

**“ANY ROOM LEFT FOR MIRACLES?”**

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As Mark’s gospel opens we glimpse the intense demands of Jesus’ ministry. Shuttled from crisis to crisis, Jesus goes to help Simon and Andrew’s mother-in-law, in bed with a fever. Mark writes, “Jesus came and took her by the hand and lifted her up.” With a few deft strokes, Rembrandt sketches that on our cover. Did she get well? Or burn up and die? So complete was her healing, their mother-in-law put on an apron and started dinner for everyone before they could stop her.

After that, word of her healing spread to neighbors like the rumor of free money being handed out. Before sunset, every tormented, afflicted, or troubled person in Capernaum was at their front door. “Could Jesus do for me what he did for her?” asked their plaintive faces. He manfully faced into all of the motley need pining at their door. Mark writes, “Jesus cured many who were sick with various diseases.” No wonder, after just starting his ministry, we read he needed to retreat in prayer.

This Jesus we see here is no mere teacher, ethicist, or philosopher. He is full of supernatural power, the Holy One of God, recognized as such by afflicting demons. His ministry brims with amazing moments and astonishing truth claims. It’s astounding stuff. His world seems like one other than the one where we live. You forget to get flu shots, and your child is coughing? Jesus is just a couple doors over. Let’s go over and see him. We don’t have these options, do we? For many of us modern, fact-based, objective-truth-grounded types, stories like these strain at credulity. We want to rewrite them with natural, reasonable explanations.

I get belief questions like these all of the time: how am I to know that any of these stories in the Gospels ever happened, some ask? I can inform them that the life and death of Jesus is well-attested by the official Roman imperial historian of his day, Suetonius. But as for healings like this mother-in-law, appealing to facts will always falter. Prospective members, I’ve found, can sometimes feel like frauds for joining because they don’t know how to handle miracles like the healings, the virgin birth, or the resurrection. How should I really think about or believe in this?

I take a handle-with-care approach. But at the same time, the Bible says what it says. As we explain away troubling details of these stories, that often does the Bible violence. As Christians, we feel embarrassed by pre-modern conservative Christians who insist God created the world in seven 24-hour days or treat the Bible as dictated word-for-word in a booming voice. It seems silly. We want to say, why must you be so narrow? Why can’t your faith respect scientific truth for what it brings without being threatened? Isn’t the notion of truth big enough in this far-flung cosmos to have room for both scientific truth claims and spiritual ones?

But let’s be honest. We modern liberal Christians can be narrow in the other direction. We believe our modern progressive scientific outlook is about as open

as any attitude could ever be. But our perspective has a blind spot worth noticing.

The thought-world we inhabit is impressively knowledgeable about many things. We can launch rockets and build powerful computers and track storms on radar. But our thought-world also has some fatal flaws. Here's one. Our fact based outlook is based on the assumption that we live in a closed universe where any possibility of intrusion from forces outside this closed loop must be impossible. This gives rise to a mechanistic, cause and effect way of grasping the world. You know, if you do this, you will always get that. So we don't look for causes of our *problems* outside of what we can see, touch, or verify. And neither are we open to any *cures* for our ills beyond the cause and effect loop of our own doing either.

In a word, our modern outlook pressures us to believe God cannot or will not engage in direct action in our world. So we read a story like the one about Simon's mother-in-law being healed, and it makes us uncomfortable. That Jesus arrives and raises her up makes us squirm. We would prefer a medical explanation. For it challenges the way we've been trained to make sense of the world around us.

My friend Tony Robinson describes this contemporary thought world, "Modernity was characterized by a huge confidence in reason and the capacity of human beings to comprehend, explain, and master the world through the exercise of reason in its theoretical and applied forms, science and technology. The explosion of science and technology led to a spirit of optimism about humanity's ability to solve its most vexing and persistent problems, like poverty, disease, and ignorance...Particular cultural, linguistic, and ethnic traditions, values, and stories (*like the Gospel!*) were downgraded and forgotten in the melting pot of a new and universal human identity. Moderns believed that (we) could stand apart from history, conditioning, and context to attain an objective viewpoint and perspective."

Don't get me wrong, I find biblical fundamentalism depressingly narrow. But all fundamentalisms make me feel claustrophobic, even modern scientific fundamentalism, unable to see any truth beyond empirical fact. Of course, those who insist facts are the only truth often crave the sense of power it gives, the sense of control. The problem is it leaves no room for God in our lives. And coming here is about making room for God. God can't work in our lives as we give God no room.

I mean, do you want to convince the couple who finally got pregnant after doctors said 'no way possible' that their baby *isn't* a miracle? The doctors just overlooked something?...Do you want to tell me the full rainbow arching over First Congregational, Branford on a steamy Sunday afternoon on July 29, '79 during my ordination was merely the atmospheric condition of moist summer air meeting sunlight? I still regard it as a blessing, a miracle of a very minor sort, but still a little miracle. Jesus didn't walk this earth to shut down awe and wonder, but to open all that up.

I want to teach you in such a way as to make room for a mysteriously powerful Jesus to intrude upon our preconceived ideas about what is and is not possible.

I want to shake us all loose a little, to let God intrude upon our settled, closed, restricted, modern ideas about what is true. Even if you think me primitive, superstitious, or *nana nunu*, I am here to announce that God's good news has entered the world to heal it through the work of his Son, the Holy One of God, the Christ. Besides, I have already been called much worse than primitive or superstitious.

So if you're a prospective member with these legitimate modern questions about exorcising demons or feverish women being lifted up and healed, start with Jesus—trusting him, glorifying him, and becoming like him—and work backward to his miracles. I once told someone who said he couldn't join because no way he could subscribe to the teaching of the virgin birth, "Don't start there, start somewhere else." Jesus' good news, of course, is where we start and where we finish.

Cecile and I visited Hayden Planetarium on our day off two months ago. It was fascinating to sink back into the plush chairs and listen to Neil Degrasse Tyson—a very smart atheist—discuss black holes. No one has ever seen one, of course. Neither can black holes be proven. *But everybody believes in them.* How does that happen? Tyson says, don't start with the black holes. Start somewhere else. Start with the forces the black holes exert upon other bodies around them. Hmm. That thinking sounds familiar to me. Clarence Jordan says the same about the virgin birth. Why must have Mary been impregnated by the Spirit of God and not a mere man? Because when we observe the life and deeds of Jesus—such as in our gospel lesson—we know his coming had to be of divine, not human agency.

Soon it will be spring, thank God, and Easter will bring its rumors of resurrection. It's the miracle around which all other miracles are arranged and grasped. But if we can't loosen up a little now, we won't be ready to hear any good news in the tale of how God in Christ transfigured death into a gateway to life. That's why we work year round to make FCC into your spiritual outpost to cultivate the minority viewpoint of awe, wonder, and mystery; that the possibilities of life with God far outshine the ability of our senses to perceive any data as statistically significant.

Of course, we can perceive everything strictly in terms of cause and effect. We can also reduce Van Gogh's *Starry, Starry Night* to an accident of paint and canvas. But as soon as we do, we have lost something. Not only as people of faith, but even as human beings. Awe, wonder, the majesty of mystery, the beauty of holiness—these valid and real experiences have been an essential part of us longer than laboratory rats. Where there is faith in God, miracles await us. That is the life that I stand before you to proclaim, the life you want to live. Amen.