

Do you believe in Miracles? In the Ancient World, you did not PROVE spiritual circumstance logically, the SPIRITUAL, the Religious required Supernatural Miraculous Proof. More than any other issue in the development of early Christianity, MIRACLES present a problem for our understanding.

Last week, we named that Jesus got in a boat with his Disciples and went across the lake to the other side. More than compass directions, on one side of the Sea of Galilee, was the Jewish culture; on the other shore were non-Jewish Gentile people, some of whom were Greek, some Roman. TODAY, we also exist, as if on another side, another reality, which we really cannot over-emphasize.

500 years ago, Western Europe began an experiment called "The Enlightenment." More than the Protestant Reformation, Democracy, more than a shift away from Peasant classes; more even than cultural changes brought about because of the Printing Press; the Enlightenment embraced Reason and Logic and Knowledge for all to determine and defend The TRUTH for themselves. Throughout what has often been described as The MODERN Era, we have been on a scientific quest to catalogue, to know and prove everything about life. Which leads to problems understanding, before and after the Enlightenment. The POST-Modern Era recognizes that sometimes "Life Happens" different from rules we anticipate, we have come to recognize that everything about life cannot be quantified and controlled, but also that culturally different groups because of their life-experience anticipate and interpret events and norms differently. Second, that as we read the Bible, which was written 1500 years before the Enlightenment began, people perceived life, interpreted the world, differently than we do today. Jesus, according to the Gospels, spoke and taught almost exclusively in Parables, but he also did Miracles, which are hard for us.

SO those during the Enlightenment, routinely interpreted away or discounted Miracles. Different from our Canon of Scripture, Thomas Jefferson, George Washington, Abraham Lincoln each had their own Bibles which only included the laws, teachings, narratives and parables, without including Miracles.

Others interpreted away the miraculous, that Mary's was not a Virgin Birth because the word could simply mean younger than the normal age of conception. Jesus did not walk on water, he waded along the shallows and the Sea of Galilee often has mist at dusk and dawn so it appeared he was on water. But in a POST-MODERN era, we simultaneously attempt to hold the realism cultures during The Enlightenment; while simultaneously being able to believe in computer processors, communication devices and weapons of mass-destruction in our world, that they could never have believed; and we receive the full testimony of Ancient Texts trying to understand what they perceived about the world.

An important lesson to learn in Bible Study, is to allow the Bible to teach us how to read and interpret the Bible. It is difficult and frustrating to attempt to read the Bible from front to back, beginning to end, as if a Novel. Instead, much like a Library the ancient texts of Israel before the Monarchy of David and Solomon are grouped together; Psalms, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes are together; the Gospels are grouped together, the Letters are together. Different from the Gospels, Paul's theology and arguments were heavily influenced by Greco-Roman philosophy. But also, over the last few weeks reading the Gospel of Mark, we have listened as Jesus taught in Parables, and we have come to perceive that there are multiple layers to these stories, so why would the Miracle stories of Jesus on the other side of the lake, be any different?

As Westerners, following Descartes and Sir Isaac Newton, we believe we think with our Brains, and poetically we sometimes differentiate between our Brain and our Mind, wondering the anatomic location of a Soul. The Ancient Israelites, Judeans and Christians understood that different organs of the body process life differently. Your Eyes witness and read providing information to The Brain. Your Hands work and Feet walk, so carry experience to your Stomach. Your Ears hear stories of Miracles and we process these in our Hearts. Consequently, the Ears were described by some as "The TASTEBUDS of the HEART."

Throughout the Bible there are basically three types of Miracles: There are MYSTERIES like Dreams and Visions, Oracles and Revelations. There are NATURE MIRACLES, like Creation, parting the Sea, Withering a Tree, Calming the Sea and telling the Wind to be Still. And there are HEALING MIRACLES which deal with either diseases, demons or death; and might as easily be described as HEALING STORIES as Miracles.

According to this morning's reading, after their stormy night crossing, Jesus and the Disciples landed their boat in a Roman pagan region; a story similarly told by Matthew and Luke, however Luke names two persons possessed by demons. Different from other HEALING STORIES, where the afflicted person is unable to walk, to see, to hear, has leprosy, or the person has died, the illness of the stranger they meet makes him superhuman in strength, uncontrollable, until Jesus heals him, where the man then is able to sit quietly and have coherent conversation even about following Jesus. However, Mark adds three elements, which like a Parable interpret this Healing Story in differing ways.

