

The Irruption of a New Order

For many people, one of the fun things about learning is discovering how things work. Our curious nature has us always looking for understandable explanations that then make it easy or easier to accept reality around us. This understanding of how things works can apply in all sorts of different subject areas.

For a kid growing up during the 20th century, as I did, it was all about this figuring out these clear explanations. Some of the funnest and most memorable for me was learning how a battery stores energy that can then be drawn on for electrical current when needed. Or even more basically, how a standard household toilet works. Later on in school the lessons learned included learning how heavier than air vehicles can fly and stay aloft without tumbling from the sky. For some, learning the basics of aeronautics can take away the fear of flying. Or closer to earth, how is it that ocean liners weighing thousands and thousands of tons stay afloat on the seas without sinking to the bottom?

With the development of ever more sophisticated and powerful computers, engineers and scientists are able to compute intricate mathematical formulas that work within the laws of nature to enable an unmanned space capsule to rendezvous with the international space station right on schedule and on the mark. Or using other advanced calculations to enable us to have our precise location noted using G.P.S. technology readings off of satellites in geosynchronous orbit above the earth. This allows us to find our way around and through places that previously would have been most challenging.

There's something comforting about figuring things out in a way that makes sense and that then makes life more predictable and manageable. So much was this mastery of figuring out the inner workings that led, again in the 20th century, to the development of laws and principles that would predict other areas of our human living in addition to the scientific and mathematical realms. The predictive nature of the hard sciences, it was felt, could very well be applied to what became known as the social sciences: sociology, psychology, economics, political science, to name just a few. And to this day there are sociologists, psychologists, economists and political scientists who would seem to suggest, by the way they talk, that their area of expertise is as predictable and understandable as is the work of geologists, chemists, astronomers and physicists.

As the door was closed on the 20th century, the door on the certainty and predictability of the world around us also seemed to close—or at least it seemed to begin to close. Physicists and astronomers, for example, in their ongoing pursuit of more and more and ever more discoveries began to observe phenomena that didn't seem to fit within the predictions that had served their research for so long. Mathematicians who in their most advanced and intricate extent had moved beyond logic and predictability and into a much more theoretical realm found that they were being joined by the other deep thinkers and researchers in the hard sciences who were moving into a more theoretical realm as well. And the social scientists, who were already grappling with the less-than-perfectly-predictable human element that infuses their study, also became less certain as they studied their subjects.

Some have called this transition from certainty to less-than-certainty, the move from the modern to what is now the post-modern world.

Now, lest you think that I think that I sound like I really know what I'm talking about here, let me assure you that I don't and in that admission, I hope that I'm making a point that is relevant to our study of Luke's gospel today.

Today we just read one of the miracle stories in the life of Jesus. In this case it's a healing miracle story. It comes toward the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. He has just shared a series of teachings in which he makes clear he is inaugurating a new way. Like the teachings in Matthew's gospel known at the Sermon on the Mount, Luke has what is known as the Sermon on the Plain. Likewise the teaching includes, "Blessed are you who are poor. . . who are hungry . . . who weep. . . who are hated and excluded by others." (Lk. 6:20f) He goes on to preach in which he calls to love enemies. Many of the surprising turning of the tables sort of teaching is what he has just finished when we come to the healing of the centurion's servant.

In a nutshell, Jesus is made aware of a Roman centurion who is said to be one who respected the Jews and the Jewish ways while not being Jewish himself. Jewish leaders come to Jesus to tell him of this centurion's servant who is ill and dying. Jesus turns to follow them to where the servant lay ill. But before Jesus even gets there the centurion sends messengers to Jesus not to physically come because he is not Jewish. They implore Jesus to simply speak a healing word, confident that in doing so the servant will be healed from afar. Jesus then says, "I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith." (Lk. 7:9b) And then we read that the centurion's servant is said to have been made well.

This is indeed an odd miracle story in that the man who is healed is never seen or touched by Jesus. It's also notable in that the faith that Jesus extols is of a man who is not a Jew or man of God. And it's said to have been on the basis of his faith that the servant, who also is not a Jew, is then healed.

When we come across this story as well as the many other miracles that Jesus performs, we as readers of the Bible have to do some interesting wrangling in order to make any sense of them. All of the miracles of Jesus are labeled such because they fly in the face of logic and the rules of physics and of chemistry and biology and on and on and on. Miracles, by their very definition are events or happenings that don't fit the rules. Some force is at work that is above all the other forces. And of course we Christians believe that all things are possible for God. God is not bound by the laws of science and math.

There are at least a couple of ways that Christians have tried to understand what is not very easily understandable when we encounter events like these in the Bible. The first is to suggest that while not questioning that the miracles indeed happened as they are recorded in the gospels, miracles like that just don't happen now like they did then. The age of Biblical miracles has come and gone and it is not today for sure. Some will sigh and say things like "I wish there were miracles today like there were in Bible times." While this perspective seeks to learn of the love of Jesus and of God that leads to miracles and it certainly is respectful of the Biblical stories and events, it does I think miss a fuller and more complete understanding.

A second way that miracles have been understood in our day, in this time of a scientific world view is to look at the miracles from that very perspective—trying to understand them scientifically. A good example of this is how the various healings by Jesus of demon-possessed people are understood. We'll say that those who were said to have been possessed by demons were actually suffering from mental illness or some other psychosis. So rather than having the demons removed from the victim, Jesus is able to bring about a restoration of mental health. Others of the miracle stories are similarly explained away as having been written in a pre-scientific era. There must be a logical and scientific explanation for the end result of Jesus' actions. In this case we need not suspend disbelief in order to

read of these miracle events. We just trust that there is more to them than has been written down. While this perspective was popular in the middle of the 20th century by some intellectuals and theologians, most have come to see that by explaining them away, we are likely missing a larger meaning that's being conveyed.

There is yet another way to glean understanding from these stories of amazement and wonder. Justo González is a historian and theologian who has suggested that the stories of the miracles performed by Jesus in particular are part of a larger understanding that comes from the gospels. He writes,

When Luke speaks of a miracle he is not implying, as many believed in ancient times, that this showed that a capricious power was at work. Nor is he implying, as we moderns tend to think, that the closed order of the universe has been broken, for neither he nor any of his contemporaries believed in such an order. A miracle is not an interruption of an order, but rather the irruption of the true order—the order of the creator God—into the demonic disorder of the present world. It is a sign of God's victory over the powers of evil. It is an announcement that the new order is at hand, that ultimately power belongs to the God of creation, of true order, freedom, and justice. The miracles of Jesus in the Gospel are not just a validation of his mission and his teaching. They embody and are part of the good news! (*Luke* © 2010 Justo L. González, Westminster John Knox Press, pp. 83-84)

I like the word that González uses. Miracles are irruptions of the new order by God. Here irruption stands in contrast to eruption. We who live in the greater Yellowstone Ecosystem know all about eruptions as we witness the amazing geysers. In a geyser boiling hot water and steam erupts out of the earth in a dramatic way. While an eruption is a breaking out, an irruption is a breaking in or into.

The miracles of Jesus are yet another way that God is breaking into our lives with a new order in which God, through Jesus, is making right the relationships we have with one another as well as our relationship with God.

The healing of the centurion's servant is a powerful demonstration that it is not by our own merit or success that we are found to be right with God. As Jesus healed the centurion's servant on the basis of the faith of the centurion, we are healed/made right/ reconciled to God on the basis of Jesus' faith.

It makes no sense does it, from a scientific, mathematical, logical frame of mind—that we are put right with God not on any measurable evidence that we can ourselves produce. It's a miracle that God's amazing grace given us in Jesus is fully sufficient for us to be made part of the great household of God in this life and in the life to come.

Let us pray.

To my precious Lord I bring my flask of fragrant oil;
kneeling down, I kiss his feet, anoint them with the oil.
Jesus, who for my sake walked the road to Calvary,
with each step has marked the imprint of his love for me.

(Chung Kwan Park, *Glory to God: The Presbyterian Hymnal*, © 2013,
Westminster John Knox Press, #704)