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Interpreting the Miracles of Healing for Preaching

STANLEY N. OLSON
First Lutheran Church, Duluth, Minnesota

Both the preacher and the audience come to a miracle text with preconceptions which affect proclamation. Even the definition of miracle is problematic. In common usage *miracle* means anything wonderful or amazing—a sunrise, the birth of a baby, a space shuttle flight, or a new technique in microsurgery. Another definition, somewhat more reflective, points to the analogy between the ordinary and the so-called miraculous. For example, it is noted that the God who fed the five thousand also provides food for the billions, or that the healing of the blind is of the same order as the body's own capacity to heal itself. Although such broad definitions are widely used, it is necessary to have a more narrow definition for helpful consideration of the biblical texts we refer to as miracle stories and of the idea people have when they pray for a miracle or think they have received miraculous healing. Augustine suggested that a miracle is an event contrary to what is *known* of nature, and many today have a similar understanding. With that definition, a modern observer need not label as miracle some or all of the events that Jesus' contemporaries did. Further, expanding knowledge progressively eliminates the miraculous from the modern world. The most widely used narrow definition is probably something like, "A miracle is an event not explicable by normal causation and which is perceived to be the result of God's action." This definition is honest—and problematic—in that it raises the issue of God's action in the natural world.

If we define miracle as a supernatural intervention in the natural, we shall find Christian responses ranging from outright disbelief to unexamined credulity. The credulous treat the miracles of Jesus as so predictable that they lose the impact such events and accounts ought to have. They may do the same with miracles in our own world. By any definition, miracles are unusual and unexpected. Those who treat the miracle accounts as historical may do so in the conviction that God could certainly intervene in the created world and that under certain circumstances God would want to intervene in normal causation. A difficulty for this position is explaining the circumstances which lead to this intervention—why raise one widow's son and not another; why heal one cancer victim and not another? Those who reject miracles completely may do so for logical or theological reasons. The logical objections are those which would loosely be called *scientific*—based in a belief that the universe represents a closed system of causality which is always explicable in principle if not in practice. For

example, today's surprising or unexplained healing will be attributed to unknown natural causes, not supernatural ones. The same assumption of unknown natural causes will be extended to the New Testament miracle stories. Theological objections to miracles are those which find it

inappropriate to think of a creator who occasionally makes small adjustments in a world normally allowed to run on its own. The conviction that God is merciful and just makes some people object to the seeming randomness of miracles and even more to the idea that sincere prayer or many prayers or special merit could convince God to do a miracle. The difficulty with both the logical and the theological objections to miracles is the inherent danger of divorcing God completely from the world. That divorce would have drastic implications for prayer, worship, the hope of resurrection, and much more.

Having raised these philosophical, theological, and practical problems, I intend to leave them with the preacher.[1] I find my own answers in the direction of seeing God's consistent involvement with the world, and I find some support for this in the way the New Testament uses miracles. The theme of this article is that the preacher can follow the example of the New Testament and concentrate on the meaning of the miracles and not on the miracles themselves. These meanings cut across the modern distinction between healing and nature miracles, but most of the examples below are healing miracles which appear in the three-year lectionary.

I. MIRACLES IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

The writers and original readers of the New Testament, of course, believed that Jesus did perform miracles.[2] Apparently even Jesus' enemies and the opponents of the early Christians granted this. What the modern reader may forget is that Jesus was one of many who were seen as performing miracles. Our Old Testament attributes healings, resurrections, and nature miracles to Moses, Aaron, the prophets, and others. Even the magicians of Pharaoh could duplicate the wonders of Moses. In the New Testament, the disciples are given authority to heal, exorcize demons, and even raise the dead. Other writers from Jesus' time attribute miracles to various rabbis and wandering philosophers and to pagan gods and their priests.[3] Thus the early Christians in general did not doubt the possibility of miracles. Rather, their concern was to distinguish Jesus from the mere magicians, and from those who worked by Satan's power and to concentrate on the meaning of his miracles for their lives.[4]

[1]On miracles in the New Testament see Anton Fridrichsen, *The Problem of Miracle in Primitive Christianity* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1972) and Reginald H. Fuller, *Interpreting the Miracles* (London: SCM, 1963). On miracles in general see Ernst and Marie-Luise Keller, *Miracles in Dispute: A Continuing Debate* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969); Richard Swinburne, *The Concept of Miracle* (New York: MacMillan, 1970); and Ian Ramsey and others, *The Miracles and the Resurrection* (London: SPCK, 1965), especially the essay therein by F. N. Davey, "Healing in the New Testament," 50-63. C. S. Lewis, *Miracles: A Preliminary Study* (New York: Macmillan, 1947) is also of interest.

