cronkite used to tell us at the conclusion of the CBS Evening News, "And that's the way it is", it really wasn't the way it is for all of us. Some of us were already arguing about "the way it is" before CBS had cut to a commercial and the television studio in New York had turned down the Klieg lights.

So is it any surprise that in Jesus' time there was plenty of question, if no disbelief, over the most basic of remarkable events? We might want to ask, "What could be a more obvious indicator of God's intervention than what happened to this man in our account from John's gospel?" The man is known to be blind from birth. He is brought before Jesus, who knew a teachable moment when he came upon it, and with a little dirt mixed with spittle spread over the man's eyes, tells the man to wash the mud away in the spring nearby. He does this and when he returns he reports that he can see.

Now, wouldn't you expect that someone would have said something like, "That's amazing"? But it didn't happen. At least there is no record of such a response from the authorities who investigated the miraculous cure. Instead they responded

with skepticism, saying: “This man was not really blind. He just acted like he was blind. Go get his parents and ask them if he was blind.” Others said, “Look, we know this man, Jesus, is a sinner. He works on the Sabbath so he is no man of God.” Still others said, “How could such signs come from a man, meaning Jesus, who is that sinful?”

We know these people, don't we? We see ourselves in them and we see others we know in them. We suspect that if something like this happened in our time there would be a similar divided reaction: some would say it was a miracle while others would say, “He's nuts.” When the authorities interviewed the man on whom the miracle had been performed you have heard what he said: “I once was blind, but now I see. That man who gave me sight is a prophet.”

One of my former mentors, the late Edmund Steimle, was a Lutheran pastor and preacher in New York City during the latter part of the 20th century. He once reminded us of something theologian Samuel Miller said: “Miller,” Dr. Steimle tells us, “describes faith as ‘resonance’: ‘There is a resonance between God and the world; they fulfill each other, God speaking through the world and the world finding its answer in God.’¹ Steimle comments, “It is an openness—an expectant openness—to the divine possibilities in the world, in life, as these possibilities come to a burning focus in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ.

¹ Samuel H. Miller, *The Dilemma of Modern Belief* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), pp.78 ff.

“Our trouble,” he goes on to say, “is that so many of us, beaten down, discouraged, or simply living on the surface of things, lack this openness. We are afraid of the possibility that God might actually act the way he acted in Christ. We’re scarred of the unpredictable. We really don’t want miracles to happen!”²

“Writer Frederick Buechner reminds us,” (in one of his sermons while teaching at Phillips Exeter), “of one of those delightful happenings in the old TV show, Candid Camera. It was a silly show of course, but occasionally it would shed light on the human situation which made you want to laugh and cry at the same time. The program, as you recall, consisted of film shot at various places around the country, showing ordinary people unaware of the fact that they were on camera. Often the crew would set up a ridiculous situation just to catch the candid reactions. One of them was set up in an ordinary lunch room with a flower in a vase on a table. Somebody would sit down, drink his coffee, and then between sips, the miracle would happen: the flower would reach up and out of its vase and bend down and start drinking the coffee. What most of these people did in that situation was just to look around, embarrassed, to make sure nobody else had seen, and then move away to another table and try to look as if nothing had happened.

It was a foolishly delightful show. But it almost makes you want to cry as it points to the fact that we really don’t want

² Edmund Steimle, *From Death to Birth* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1973), p.31.

anything to break into our tidy little worlds with the unexpected, the kind of thing we can't manage. It becomes tragic when we'd rather sit in the mess we're in than look expectantly for healing or reconciliation, even if it means a miracle."³

We probably should not be surprised when someone reflects, as Dr. Steimle does, that we carry fairly low expectations of God and what God can make happen. Thus we are hesitant to pray, asking God to provide what we are unable to provide, be it vision, forgiveness, insight, a way through a dilemma or a way into love in a relationship. And don't even think about a miracle. And yet,...and yet the miraculous still happens, even in the lives of weathered skeptics like us. A rebellious son or daughter returns to the family that never stopped loving him or her; a patient with cancer has surgery and is declared cancer-free after a year; a writer overcomes the depression that was conflicting with his creativity, thanks to a counselor's attentive care. Is it not a miracle, something beyond our control that happens in a compressed amount of time, when we accept the death of a loved one whose life was all too brief? Is it not a miracle when we discern what God wants of us and makes it seem like it was our idea all along? Is it not a miracle when we see ourselves as others do, for the first time, and realize it is ever so much more rewarding to be all that they know we can be rather than the constricted half-baked, half-alive figure we had been?

³ Frederick Buechner, *The Magnificent Defeat* (New York, Seabury Press, 1966), pp. 136 ff.

What does God have to do with such transformative moments? Everything. For people of faith such transformation is no mere coincidence. It is the answer to a prayer that God will act in ways that are beyond our power as human beings. We can do a lot for ourselves but we still can't make ourselves whole, holy, the object of God's salvation, the recipients of God's grace and healing and resurrection. Only the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of Sarah, Rebecca, and Ruth, the God of our salvation in Jesus the Christ can give us what we cannot give ourselves: a new life, for eternity.

Before we leave this dramatic narrative let's just note that this is a fine example of John, the writer's craft. He introduces Jesus early on. Jesus acts on behalf of the blind man, giving him sight and then is not heard from again until the very end of the narrative. John presents God acting in Christ, then leaves the people to struggle with this remarkable happening among themselves. It is not unlike our situation, is it? God acts in the lives of people all the time and some of us are willing to acknowledge that while others remain skeptical if not contradictory.

One commentator asks, "Who, then, is on stage in every scene? The man healed of blindness. He it is who tries to explain, who faces accusers, who suffers without family support, who confesses, who is expelled from the synagogue, who is a

disciple of Jesus. The spotlight is on the follower of Jesus. Jesus appeared and opened the man's eyes; Jesus went away; Jesus came a second time to receive, confirm, and vindicate the disciple.

“Can anyone miss, then, what the Evangelist is doing? The life of the disciple, the life of the church which lies between the coming of Jesus and the coming (again) of Jesus, is being portrayed.”⁴

This is our story, yours and mine. We are the people of faith. We are the skeptics. We are the ones with insight. We are the ones who see. We are the ones who give God the praise.

Amen.

⁴ Fred Craddock, *John*, (Atlanta, John Knox Press, 1982), pp. 72ff.