

“Miracles! Miracles? Miracles...”

Matthew 4: 1-11  
Ezekiel 37: 1-14  
“The Elk Spirit of Lost Lake”

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June 27, 2010

I am going to set up this dialogue sermon a little differently than the last three sermons. In the last three sermons I have tried to give some context for the scripture and then have had you share your questions and your perspectives on the particular themes. For instance, in the first week we focused on the line where both Psalm 22 and Jesus repeat the wrenching phrase, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” And then we explored those times in our lives when we may have felt forsaken by God. We explored many of the feelings associated with those really difficult times. Last week we explored the concept of sin and blended our individual thoughts on that with our Reformed understanding of sin.

This week I think I want to set the dialogue sermon up as a defense. I want to share with you my best judgment about how we read the various miracles in the Bible and then I want you to push me on my interpretation. In other words, I am going to give you my understanding and then I want you to ask the hard the questions. This is a topic that has not gone away. It is at the very core of how we understand our faith.

I decided to approach this dialogue sermon this way after having an interesting experience preparing for it. Here were the two questions that fed into today’s topic. One, the writer asked, “*Why have we lost the ability to hear God speak to us as he did to Noah and Moses?*” The second one said, “*Please explain the several appearances of Jesus and the empty tomb if he was not resurrected.*” The first one says, “If these stories are true then why doesn’t God speak to us today like that?” The second one says, “If these stories aren’t true then how do we explain these stories?” Same question from two different starting points.

Quite honestly, I found myself upset as I began to reflect on these questions. I kept trying to figure out what was riling me up so much about the assumptions in these questions. I finally figured it out—that I was feeling really sad for the Church (I mean the Church with the big “C”). I am sad for the Church because we have somehow found ourselves in this position where we believe that there are only two valid ways to read the Bible. One, we believe that what is on the page happened exactly as it says it happened. The problem with this is that it forces the first question of why God isn’t speaking to us today like He did in the time of Noah and Moses. Or we view the Bible as an unreliable account of how things happened, maybe we see it a nice collection of stories and myths, but dismiss its truth claims. Thereby we get the assumption in the second question that if these stories are not factually then they also must not be true. I am sad today because the Church has not yet learned how to read the Bible with our mind and with our heart.

Today we read three stories: The story of the “Valley of Dry Bones” where God breathed into a massive grave site and suddenly dry, clankety bones arranged themselves in order, received flesh upon those bones, and began to walk; We read the story of Jesus temptation in the desert where Jesus had a literal conversation with the devil and after it was all over “suddenly angels came and waited on Jesus”; And finally we read “The Elk Spirit of Lost Lake,” a Native American myth where Plain Feather has a guardian elk, is tricked by Smart Crow, and who wakes up in the bottom of a lake where he has a conversation with his guardian elk.

Would you not agree that every one of these stories is a treat for the imagination? Would you not agree that every one of these stories has events that we might consider miraculous? A Valley of Dry Bones suddenly comes to life in Ezekiel. Jesus is having a debate with the devil and after winning the debate, angels suddenly appear to wait on him. And Plain Feather is lying on the bottom of a lake having a conversation with his guardian elk without any scuba equipment. Every one of these stories has elements of the supernatural, the miraculous, the this-just-doesn't-happen-like-this type of event.

So, let me ask you—would we ever tell our Native American brothers and sisters that the difference between them and us is that their stories are just tribal myths while our Biblical stories are actually true? Would we be so bold as to say our stories are fact while their stories are fiction? Can we hear the debate between them and us? Can we hear ourselves saying, “*Well, Plain Feather didn't really have a guardian elk. We know that he didn't literally wake up on the bottom of the lake and have a talk with his guardian elk. We recognize that these are just your cultural myths.*” And then we turn around and just as confidently claim, “Why yes, of course, Jesus had a conversation with devil. And angels really did come down from heaven and wait on him. And God really did raise thousands of dry bones and make them come to life. And Jonah really did get swallowed by a whale and survived three days and three nights before the whale vomited him back up.” How do we know these things are true? How do we know they really happened? Because it's right there in the Bible as plain as day. In the same breath that we claim our stories as true we dismiss the Native American stories as merely myths.

As I reflected on this dialogue sermon I found myself both upset and sad. Both of the questions for today reveal how difficult it is for us to find that place where we can read the Bible with intellectual integrity and experience the truth of the Bible. Said another way, we still struggle as contemporary Christians with how to read the Bible with our minds as well as with our hearts.

How many of remember the song by the Carpenter's titled *Close to You*? The song goes:

Why do birds suddenly appear?  
Every time you are near  
Just like me they long to be  
Close to you  
Why do stars fall down from the sky?  
Every time you walk by  
Just like me  
They long to be  
Close to you  
On the day that you were born  
The angels got together and decided  
To create a dream come true  
So they sprinkled moon dust in your hair  
Of gold and starlight in your eyes of blue

Do birds really appear when that special person draws near? Do stars really fall down from the sky every time she walks by? Did angels really get together and decided to create a dream come true? Most of us would say, “No.” But, does that mean that this song is not true? If the song has the facts wrong does that mean that they also got it wrong about love? If birds don't really appear does that mean that love also is not real?

In the same way, if the Valley of Dry bones is not a factual account of what happened does that mean that God didn't actually breath a new spirit into the life of Israel? And if angels didn't really wait on Jesus does that mean God really wasn't present in Jesus. Can't a story get the facts wrong and the truth right?

We don't have to check our minds at the door in order to read the Bible. We can read the Bible with our minds as well as our hearts. The most profound statement I have ever heard about reading the Bible came from the old Indian storyteller who used to start all of his stories this way, "*I don't know if it happened just like this, but I do know it's true.*" That is the key to knowing how to read the Bible with mind and with heart.

Questions for Discussion/Reflection

Is there a difference between facts and truth?

Are there some miracles in the Bible you believe are just stories and some you believe actually happened?

Are our Christian stories just like other religious myths or are they "more true?"

Does it undermine your faith to think of the miracles of the Bible as Christian myths?

What is the purpose of the stories if they aren't factual accounts of what happened?