[2]The historical evidence for this belief is very strong. Miracle stories are included in John and in all the sources of the Synoptics except, probably, special Matthew.

[3]For a few examples see s. V. McCasland, "Miracles of Healing," *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible,* ed. George A. But trick (4 vols.; New York: Abingdon, 1962) 3.399-400.

[4]Fridrichsen, *The Problem,* 93.

Ancient or modern, the telling of a miracle story usually has three parts: situation, miracle, proof. Mark 1:30-31 shows the briefest form. Jesus entered Simon's house and was told of the feverish mother-in-law (situation). He took her by the hand and she was healed (miracle). She waited on them (proof). Attention to the form is helpful to the interpreter, since expansions,

repetitions, and alterations may reveal the interest and intent of the teller. Luke 7:1-10 makes its point by expansion and omission. The situation part of the story places considerable emphasis on the worthiness of the Roman centurion—a point of special interest to Luke's gentile audience. The centurion's ideas about obedience and representation imply the origin of Jesus' power in God and the subordination of the powers of evil. The account also illustrates the typical de-emphasis in the New Testament on the magical or technical aspect of the healing. The miracle is not recorded, only the proof by witnesses.

Strictly speaking, the miracle stories tell us nothing about God and Jesus which we do not find well presented elsewhere in the Gospels. All three of the themes to be explored below reflect the four evangelists' larger presentation of Jesus' identity and significance. The miracles are part of who Jesus was, and their effect is of a piece with all he did for the world. Further, the miracles are not presented as unique occasions of God's contact with the world. God is always present and active for the biblical writers. In the Bible, miracles are considered unique not because they are acts of God but because they are acts of God contrary to all expectation.

II. THE MEANINGS OF THE MIRACLE STORIES

The significance which the New Testament sees in Jesus' miracles can be explored under three headings, all of them broader themes of the Gospels.

1. *God at Work in Jesus*

Miracles are used in the Gospels and in Acts to make statements about Jesus' identity, particularly his identity as the one in whom God was at work. In Peter's Pentecost sermon we find this theme, "Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs[5] *which God did through him* in your midst" (Acts 2:22). The miracles are God's work and attest to Jesus. In the Nazareth synagogue (Luke 4:16-21) and in answer to John the Baptist (Matt 11:2-6; Luke 7:18-23) we hear Jesus describe his own work by quoting or alluding to such passages as Isaiah 29:18-19; 35:4-6; and 61:1 which talk about the direct working of God. In conflict with the Pharisees, Jesus explains how his exorcisms reveal the working of God and the coming rule of God (Matt 12:28; Luke 11:20). For the Fourth Gospel, Jesus' miracles reveal divine glory (1:14; 2:11; 11:4, 40)[6] and should produce belief in Jesus as Son of God (20:30-31). In the first three Gospels Jesus' link to God is often mentioned in the proof section of the story by quoting witnesses who praise not Jesus but God (Mark 2:12; Luke 7:16; 9:43). The point that the miracles attest to the working of God is sharpened

[5]The New Testament uses several words to refer to the miracles. John shows a preference for *semeion* (sign), but the other evangelists use the different words without apparent distinction.

[6]John is filled with double meanings. Jesus' ultimate glorification is his crucifixion, and the miracle of Lazarus reveals his glory (11:4, 40) and leads to the cross (11:53).

by Jesus' refusal to offer a specific proof of his identity (Mark 8:11-12 par). The miracles are not done for self-authentication, but the miracles which are done should be sufficient evidence to produce belief. Mark places the demand for a sign immediately after the account of the feeding of the five thousand, suggesting that the Pharisees are willfully blind.[7] In Matthew's version of the temptation (4:1-11) the first two tests are phrased in terms of Jesus' divine sonship, and Jesus

rejects the idea of proving himself by a miracle. Being Son of God is significant because of the implications about the authority and obedience of Jesus. The miracles point to his link to God but do not prove it to the dubious.[8]

Mark 1:21-28 (*4 Epiphany B*). All three parts of this miracle point to Jesus' identity. In the setting, the crowds marvel at the authority of his teaching. Then the unclean spirit addresses Jesus as "the Holy one of God," who has come to destroy the demons.[9] The proof of the miracle includes a surprising reference to Jesus' *teaching* and authority. The preacher may focus on Jesus as the one with God-given authority to destroy evil and to teach.