A fascinating piece of archeology has surrounded a papyrus discovered a Century ago, dating back to between the Century before Jesus' birth and the 4th Century, from the Greco-Roman World, this is an instruction manual containing Magic rituals, spells, formulas and incantations. At the very time that post-Babylonian through post-Jerusalem temple Judaism and Christianity were being formed as RELIGIONS, this papyrus seems to describe The Pagan Gentile Alternative, complete with recipes for magic charms, love-potions and spells, as well as the words to say to cast out demons or make them powerless.

Different from "Abracadabra" the incantation to cast out a Demon was to stand toe to toe opposite the Demon and say **"I adjure Thee, Demon, come out of him."** One variation even incorporated Judaism and Christianity into this same magic incantation **"I adjure Thee, by the God of the Hebrews, Jesus, come out of him."**

Now that would just be a curious similarity, except for the wording of Mark 5: 7 "Crying out with a loud voice, the demon possessed man said, '**What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I adjure Thee, by God, do not torment me.**'" The evangelist of Mark is comically ridiculing "pagan magic", as compared to faith in Jesus Christ, by having the Demon attempt to exorcise Jesus be gone, by using a Magic Incantation for casting out Jesus, by naming Jesus of the Most High God in the incantation!

The second difference used by Mark comes in the specificity of names. Where did the Disciples land? To say "the Region of the Geresenes" and the name of the man is "Legion" sharpens this story, that they are in the region of the Roman Garrison and the afflicted man is a Roman Soldier! In our Post-Modern world we would attribute his "demons" as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, a Mental Illness with violent outbursts unable to be subdued or controlled. In contrast to both Pagan Magic and the Force of the Roman Legion, Jesus offers the man Healing through Faith in God.

The difference being that the Magician assumes the power of God, by saying the right words; and the Roman Legion dominated by inhuman power to oppress human beings; whereas Christian Faith trusted God to be God, relinquishing all power, domination and manipulation of the world.

Mark's third twist comes with where Jesus sends this Legion of Demons? To a Jewish audience, the inhuman uncontrollable demon-like force of the Roman Legion is transferred to a herd of unclean pigs, and this force is so evil, it even makes wild pigs run off the hillside to drown. It is easy for us to feel sorry for the demons, but the Ancient Judeo-Christian understanding would have been that in death all spirits good and evil are released to be redeemed by God.

While the circumstances are different, I believe a similar "healing story" is told in the Book of Acts. Similar to a wind and storm-tossed crossing to the Other Side, the Holy Spirit transports Philip to a desolate road. A stranger appears, not a member of the Roman Legion but riding in a Chariot which was technology for

war. The rider is not a Soldier, but at least as powerful and equally foreign he is the High Priest of Candace, and equally as unclean he is a eunuch. Different from being possessed by a Legion of Demons, this man is reading Scripture he does not understand... A passage from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah, stating that real authority and power comes not through dominance, but humility and sacrifice. Where Jesus sits with the Demon-possessed man called Legion, Philip climbs up into the Chariot, as companion to interpret Scripture to this Secretary of the Treasury.

If you were to tell the old, old story to someone who had never before heard, where would you begin? What the Bible says is that where we need to begin is not at the beginning, or at the end, or even where I want to begin; but with where the Searcher is questioning. The Ethiopian Eunuch Priest of Candace, who has control over all the riches of Ethiopia, is reading in Isaiah about the Lamb who does not cower or run away, but has bold integrity to accept the identity of being the Lamb of God. And he opened his eyes at that moment in his life; and he saw a pool of water and asked "What is to prevent my being Baptized?"

Lon, last Sunday you asked me "What do I need in order to be Baptized?" The Sacrament of Baptism is not a Graduation that you have learned everything and now are worthy to be Baptized. Instead, what we need you to bring throughout your life are your questions, your concerns, your doubts and fears, your Story, your integrity and your full identity as a lamb of God.