

Exodus 17:1-8
John 14:8-14

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Miracles Too

"Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do, and, in fact, will do greater works than these because I am going to the Father." *John 14:12*

Over the course of history, the idea of miracles has attached to the human mind on a sort of sliding scale. What in one age lay outside the bounds of possibility—certain healings, for example, or communications over vast distances, or modes of transportation, in a later age become commonplace. Now, the notion of travel being limited to the speed of a horse—where it had slumbered for 5,000 years—seems comical.

Traditionally, miracles have been classed as events falling outside the natural realm—events that are *super*-natural. But the laws of nature are themselves imperfectly understood and often have to be revised. For example, Isaac Newton's classical understanding of the universe in which all things happen deterministically—as a result of known and measurable forces—works very well in our observable, everyday world. Driving the car out of the garage with the garage door down is certain to injure the car and the door, not to mention your ego. But at the level of the infinitely small our very predictable world breaks down almost entirely. Matter zips in and out of existence far quicker than you can negotiate the garage door, particles communicate with each other over vast distances instantaneously, as if telepathically in what Einstein called, "spooky interaction at a distance," and hidden dimensions appear to weave through the whole fabric of space and time quite possibly linking ours to other universes. In such a "spooky" world in which many of the foundations of science are fast being amended, the possibilities for what constitute the miraculous are fantastically open. A rigid doctrine of miracles can begin to look like a dinosaur.

What is becoming increasingly clear is that miracles are frequently not other worldly, supernatural intrusions, but very real, albeit little understood, incursions of what is already very available to us all. The power to do extraordinary things already lies within us, in the same sense that the heart

of the atom yields unimaginable potential still untapped. And, like the atom, the power is given into our hands. As Jesus said, “Greater things than I do will you do.”

Reginald Fuller has noted that the popular conception that miracles are a breach of nature’s laws, a power exercised only by God, is not something that the Bible itself entertains. Indeed, Werner Kelber has convincingly shown in his fascinating and now classic book, *The Bible as History*, that so many of the miraculous events of the Old Testament—each of which is given to demonstrate the power of an active God—are not outside but very much within the scope of natural events that God uses. Miracles are so often rather the product of extraordinary faithfulness and timing.

- The sea’s sudden retreat as the Hebrew slaves fled the Egyptians is a feature of a marshy area called the Sea of Reeds (Red Sea is a mistranslation of *Yom-Suph* in the King James Bible). I have seen such a natural phenomenon many times in England at the estuary of the River Kent in Arnside, where once each day the entire tide comes sweeping up the river behind a single wave perhaps four feet high. It’s called a bore wave. The Severn estuary and the Bay of Fundy exhibit a similar phenomenon.
- The waters of the River Jordan that similarly parted for Joshua near the end of the Hebrew’s wilderness journey’s is similarly a not uncommon natural phenomenon. Mud slides on the steep banks of the river upstream from the Jericho valley temporarily dam the river, allowing guileless travelers to cross downstream, quietly unaware.
- Manna, the hoar-frost like doughy substance of early morning that the Hebrews substituted for bread, is still found in the Sinai Desert to this day. I have tasted some, a sweet marzipan-like substance.
- And often secreted behind thin rock faces in the desert lie natural cisterns of water that a sharp blow can release to the thirsty traveler, as one did for Moses (our Old Testament lesson).

What makes each of these events miraculous and divinely providential in the context of the Bible’s story, is their extraordinary *timing* alongside the faithfulness of the leaders in trusting God’s provision.

Jesus’ miracles take us to a more personal level. In the gospels, what is clear is that Jesus had the ability to access not a source of power outside our world, but one very much within it, not a God who is beyond but an accessible Spirit pledged within and running through everything. This truth is at the heart of Jesus’ statement to his befuddled disciples, that within our

grasp lies the capacity and the power to accomplish even greater things than he had done. Nor was this an isolated claim. It runs like a golden thread throughout the Gospels.

We do not access this realm of God easily because we primarily live, think, move, and are motivated materially. We look for material evidence, we seek signs, we want pragmatic results. We want to know, “What’s in this thing for me? How does this religion thing advance the quality of my life.” But it’s not about us. It’s about what we can do for others. Which is why miracles are rare.

The problem and the challenge for us in accessing the presence of God is as acute, even within the church, as it was for the disciples 2,000 years ago. As Carl Michaelson has put it in *The Witness of a Radical Faith*, “Who would have thought to look [for God] . . . on the breast of Mary, in a carpenter’s shop, God at the back of a fisherman’s boat, God on a cross! . . . the Christian message is proclamation that strikes the world with all the force of a hint.” The evidence is before our eyes, and it’s not that we cannot, but often do not quite get it.

Some years ago I did a series of five minute devotionals on local T.V. in Greenville, North Carolina. The producer told me ahead of time that I was welcome to use the Teleprompter, and she gave me instructions for laying out the text, typically just two or three words to a line. I imagined that the Teleprompter would be right next to the lens, so that it gave the appearance of looking into the camera. But to my astonishment, when the paper text was scanned it was projected onto a clear glass plate laid right *across* the camera lens, so that the camera actually looked through the scrolling text. Because the camera was focused on me some distance away, it looked through the text on the glass without even noticing it. So close yet unperceived.

Clearly, God has given us access to something very special that we just don’t utilize as we should. We live within the realm of miracles, often without seeing or utilizing what God has made available. We can do the miraculous, too, every day. “Greater things than I do will you do,” said Jesus. *Miracles are transformed events by transformed people.*

When Buck Breland was enrolled in preschool in Texas, his teacher took his mom aside and said, “We’re having a problem with your son. He’s gathering up his classmates and telling them what to do.” The teacher suggested Buck might need special attention, so his mom had a child psychologist evaluate him. After the session, the psychologist said, “There’s nothing wrong with Buck, except that he’s a leader whose found his first followers.” Buck had a passion for life, its sacredness and beauty, and he had a passion for enriching the lives of others in the name of Christ. “Much

of his life,” said Joe Fanning, a colleague, “was gathering people together and giving them something to do—namely, encouraging people to love each other in concrete ways.” “If he was intolerant of anything,” said Larry Bethune, a classmate of mine at Princeton Seminary, it was people “who wasted time on insignificant trivia that divided and damaged people rather than lifting and linking them. His light burned among us so briefly, but it burned so brightly.”

In 1992, a year before graduating from the University of Texas, Buck Breland was diagnosed with a fatal cancer. It never seemed to check his stride, or his compelling passion to work for God and make a difference. Within a few years, after constant treatment and two bone marrow transplants, and still in the midst of his studies at Princeton Seminary, he died. Across the campus center hung a banner that read, “‘It is love that is healing’—Buck Breland 1970-1999.”

If anything characterized others’ testimony about Buck, it was the way his life made other’s better. He transformed them by allowing the miraculous to seep *out* of him, steadily, resolvedly, like a life giving intravenous drip. It is, after all, not the prolongation of life that it’s all about (consider that everyone whom Jesus healed of whatever ailment, eventually died). What matters is what we do with the time given to us. You can do miracles, too. The miraculous in the commonplace.

Shall we pray together:

“Show me, Lord, where I can touch a life and make a difference. And let me not discount any person who is brought to me this day.” Amen.