

The Anti-Miracle Miracle (John 6:1-35, 41-51)

A sermon for the Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

The Old Testament Book of Judges tells the story of Gideon, who led the people of Israel out of captivity and slavery. The text describes how a messenger came to Gideon and said: "You are supposed to lead the people." And he said: "Wait a minute. Let me go and make some food, and if you're still there after I've made the food, then I'll know you are really who you say you are." The messenger was still there when the food came.

Then when Gideon was called to lead the army, he defers: "I'm not so sure about this. I'd like to really know. Let's do a test: Let's put out a piece of fleece (a piece of skin with the wool on it) on the ground overnight, and if in the morning the fleece is wet, and the ground dry, then I'll be convinced." And that's what happened.

But then he adds: "Let's try it the other way, just to be sure. If in the morning the fleece is dry, and the ground wet, then I'll be convinced." And that's what happened. Then he led the army to victory (Judges 6-8).

I'm not at all sure that I would have been convinced. We know that when flipping coins, you can have a whole run of heads or a run of tails, but over a thousand flips it evens out.

Let's suppose in the second place that we were there in Jerusalem after the resurrection. In Luke and Acts it says there were 40 days after the resurrection during which Jesus appeared. We might think that if he were walking around, there might be thousands of people who would be convinced. But they knew about dreams, delusions, fraud, look-alikes, and other kinds of trickery.

Luke writes that for those forty days, he appeared "not to all the people, but to those who were chosen by God to be witnesses" (Luke 10:40-41). Not to thousands, which obviously could happen in those forty days, but to those who were chosen as witnesses.

What if Jesus were to appear right here in the middle of us today with a clap of thunder? A flash of light. Would you be convinced? Or would you think it's a hologram? Or it could simply be something you couldn't explain. It would not mean that you would say: Yes, this is the resurrected, living Lord.

In 1977 an Orthodox Jewish scholar, Pinchas Lapide, wrote a book called, *The Resurrection of Jesus*. In this book he expressly states: "Of course Jesus rose from the dead. But that doesn't mean I know how to explain that." It didn't make him into a Christian. We ask ourselves: "What do people make of the resurrection account?"

This brings us to the feeding of the five thousand in the sixth chapter of the Gospel of John. The people are quite enthusiastic because they have somebody to feed them and take care

of their medical needs. Jesus, however, withdraws. The leaders come to him and say: "Well, who are you really?" And then they say to him: "Do a sign. Do a miracle for us."

It wasn't enough that there had been this feeding of the five thousand. They said: "Do another miracle" (John 6:30). Because, after all, there were all kinds of healers and fakers.

What about miracles? In Augustine everything is a miracle. In the Enlightenment there are no miracles. Many who were religious embraced Deism, which spoke of God as the watchmaker who winds up nature like a clock and does not intervene. In the twentieth century the God-of-the-gaps, that is, using God as a stop-gap for the incompleteness of scientific knowledge, was hotly debated. The temptation is always that I must understand God in a way that convinces me.

Which brings us back to the New Testament and what it says about miracles. In the original language of the New Testament, the words "sign" and "miracle" are the same word, *semeion*. All signs and miracles are **ultimately ambiguous**.

For example, even a simple sign, like a street sign can lead one astray. Decades ago a common teenage prank was to take a pipe wrench and turn a street sign a quarter of a turn. Drivers new to the neighborhood would get all confused. All signs, all miracles are ambiguous.

In Mark 3:22-23, the Pharisees say to Jesus: "You're doing this by the power of the evil one." They knew about other powers, other spirits. They knew that basically miracles and signs are ambiguous.

What do the gospels actually say about signs and miracles?

In Matt 16:1 it says: "The leaders came to Jesus and to **test** him they asked him to show them a sign from heaven." Jesus: do a sign, do a miracle. In this way they could judge him.

Asking for a sign or a miracle is a way of saying: "Lord, you have to jump to my requirements, and then I'll believe." Asking for a sign is really testing, judging God, which is ultimately what sin is about.

Matthew 16:4 says: "An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign shall be given to it, except the sign of Jonah." Luke 11:29 repeats these words: "This generation is an evil generation; it seeks a sign, but no sign shall be given to it except the sign of Jonah."

Mark 8:12 is even more radical. He says no sign will be given. What is the "sign of Jonah"? It is a metaphor for three days dead and coming back to life again. It is referring to the cross and resurrection (Luke 11:30).

Are we then supposed to have faith in faith? To believe in believing? No. Or is faith a matter of believing impossible things? In Alice in Wonderland the Red Queen tells Alice that when

she, the Queen, was a girl, she made it a practice to believe six impossible things before breakfast!

No, Christian faith is not a matter of believing in believing, but when you come down to it, faith is blind. In fact, faith has to be blind. Otherwise it would be based on saying: "I can judge. It's evident to me, and I'm judging who and what God is about."

It's an age-old problem. Protagoras, a philosopher who lived in the fifth century B.C., famously said: "Man is the measure of all things." Plato mocked him in a Socratic dialogue for saying this.

Doesn't Protagoras represent the prevailing view of truth today also? Everybody has his own truth, and everything is relative. Different strokes for different folks. Different truths for different tribes.

Into this world of relativism, God has given the cross. Our basic Christian faith is summed up in 1 Cor 1:22-25. It starts out: "For Jews seek **signs** and Greeks seek wisdom. . . ." We can substitute the word, "miracle," for the word "sign" in the text and read it as follows:

"For Jews seek **miracles** and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God."

The cross is the anti-miracle. (How does one grasp that God dying is a miracle?) The resurrection is beyond our understanding. Talk about an ambiguous sign! Yet that this is what God does, and that's the key for what Christian faith is about.

The common mistakes are to say that salvation is a **gift**, and you have to **accept** it, or that it's a **call**, and you have to **respond**.

The Apostle Paul, knowing this problem, writes a significantly direct answer. Most of his letters were dictated to a secretary. Thus in Galatians 4:9 he starts out: "Now that you have come **to know God**," but then he corrects himself, "or rather **to be known by God**." He corrects himself because "knowing" means you have some perception and therefore decide. No, we are "known" by God, or as it says in Philippians 3:12: "that he has already made me his own."

The Lord has made us his own, as is repeated throughout the Gospel of John: 1:13: "who were born not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God"; and 6:44: "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him"; 6:65: "no one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father."

As Luther writes in the Small Catechism, the Third Article of the Creed: "I believe that I cannot by my own reason or understanding believe." The Holy Spirit is the one who calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies us.

This is not something Luther imposed on us, as he says a number of times: "The Lord snatches us from the jaws of the devil." (Large Catechism, IV:83; Tappert 446; Kolb/Wengert 466). The Lord is the one who makes us his own. It is not because of us, but in spite of us.

This brings us back to John 6:35: "Jesus said to them, 'I am the bread of life. He who comes to me shall not hunger, and he who believes in me shall never thirst.'"

In the Gospel of John water is the living water of the Holy Spirit and baptism, and of course, our Lord himself, but also the body of believers today, and as he comes to us in the Lord's Supper. We come together because he comes to us and makes us his own.

This is all beyond our understanding. As Paul writes (Rom 11:33-36):

O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! 'For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?' 'Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?' For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen."