

Of Miracles and Metaphors

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reading for the day: The Healing of Blind Bartimaeus:

They came to Jericho. As he and his disciples and a large crowd were leaving Jericho, Bartimaeus son of Timaeus, a blind beggar, was sitting by the roadside. When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" Jesus stood still and said, "Call him here." And they called the blind man, saying to him, "Take heart: get up, he is calling you." So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus. Then Jesus said to him, "What do you want me to do for you?" The blind man said to him, "My teacher, let me see again," Jesus said to him, "Go; your faith has made you well." Immediately he regained his sight and following him on the way. (Mark 10: 46-52, NRSV)

What are reasonable people to make of a story like this? The healing miracles look like radical disruptions of the causal patterns and scientific laws that shape and sustain the material world. In the world as we know it, in the world we live in, no measure of religious faith can reverse retinal detachment or macular degeneration or whatever else we might imagine as the medical problem of blind Bartimeus. That's just impossible, we think. Fundamentalists aside, of course. Impossible for most of us, I should say. My claim this morning is that we are misreading the text if we imagine that what it primarily describes is a medical intervention, as if Jesus were a magical ophthalmologist. No. That's not the core of what's going on here. What this passage offers to the spiritual seeker is an exterior image for an interior or spiritual transformation. And the question to consider, then, is what brings about such spiritual transformation.

To begin to work out an answer to that question, we have to keep in mind that the original authors and audiences of this text would not have seen miracles as disrupting or contradicting the nature of reality. The ancient world did not share our scientific

world-view. The ancient world did not believe that there is an objective, universal, mathematically regular causal structure "behind" observed events. That idea does not begin to emerge in Western culture until the very late Middle Ages--more than a thousand years later than the gospel according to Mark.

Furthermore, the ancient world believed that God or the gods already had unquestioned day-to-day control over reality. Spiritual forces or spiritual realities controlled their world just as scientific laws or scientific realities control ours. As a result, they saw miracles differently than we do. They thought miracles revealed or affirmed the spiritual forces governing reality.

Miraculous healings or other "incredible" actions by spiritual teachers confirmed or revealed the teacher's insight into spiritual reality, just marvelous electronic gadgets confirm or reveal what engineers understand about microchips and so forth. Most people in the ancient world could not work miracles, of course. But how many of us here this morning could design a microchip? Or steer a spacecraft to Mars? In the ancient world, miracles did not contradict the physical laws of the universe just as cell phones--amazing though they are--do not contradict physics as we currently understand it.

Let me be very clear about this, because I know it's sharply at odds with what plenty of people heard growing up, and furthermore it's sharply at odds with what Christian fundamentalists still try to insist. The miracles recounted in the gospels were not an attempt to prove that God is real or to prove that Jesus is God by demonstrating Jesus' ability to disrupt reality. That's a naive projection of our scientific world-view onto these ancient texts. It's also very bad theology, of course, but let's set that issue aside for now.

Jesus' healing miracles were affirmed or made visible Jesus' legitimacy as a spiritual teacher. Over and over again, bystanders comment that one or another miracle prove that Jesus is a prophet or a teacher sent from God. Some even say that he merits the title "son of God," which is what the original Jewish kings were called.

So what did Jesus teach? Love one another. Do evil to no one. Welcome everyone; do not exploit or exclude or take advantage of anybody, not ever. Jesus taught and lived a radical inclusivity. He taught and lived an astute, programmatic nonviolent resistance to oppressive socio-economic, religious, and political systems. What fuels our spiritual transformation, Jesus taught, is recognizing how God's priorities are different from the priorities of Wall Street, or Washington, or Wal-Mart. If we can get in touch with the cosmic or transcendent love at the core of all of reality, Jesus taught, then we can step outside the competitive insecurities and brutalities that flow through the world like toxic waste. His miracles illustrated what his sermons proclaimed, which is that our lives can be healed by our willingness to live compassionately in the light of God's unconditional, radically inclusive love for us. For us individually, personally, intimately--and whether or not we think we "deserve" it. This ultimate, cosmic, personal affirmation of each person's core moral value is one of the key differences, it seems to me, between how Buddhists and Christians account for the origins of human compassion.

I'm arguing, then, that the miracle stories are teachings just as Zen koans are teachings: they show the difference that spiritual growth can make in our lives. They show what happens when we open ourselves to the love God offers. God offers a sustaining personal presence just as consistently as the earth offers gravity to the soles of our feet. Openness to God in effect opens our eyes to a whole new way of seeing our moral connection to everyone else. It heals our spiritual blindness. Like Bartimaeus, then, we can stop living like blind beggars by the side of the road.

In short, perhaps it's reasonable to imagine that Jesus worked miracles just as IT guys work miracles on computers "infected" with "viruses." In both instances, "healing" happens not by breaking the laws governing reality but by demonstrating a fine command of how these systems work. Such people rescue us from our own foul ups. They teach us practices that will keep us out of such predicaments in the future.

In saying this. I'm neither exalting IT guys nor denigrating Jesus. I'm trying to illustrate how simply and straightforwardly the ancient world accepted the reality of spiritual authority. And I'm trying to rescue the spiritual wisdom of gospels from its mangling at

the hands of fundamentalists.