Mark 1:29-39 (*5 Epiphany B*). The healing of Simon's mother-in-law is told briefly. It is followed by a Markan summary of Jesus' healing activity, again with a reference to the demons' knowledge of who Jesus is. In context (1:24), that reference to the demons brings to mind Jesus as Son of God. This pericope might be used to talk about misunderstandings of Jesus' God-given power since the point of the last incident (vv. 35-39) is that Jesus is not merely a wonder worker for one city but also a proclaimer (and exorcist) with wider concerns.

Mark 2:1-12 (*7 Epiphany B*). The miracle here simply provides the setting for a discussion with the scribes. The meaning of the story is Jesus' authority to forgive sins. The miracle confirms that power by showing that God is the source of the authority. God heals and God forgives. The observers get the point and glorify *God* for the miracle. The preacher might use this text to explore the effects of forgiveness today, forgiveness offered by the Son of God. Forgiveness is significant because of the authority Jesus has.

John 9:1-41 (*3 Lent A*). This pericope must be read to the congregation in its entirety to convey the impact of the story. The man born blind first knows his healer only as "the man called Jesus," then as "a prophet," later as one who must be "from God" since he can do such miracles. Finally, when confronted with Jesus again, he addresses him as "Lord" and worships him. Throughout his Gospel, one of John's favorite themes is the mysterious origin of Jesus—mysterious to those around him but always known to the reader. Jesus is from God. In this miracle, the one healed is a witness to Jesus' identity and origin and strengthens his own understanding by sharing it. The preacher might use that point by suggesting that we too can see the work of God illuminating our own lives and tell others about it. The sermon might also explore the narrative move

[7]Fridrichsen, *The Problem,* 76-77, notes the importance of this idea for a church which still found itself arguing with non-believers whether Jesus' miracles were evidence that he was the Messiah.

[8]They attest that Jesus was God's representative and are used similarly for his followers: Mark 16:20; Acts 3:12; Rom 15:18; 1 Cor 2:4; 2 Cor 12:12; Heb 2:4.

[9]The command to silence here is part of the exorcism. At other points in Mark it becomes part of the phenomenon in Mark which scholars call "the messianic secret." In the miracle stories the commands to silence function to avoid a narrow focus on the miraculous element without full attention to Jesus' person and mission.

from the man's physical blindness to the doubters' metaphorical blindness—blind to the working of God in Jesus.

John 11:1-53 (*5 Lent A*). As the previous text is almost a dramatization of the saying, "I am the light of the world," so this Lazarus chapter dramatizes, "I am the resurrection and the life." Again, the impact of the story requires the reading of the whole. The first paragraph hints we will learn something about Jesus: "This illness...is for the glory of God, so that the Son of

God may be glorified by means of it." The dialogues with Martha and Mary focus on what Jesus is able to do, *by God,* and on who Jesus is: "Lord...the Christ, the Son of God, he who is coming into the world." The unusual prayer of Jesus also emphasizes his link to God. The sermon might use the saying in 11:25-26 to focus on the particular gift of God in Jesus: "I am the resurrection and the life; whoever believes in me will live, even though he or she dies; and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die." The second clause is a reference to physical death and spiritual resurrection. The third clause means that those who are alive spiritually will never die spiritually. The physical resuscitation of Lazarus provides evidence for Jesus' God-given power to offer life which cannot be taken away. We are offered the present experience of eternal life.

