

On the mind of the Rev. J. Gregory Morgan...

“The Miracles of Jesus: How are we to understand them?”

Recently, we’ve had a series of New Testament lectionary readings from Matthew at our Eucharists in Pentecost which has prompted me to reconsider the role of miracles in all of the gospel accounts. As I’m sure you recognize, the miracles are problematic for many contemporary Christians, largely because we are living in an age which separates us from the first century by two millennia, a period in which the western mentality has been utterly transformed by the Enlightenment and the rise of modern science. That outlook fosters skepticism and therefore makes all things which are not immediately visible to the naked eye subject to great scrutiny, and ultimately, disbelief. And yet we know that the miracles were critically important to the early Christians. You will recall the end of the gospel of John which concludes in this way: Jesus did many other signs and wonders. And if we tried to write them all down, they’d fill too many books **“but these are given so that you might believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.”**

That’s a pretty strong connection between miracles and the identity of Jesus as the Son of God or simply between evidence and how we arrive at truth in our own time. But the dilemma is still there: written evidence from scripture vs. the reality of what our mentality can support. Thus, when I discovered a series of reflections upon the meaning of the miracles (in Matthew as well as the other gospels) recently, I read and absorbed the ideas quickly. These formal thoughts came to me via the mind of **L. Michael White**, an American Biblical scholar who holds the Ronald Nelson Smith chair in Classics and Christian Origins at the University of Texas at Austin where he directs the Institute for the Study of Antiquity and Christian Origins. In other words, a pre-eminent New Testament scholar delivering a lecture at Harvard University*.

I found this material very useful in helping to sort through these issues. First, he argues that we simply must “disengage our modern mind for a while and think with an ancient mind” or what we can reconstruct of it based on the facts at our disposal. What he means is that we need to comprehend on a deep level a Greek view of reality which is foreign to our way of thinking, yet as a result of which people “seriously believed that miracles happened.” In antiquity, “the magical was part of the very cosmological structure of the world that undergirded everyone’s religious outlook.”

Here is a framework to help us understand this. In the time of Jesus, Palestine was part of the Eastern Roman Empire which spoke Greek rather than Latin, Hebrew or Aramaic. That language category meant that the general outlook of everyone was influenced by Greek rather than Roman thought. From this perspective (much of which was expressed in the famous Greek schools of philosophy), they believed that “the planets and the sun and the stars circulated around the earth” which is a kind of “enclosed sphere, a hard shell on the outside. No infinite space. And this enclosed sphere of the world was occupied by a kind of plasma that pervaded everything. That plasma, just like your blood flowing through your body: if you ripple it over here, you get an effect over here (or an adjacent area) just like any fluid system” because all of it is connected: if you can pull the right string on this side of the equation, you can make something happen (in your own general location). For them, this was science. The result is that “the miracle story is not interested in whether it ever happened or not. People believed that this sort of miracle (examples in the Gospels feature the feeding of multitudes of people, exorcisms, rescues, reviving the dead, hauling in a super-abundance of fish, walking on water, and healing the sick) happened all the time.” The story is more than just the expectation that it could happen or that it did happen. “It’s a statement about the belief (of the hearer or reader or oral witness) in the person who they say made it happen. In other words, the stories are more about the presentation of theology and belief than they are about the reality or non-reality of miracles.”

If we take the Feeding of the 5,000 as an example, we can see this clearly. The crowd of followers is motivated more by the person who made the miracle happen (Jesus, in this instance) than in the other particulars of the source of a miracle. If we get hung up on whether and how the feeding here actually took place in specific terms, we miss the whole point of the story which has to do with our obligation as followers of

Jesus to be generous even to complete strangers just as the God of Israel was generous in freeing the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. When asked what was to be done about the hungry multitudes, Jesus replied to the disciples: “**you** feed them!” The word YOU hear is the key to the whole passage. It is unexpected. It is puzzling. It appears to be asking the impossible of average human beings. But it is conveying a truth that is much larger than the reality of providing food to multitudes of people (who are, after all, complete strangers) with little or no obvious means of accomplishing it.

If we absorb this information and apply it when confronted with a miracle in scripture, it may help us better comprehend the role of miracles in the New Testament.

Faithfully yours,
Fr. Greg+

*The title of the lecture is “Magic, Miracles, and the Gospel” {Frontline, a registered trademark of WGBH Educational Foundation, 1995-2014, April 1998}.

SANDWICH SUNDAY

Sunday, August 16, 12:30 to 1:15 p.m. Every third Sunday of the month, parishioners and visitors are invited to the Parish Dining Room to help make sandwiches for delivery to a nearby homeless drop-in center. Please join us!

DISCO BINGO AT MORAVIAN OPEN DOOR

Saturday, August 22, 6:00 to 8:00 p.m. Disco Bingo at Moravian Open Door (MOD) is back! Join us at MOD (347 E. 18th St.) for some fun, fellowship and nifty dance moves, along with several rounds of bingo. MOD is a transitional housing facility and community partner of Incarnation. We hope you can join us there.

We are seeking \$10-15 gift cards that we can use as bingo prizes. Speak to Vestry member Lenore Ritter or email the Rev. Adrian Dannhauser (adannhauser@churchoftheincarnation.org) to RSVP, contribute a gift card, or for more information about our ministry with MOD. You can also leave a gift card donation at the Parish House.

Suggested gift cards: *CVS, Starbucks, Chipotle, Subway, Trader Joe's and Whole Foods.*

JOURNEY BAGS ASSEMBLY

Sunday, August 23, 12:30 to 1:15 p.m. Help assemble "journey bags" for families taking long bus rides to visit their incarcerated loved ones in prison.

Journey bags are filled with items such as toys, games, and snacks that help children and their caregivers pass the time on the bus and feel supported as they embark on a trip that can sometimes be difficult.



Our goal is to create 100 journey bags at a cost of \$12 each. You can participate by buying items from our Amazon Loved Ones Link gift registry: bit.ly/4wcne5. Or you can donate toward the cost of the bags by scanning the QR code.

Thanks to those who have given to the cause. We've received over \$600 in donations and Amazon gift registry items. Halfway there!