Reading the miracle stories this way is also deeply consistent with how ancient writers depicted the inner lives or the self-awareness of their characters. That's a second bit of historical context to keep in mind as you ponder the stories describing Jesus' miracles and miraculous healings.

It is not until Shakespeare--15 hundred years after the gospels--that we see a character standing stage front, alone, talking out loud to himself, trying to sort through his own motives and perceptions. In creating these scenes, Shakespeare is importing the conventions of sixteenth century lyric poetry--all those love sonnets--into his plays. It was an astounding innovation. It was so successful, so important, so massively influential, that now we take it for granted. It's hard to imagine anything else. "Self-talk," psychologists call it. We all have a chatty "stream of consciousness" going in our heads. Since Shakespeare, spiritual change can be portrayed through all this interior chit-chat.

But in the ancient world, writers did it differently. There is no interior chit-chat. They never depict "self-talk." Instead they portray character through actions and interactions. That's it. Actions and interactions. Once in a while the narrator may toss in an adjective or two: so-and-so was angry, we might be told, or his heart was heavy. But we never get a direct look at the inner processes of human consciousness. We understand what someone feels only indirectly, by inference from what they do, or what they say to someone, or what someone says about them or to them. That's why the characters in the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey* can seem so flat to undergraduates: they have trouble identifying with characters who never let us "inside their heads."

Then consider this: spiritual transformation is an intensely interior process. It has uncanny, even mystic dimensions. But given the literary conventions of the ancient world, of course the process of spiritual change is depicted in the same way as other aspects of the interior life: by actions and interactions. Period.

Let me offer some examples. Moses does not stand alone, center stage, and say "to

free my people from Pharaoh or to stay safe tending sheep: that is the question . . ."

No. He argues at length with an invisible voice that addresses him from within a burning bush. King David doesn't wake up in the middle of the night, tormented by guilt over his affair with Bathsheba and his murder of her husband. No. He's fine until God reveals to the priest Nathan what the king has done. Nathan then confronts the king. Then and only then does the king repent--and we still get no direct look at his state of mind. We hear what he says and we see what he does. What a modern novelist would depict as inner realities are all massively externalized. They are presented as external dramatic events, not as interior musings.

We see all the same storytelling conventions in Homer or Virgil, in Ovid or Sophocles. We see them as late as Dante and Milton, in part because Dante and Milton were so deeply influenced in their storytelling habits by these ancient writers. In the interests of time I won't recount more examples--but there are plenty.

The rule of thumb here is simple but potent: expect an ancient author to depict inner realities through exterior realities. But that's not all. Through the choice and arrangement of these exterior realities, the authors will commonly have something quite astute to say about the human condition.

For instance, the healing of blind Bartimaeus in the passage I read earlier also shows us what it takes to achieve a spiritually transformed "vision." We have to want it as urgently as he did. Like him we have to be able to acknowledge what we want.

That can be hard. That can be very hard. If I'm not sure I can get something, I'm very tempted to deny that I want it.

Worse yet, we have to be willing to leave our "cloaks" behind. When the people accompanying Jesus say, "Take heart; get up, he is calling you," blind Bartimaeus jumps up and tosses off his cloak. In the ancient world, beggars did not hold out paper cups to passers-by. They sat on their cloaks, and people tossed them coins or maybe a handful of vegetables from the load they were carrying to market. So when Bartimaeus leaves behind his cloak, he is leaving behind how he survived as a blind man. It is at

the end of these actions and interactions that Jesus says, "your faith has healed you."

Here's another quirky little footnote. The word we translate as "faith" does not mean "acknowledging the truth of doctrine." Bartimaeus did not affirm that Jesus Christ was the second person of the Trinity or anything like that. The word "faith" means "trust" or "confidence" or "commitment." Let's consider each of those three translations in turn.

Jesus says, "your trust has healed you." "Trust" heals us? Oh. Well that opens out some interesting ideas, doesn't it? Does distrust keep us spiritually blind? Does fear? Does clinging to old habits keep us from seeing new possibilities in our lives?

Or Jesus says, "your confidence has healed you." Hmm. Where is a lack of *confidence* "blinding" you to new possibilities in your life? Who in your life is saying to you, "Take heart. Get up!"

Or Jesus says, "your commitment has healed you." What is Bartimaeus committed to? Well, he calls Jesus "son of David," and then he follows Jesus "on the way." "Son of David" was cultural shorthand for the promised Messiah who would rescue his people from oppression. Is spiritual blindness the result of some kind of oppression? "On the way" is also shorthand. It meant living into the new reality of God's radically inclusive and unconditional love for all of humanity, not just the "chosen people." To be "on the way" is to be committed to this whole new way of seeing who God is and seeing who we are in relationship to God.

As I said before, the miracle stories are teachings. We are meant to meditate on them spiritually--not to read them literally, as a claim about Jesus' control over cellular processes. That's not the point.