2. *Jesus' Benevolent Concern*

The miracle stories are used to present Jesus as a benefactor of humanity. In Acts 10:38, Peter says that Jesus, "went about doing good and healing." The word he uses is a characteristic one for describing the quality of benevolent concern which was appreciated and praised in the Hellenistic world. In telling the story of the widow of Nain, Luke says that the miracle was motivated by compassion for the grieving woman (7:13). Luke alone pictures Jesus in terms of the Hellenistic benefactor, but the other evangelists also report miracles motivated by pity or concern (Mark 1:41; Matt 15:28; John 11:33-35). This concern for humanity points to the messianic character of the healing miracles. The messianic age and the Messiah's work were sometimes described as the renewal and restoration of creation (Isa 11:6-9; 35:5-7; Ezek 47:8-12). The miracles affirm the goodness of the physical world by showing that it is of concern to God. "God's agenda is the mending of creation."[10] This theme in the miracle stories is an aspect of the broader message of the redeeming love of God.

Matthew 9:35-10:8 (*4 Pentecost A*). The text follows a chapter with several miracles, most of which stress the faith of the beneficiaries. Here Matthew summarizes Jesus' ministry as one of teaching, preaching, and healing. Verse 36 is key, "When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd." The context argues that compassion is behind all aspects of Jesus' work. This is confirmed by the subsequent report of the sending of the twelve as "laborers into his harvest." Compassion caused Jesus to send his disciples on the mission to preach *and* "heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, cast out demons." Concern for people occasioned Jesus' own work and the ministry of his followers. The sermon could proclaim God's concern for human need and cite Jesus as the prime example of this concern for the whole person. The

[10]Krister Stendahl, quoted in Roland Miller, "Christ the Healer," *Health and Healing: Ministry of the Church,* ed. H. L. Lettermann (Chicago: Wheat Ridge Foundation, 1980) 16.

theme provides both comfort and challenge.

Matthew 14:13-21 (*11 Pentecost A*). This text, especially the summary of compassion and healings in verse 14, could be used in a similar way. That same compassion leads Jesus to feed the crowds, suggesting that the text might be used to consider the problems of world hunger.

Both these texts talk about the practical, helpful effects of Jesus' miracles and can be applied today in a parallel manner without allegorizing or doing violence to the story. In most other cases the theme of benevolent concern is a subordinate one in the miracle story.

Nevertheless, its presence permits a legitimate emphasis on God's compassion for those who suffer. Illness and disease are contrary to God's will. The message of the miracle stories about God's concern may be especially helpful when healing and health do not come, when there is no miracle. The preacher might explore other evidence of God's concern in the whole lives of the audience.

3. *Responding to Jesus*

Often the miracle stories are used to portray various responses to Jesus. All of the Gospels, especially the first three, describe an ever-sharper division between followers and doubters. Most of the miracles are recorded in the early part of the ministry, and they too are used to show the distinction between the increasing faith of the followers and the heightened misunderstanding and hostility of the unbelievers. Sometimes the wonders produce amazement or raise questions which stimulate the reader's interest (Mark 1:27; 4:41; 5:42; 7:37). Sometimes the observers draw correct conclusions from the miracles (Mark 2:12; Luke 7:16), and sometimes they draw false ones (Mark 6:14-16). The miracle stories record the growing hostility which will lead to the death of Jesus (Mark 3:6; John 11:53), and the accounts also reveal that some become followers (Mark 5:18; 10:52; Matt 20:34; John 2:11; 11:45). A few even become evangelists themselves (Matt 9:31; Mark 1:45; 5:19-20, Luke 5:11; John 9). Jesus' miracles were not unambiguous proofs of anything; let the modern interpreter beware!

Faith as response appears in two different aspects in the miracle stories—prior and consequent. The accounts show that the miracles were often followed by belief, and they were certainly recorded to produce belief. Faith is also presented as a pre-condition to the miracles. This may be stated positively, "Your faith has made you well" (Mark 5:34), or negatively, "He could do no mighty work there...and he marveled because of their unbelief" (Mark 6:5-6). However, prior faith is neither mentioned nor implied in most New Testament miracle stories. When mentioned, it may be the faith of the one who receives the miracle (Mark 5:24-34; 10:46-52), but just as often it is the faith of family or friends (Matt 8:10; Mark 2:5; 9:24; Luke 7:9; John 4:50). The faith is in God or in Jesus, but it is never faith in the possibility of healing. Given this diversity, it would be as wrong to insist that faith is necessary to receive a miracle as to say that the absence of healing is evidence of inadequate faith. Miracles are a challenge to faith, before and after.

