

“ENCOUNTERING MYSTERY”

Matthew 8:23-27; Mark 6:45-52; Luke 7:11-17; John 2:1-12

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“Change is a part of life... inevitable.” “Some things never change.” We hear and say both these things. Sometimes we talk about the necessity of change when we are reluctant or afraid to change. Sometimes we talk about it to criticize those who refuse to do things differently. We see both beliefs in scripture. We see Jesus calling us to do things differently, to see things differently; while at the same time recognizing that biblical characters seem the same throughout the twelve plus centuries covered by the biblical narrative.

We see this same sort of tension when we look at the miracles of Jesus. In each of the stories a profound change has occurred between the beginning of the miracle and the end. The texts we read today reflect the same sorts of changes we long for today. We may not want to walk on water, but we often long for impossible things to happen. There are storms, literal and metaphorical, that we'd like to have more control over. There are people that we'd like to have back in our lives, loved ones resurrected. And there are celebrations that end far too quickly because the “wine” ran out.

We want things to be different, but we don't believe they will. We long for miracles, but our skepticism dims our hope. And so if there's one thing we can identify with in these stories, it's the response. Were we there, we could see ourselves feeling the same things as Jesus' audience: reactions that include amazement, fear, astonishment, confusion, and praise. But we weren't there and so many of us doubt the accuracy of the accounts. For some, the miracle stories become a reason to be a non-believer. For others who see a great wisdom in the teaching of Jesus, attempts are made to explain the miracles or to treat them metaphorically.

Jesus wasn't really walking on water. He was walking on a sandbar. The widow's son wasn't really dead, but in some kind of coma where his vitals were not detectable. Everyone knows that the weather was subject to sudden change over the Sea of Galilee. And the water into wine... well that was some trick, wasn't it?

Alternatively, some have seen in the Sea stories the message that Jesus brought order to a world in chaos and the disciples were expected to do the same. Here is a story that dramatizes the call to be peacemakers, that challenges us to rebuke the winds of greed and hate that lies beneath the many injustices in the world. However you understand the physical state of the widow's son, we are called to breathe new life into the world, to take on the forces of death and destruction. And the water into wine? Baptism and Communion: two sacraments that celebrate God's love and sustain us in faith.

Brian McLaren says that we don't have to make this choice between seeing the miracles as facts or treating them as metaphors. We don't have to get hung up over whether we

believe in miracles or not. As so often happens when we read the Bible, we ask the wrong question or we're distracted by the wrong aspect.

In focusing on the miracle, we, ironically, lose the mystery. When we ask, "Did this really happen?" we are already attempting to remove the mystery. In the same way, when we see the miracle as a metaphor, we have already removed the mystery.

Who is it that defies the laws of nature to walk on water? Who is it that commands the weather? Who is it that suspends the reality that human beings and all nature are moving toward death? Who is it that counters the rules for making a fine wine? These actions of Jesus point to the mystery that Jesus is intimately linked with the creator who made the rules for our existence.

This is not the only place we encounter the mystery of Jesus' relationship to God. He forgives sin, an action understood at the time that was reserved for God. A special link to God is expressed in the birth narratives and in his baptism. Jesus' command of demons is rooted in his relationship to God. His opposition to the religious leadership of his day centers in their failure to heed the message of the prophets as well as his own teaching that he claims comes from God. Even his passion, death, and resurrection speak of this powerful link to God. Everywhere we encounter Jesus, we encounter God. This is the great mystery permeating the gospels.

The church has turned this mystery into the doctrine of the Trinity and in doing so has lifted up Jesus as the "Son of God." Unlike other doctrine, this one doesn't try to explain how this is possible, but emphasizes the mystery of God. One of the unfortunate consequences, though, of this doctrine is that "Son of God" is often heard as a title abstracted from the life and relationship. I think it's interesting that Jesus almost always refers to himself as "Son of Man." He revels in his position as a child of God, but he doesn't want people to forget his connection to humanity.

As a child of God, Jesus performs miracles. But he commands the winds with a human voice. He raises the widow's son with a human touch. We walks on water with a human body. And he turns water into wine as a human guest as a wedding. No one sees God doing any of these things. In several places, Jesus seems to imply that others could do these things as well. When he reminds us that we, too, are children of God, he is quite serious about that.

I am not suggesting that we would be better able to do miracles if we looked at the world with Jesus' eyes, but I think one of our problems is that we lack Jesus' vision. Instead of taking seriously our status as a child of God, we tend to focus on our limitations. We favor explanations over mystery. We favor human response over divine connections. This is why we need miracle stories.

McLaren writes in *We Make the Road by Walking*;

“Perhaps a miracle story is meant to shake up our normal assumptions, inspire our imaginations about the present and the future, and make it possible for us to see something we couldn’t see before. Perhaps the miracle that really counts isn’t one that happened to *them* back then, but one that could happen in *us* right now as we reflect on the story.

Perhaps by challenging us to consider impossible possibilities, these stories can stretch our imagination, and in so doing, can empower us to play a catalytic role in co-creating new possibilities for the world of tomorrow” (pp.96-97).

We may not walk on water, but is walking on the moon any less miraculous? We may not be able to calm storms, but we know today that human actions do impact the weather. Would reducing carbon emissions, treating the earth as a friend rather than a resource, or preserving habitats that reduce the rates of extinction be any less miraculous? We may not be able to raise the dead with a touch. But is the extension of life expectancy made by new medical technologies less miraculous? And wouldn’t a more equitable distribution of the materials and resource that have contributed to longer lives for some be something worthy of the name of miracle? And we may not turn water into wine, but wouldn’t transforming hate into love broaden participation in the celebrations of life?

McLaren concludes: “You may or may not believe in miracles, but faith still works wonders” (p.99). That is a mystery worth pondering, children of God.

Amen.

Resources:

McLaren, Brian. *We Make the Road by Walking: A Year-Long Quest for Spiritual Formation, Reorientation, and Activation*. Jericho Books, 2014.