There's a third ancient world-view issue we need to consider as we ponder the gospels and particularly the healing miracles. The ancient world believed that injury and disease were caused by the gods, commonly as punishment for bad behavior. Not by viruses or bacteria, not by cigarette smoking or alcoholism or environmental toxins, not by defective genes. Not by impersonal weather systems, mere random accidents, or stress fractures in bridges. By God or by the gods, as punishment--sometimes

inexplicable punishment.

Stop for a moment and ponder this fact. The implications are huge. If human pain of any kind is punishment for moral failure, then people who feel intensely guilty about their moral failures may express their guilt through a physical disability of commensurate kind or duration. They might "somatize" their guilt, as psychologists say. Now add to that what I said earlier about the ancient-world literary tradition of expressing inner events through exterior actions and interactions. Theological tradition and narrative tradition here converge to encourage people to externalize their psychological pain or their psychosocial suffering in some bodily way.

Such people would not have been "faking" their disorders. Not at all! They would have been expressing their feelings or their spiritual conditions or their interior experiences in ways that their culture regarded as objectively valid, appropriate, and fully comprehensible. Our modern "germ theory," please remember, dates only from the mid-nineteenth century. What we understand by "modern medicine" is less than a century old. For most of human experience, medical problems have been deeply mysterious things.

My point here is that we need to be very alert to the fact that the meanings of illness and the experience of illness were stunningly different in the ancient world. As a result, the meaning and the experience of healing were also far different than they are today. The original authors and audiences of the gospels saw his physical condition primarily as the outward manifestation of his interior spiritual or moral or psychological condition. As a result, they saw healing as a spiritual processes, not a cellular process.

So what "really happened" that day, you ask?? What happened "historically" or "medically" or "literally"? All bets are off. It's not simply that we have no way to know. The bigger problem is that these are all the wrong questions.

The gospels are not journalism. They are not modern history. They are not abstract systematic theology. The gospels are stories. They are stories meant as spiritual teachings, as spiritual guides, to bring us into a deep and transformative encounter with

the reality of God. These stories appeal to felt experience and to social realities in order to illustrate spiritual truths or spiritual insights that can only be conveyed by stories. The healing miracles ask us or expect us to identify with the lives of those who suffer physically, and to generalize from that empathic identification to a new understanding of our own spiritual malaise. We have to take these outer events and read them back as metaphors meant to illuminate our own spiritual lives.

Encountering the depth and cosmic power of transcendent love can indeed transform a life. Believers have testified to that fact for centuries. Such transformations are an ongoing reality, a here-and-how reality, not simply something that happened far away and long ago to someone else. It seems to me that the potential for such profound spiritual transformation has greater and more enduring moral significance than the cosmic power to make some literal, cellular change in someone's eyes or the neural wiring of his visual cortex.

Medical intervention was not the core of Jesus' ministry, and it's certainly not the core of his importance to us as a spiritual teacher. I think that it's a considerable mistake to anchor Jesus' spiritual authority or his credibility in his supposed control over cellular processes. After all, I can go to an ophthalmologist for my "real" eye problems. There are ophthalmologists everywhere, and opticians in every major shopping center. Getting my very first pair of eyeglasses was an utterly miraculous moment in my own life: I'd never seen individual leaves on a tree, nor blades of grass in the lawn. All I had ever seen was smeary blurry greenness. An ophthalmologist changed my life.

But where do I turn for the same miraculous help with my moral vision? For help with how I see myself, with how I see other people, with how I see the predicaments and the possibilities of my own ordinary life? Questions of moral vision are extraordinarily common. Where do we turn to be "healed"? Some few of us are literally blind, legally blind, from detached retinas or macular degeneration or whatever. But every single one of us has a set of spiritual blind spots. We are limited in what we can see, in how far we can see, in how clearly we can see. All of us need help with our moral vision at times. I think that's what the gospels actually provide.

But to read the gospels at this level--to read any ancient scripture in spiritually useful ways--we have to know the world-view and the literary conventions that the text presumes its readers will have. I can't speak with any authority about the literary conventions at work in, say, Buddhist scriptures or Native American teachings. My education is in Western culture. But for the Bible, as for other ancient Western texts, it helps to keep three points in mind. First, don't take anything literally, because that will just bog you down in irrelevant objections about scientific impossibility. Second, be alert to how whatever happens can also function as a complex external image of equally complex interior spiritual and psychological realities. And, third, translate these "outer" events back inside your own life and then ponder awhile.

For example, Jesus heals all kinds of conditions that we can consider metaphorically, as images of what's wrong in our own lives: the blind, the deaf, the paralyzed, people with fevers and epilepsy and speech impediments. People possessed by "demons." As metaphors, these images resonate deeply to the human condition. And the remedy, Jesus says, is to be spiritually transformed by the love God offers.

The healings also exist in a complex, often quite witty relationship with what comes before and after in the flow of the plot: formal sermons, arguments with the disciples, verbal fencing with the Pharisees and Sadducees. The result is a many-layered text rich in paradox, in moral challenge, and in complicated relationship to other parts of the Bible. It's a good book indeed--if you have eyes to read it.

Thanks for your attention. Are there questions, comments, or responses?