Mark 5:21-43 (*6 Pentecost B*). This literary unit of two miracles illustrates how miracles are a challenge to faith. The story of the woman with a hemorrhage has been inserted into the account of the healing of Jairus' daughter. The story of the woman focuses on her thoughts and motivation—her certainty that

merely touching Jesus will produce healing. Although Jesus says that her faith has healed her, the story rules out any interpretation in terms of autosuggestion. Jesus was the source of the healing. Power "went out" of him. The woman's faith brought her to Jesus to touch him. The insertion of this story into the other has two functions. It provides a necessary interval for word of the daughter's death to reach Jairus. More importantly, the insertion makes faith the point of both stories. When the ruler is told, "Do not fear, only believe," the reader has just seen that belief makes healing possible. Mark feels no necessity to record that Jairus did believe. The parallel

between the two stories points to Jairus' faith in seeking out Jesus as the one who could help. The sermon can take direction from this active, seeking faith which makes it possible for God to work.

Mark 6:1-6 (*7 Pentecost B*). The division between believers and nonbelievers reaches a new level here. The disciples continue to follow, but Jesus' own people are astonished at his words and works and take offense at him. The statement that Jesus could not do any miracles is not intended to suggest impossibility as verse 5b shows, but to emphasize the great unbelief of the people. The paired miracles just preceding this account describe an active faith which can benefit by God's power. Here we see a contrasting attitude—amazement and offense which cannot benefit. Jesus cannot bless those who will not seek his blessings.

Mark 10:46-52 (*23 Pentecost B*). The healing of blind Bartimaeus follows the third passion prediction (10:33-34) and the misunderstanding of James and John (10:35-45). It must be understood as part of a complex structure which begins with the first passion prediction and emphasizes misunderstanding and clarification. Each of the three predictions is followed by evidence that the disciples still do not understand what Jesus' destiny and example mean for themselves. The Markan account shows them continually failing to see that the way of the cross is also for the followers of Jesus. This healing is the last event recorded before the arrival at Jerusalem where Jesus would die and the disciples would finally realize their own role. Surely Mark is using the miracle as a metaphor. Bartimaeus was healed of his blindness and "followed [Jesus] *on the way*" (10:52). The crucified king, the Son of David, will also give sight to those disciples who cannot see the way of the cross.[11] Since the miracle is already given a symbolic interpretation, the preacher will not be wrong in applying it to our own reluctance at following the way of the cross and to Jesus' eye opening.

Matthew 11:2-11 (*3 Advent A*). John the Baptist had heard of the deeds of Jesus and sent representatives to ask the important question about his messianic identity. Jesus answered in terms of his deeds and concluded, "And blessed are those who take no offense at me." Those words take seriously the doubts of the questioner—and the readers. The miracles are not unequivocal proofs. They are challenges to faith. It was possible to take offense, to fail to believe—even while acknowledging the miracles. Doubt about the miracles is not the problem. They are taken for granted. The problem is doubt about Jesus. Here is a valid preaching point for an age which may get lost in its own doubts about the miracles. It

[11]Matthew changes this miracle to an account of *two* blind men (20:29-34) to make even more clear the symbolic importance of this healing as a contrast with the blindness of James and John.

really doesn't matter what we think about the miracles. It does matter what we think about Jesus.

John 9:1-41 (*3 Lent A*). This chapter was discussed above as an illustration of a miracle which presents the working of God in Jesus. Like many of the miracle stories, it can also be considered as an example of response. The man born blind and the Pharisees look at the same event, but with opposite reactions.

III. CONCLUSIONS

This brief consideration of the healing miracles and the world to which we preach has suggested a few directions. Sermons on miracle stories should concentrate on the significance

suggested by the text. Some texts will indicate a sermon presenting Jesus as the one in whom God is uniquely at work. Others will direct us toward the benevolent concern of God for all life, for every human need—physical, mental, spiritual. Still other texts will help us bring into focus our response to the working of God in our own lives. Miracle texts should not be treated as though they contained themes or insights not present elsewhere in the New Testament. Nor should miracle stories bear the full weight of our modern difficulties in understanding God's relationship to the world. The analysis of the texts strongly hints that attention to the miracle itself never was primary. Christianity is for every day, not just for a few dramatic moments. The miracle stories speak to that general truth. Not the miracles but the encounter in Jesus with the merciful God is the vital thing—then as now.