

“The Idea of a Miracle”

Exodus 3:1-6; Acts 20:7-12 ¹

During the next several weeks we’re going to explore a topic that will stretch both our minds and our hearts, and that I hope will take us farther into the mind and heart of God. We’re going to think together about miracles.

Today, we’ll consider the very idea of a “miracle.” Next week, during our SonRise Service, we’ll look at the panorama of miracles in the Bible. Don’t worry; I’m not going to talk about all of them! In our Resurrection Worship at 10 o’clock, we’ll rejoice in “the Grand Miracle.” And on May 4, we’ll think about miracles today. Where we’re going this morning may “strain your brain” a bit, but I hope you’ll stick with me. The insert in your worship order may help you follow along.

As is true in many areas of life, I’m only partially aware of those persons who have shaped my own thinking, but the preeminent influence in my thinking about miracles has been C.S. Lewis—especially in his little book, *Miracles*.² Much of what I’ll say this morning grows out of that book, and the online version of this sermon will give specific citations, if you’re interested.³

Lewis defined a “miracle” as “an interference with Nature by supernatural power” (p. 10).⁴ That’s probably how you and I think of miracles, too. But in order to have a framework in which to wonder about miracles, whether in Bible times or today, we must first come to grips with whether or not miracles are even possible, and why we think so.

The question of whether or not miracles are possible is not one that we can answer out of our personal experience alone. Experience is just that: something we’ve perceived through one of our senses, and the special effects we see in every movie we watch prove that our senses are fairly easily deceived. Indeed, that’s the approach we take with respect to most of the really unusual things that happen to us—we begin with the assumption that our senses have been fooled and that there is a fairly mundane, non-miraculous way to explain what just happened.

As every scientist knows, the presupposition that there is a discoverable, rational explanation for seemingly mysterious events is the driving force behind nearly all new knowledge.⁵ To resort to the miraculous as an explanation for events usually means that we remain in an ignorance of the natural world that is fundamentally disobedient to God’s ancient command to “fill the earth *and subdue it*” (Genesis 1:28).

At the same time, it is our concept of “the natural world,” or of “Nature” that presents our chief difficulty with respect to miracles. If something is “miraculous,” then it is, by definition, “super-natural.” And if something is “supernatural,” then it can’t be explained by our normal understandings of cause and effect within the Nature that we know.

At this point we must think very carefully. The last several hundred years of Western science have increasingly taught us that tangible, space-time realities are the only things that are truly Real. We’ve been taught that nothing exists beyond the Nature that we know. This is, in fact, the underlying assumption of the COSMOS television series that is currently playing on Sunday nights.⁶

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, Maryland, on April 13, 2014, Palm Sunday.

² C.S. Lewis, *Miracles: A Preliminary Study* (New York: Macmillan, 1947).

³ www.fbcbristol.org

⁴ All page numbers are references to *Miracles*.

⁵ This is reminiscent of Arthur Clarke’s Third Law, that “technology that is sufficiently advanced is indistinguishable from magic.” http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Clarke's_three_laws

⁶ www.cosmosontv.com

Science has shown us that the cosmos itself is unimaginably huge. We know that the universe is billions of light years in diameter, and that it's expanding all the time. We've also discovered that some of parts of Nature are unimaginably small, requiring scanning electron microscopes to see even the largest parts of its smallness, and gigantic particle accelerators to see some of the smallest parts.

Even so, we're told that every bit of this stuff, both small and large, is part of one uni-verse, and that this universe is all there is. We call this "all there is" Nature. But miracles—if they exist—come from something outside our Nature, and much of our science tells us that there is no such Something.

Now God, of course, would be such a "Something." But because appealing to miracle as a matter of course limits our knowledge, science rightly looks for other possibilities before considering anything supernatural. As a matter of fact, for many scientists, nothing can *ever* be explained by an appeal to "miracle," because there is assumed to be nothing *beyond* Nature that could act *within* Nature in such a way. Operating on the assumption that Nature is "all there is" is called being a "Naturalist."

We use the word "Naturalist" in at least two ways. The more ordinary way is to call someone whose vocation is wildlife and ecological management a "Naturalist." I have friends who are Naturalists in this sense, and you probably do, too. That's not what I mean here. The other principal use of the word "Naturalist" is to describe a particular philosophical position, a way of viewing Reality.

The truth of the matter is that these two uses of the word "Naturalist" are really not connected at all. One can be a vocational Naturalist without being a philosophical Naturalist, and one can be a philosophical Naturalist without being a vocational Naturalist. For a thoroughly consistent philosophical "Naturalist," the non-existence of God is a fundamental principle. Or to say that another way, **for a philosophical Naturalist, the non-existence of God is a matter of faith.**

While it is certainly true that we now understand much that was once considered miraculous, the core issue here doesn't have anything at all to do with scientific advance making miracles harder to accept. A miracle is, by definition, something that operates outside of normal processes of cause and effect. And, if there is actually Something beyond Nature, then miracles are indeed possible and they will forever remain so. As Lewis put it, "Those are the bare bones of the question; time and progress and science and civilization have not altered them in the least" (p. 49).⁷

Well, what evidence do we have that there is Something beyond Nature? As I'm sure you know, to eyes that choose to see, the evidence is so vast that it is really beyond reckoning. And even for those who wish not to see, there is at least one evidence of Something beyond that is compelling . . . if it is squarely faced.

That evidence goes like this: if Naturalism is really true, and there really is nothing beyond Nature, then absolutely nothing exists apart from the inexorable and *random* processes of cause and effect that result from the *random* fluctuations of atoms across infinite stretches of time. That would mean that, whatever we may think about the matter, *we humans actually have no freedom whatsoever*, because everything we do or think—*everything*—is the predetermined result

⁷ The underlying reason why persons hold to Naturalism instead of Supernaturalism really has nothing at all to do with miracles. The deepest reason why persons refuse to accept the possibility of God's existence is that if there really is a God, then there really are objective standards for our lives, for which we are—and will be *accountable*. That's the real reason.

of complex chains of cause and effect reaching back into infinity. Philosophical naturalists who are fully consistent and honest acknowledge this.

But if everything is predetermined and cannot happen otherwise than it does, then our own thought is also of this sort, and therefore our thought, our reasoning, cannot possibly be valid. Yet unless our reasoning is valid, then no science, no knowledge can be true.

This is a problem. It's a Big Problem. The problem of the validity of reason is as huge a problem for philosophical Naturalists as the problem of evil is for those who believe in the God of the Bible.

Here's how Lewis put it: "Sooner or later," he said, "you must admit a [Rationality] which exists absolutely on its own. . . . If any thought is valid, such a [Rationality] must exist and must be the source of [our own thought]. Human minds . . . do not come from nowhere. Each has come into Nature from Supernature: each has its tap-root in an eternal, self-existent, rational Being, whom we call God. Each is an offshoot, or spearhead or incursion of that Supernatural reality into Nature. . . . **Rationality is the little telltale rift in Nature which shows that there is something beyond or behind her**" (pp. 28-29).

René Descartes' famous statement, "I think, therefore I exist," is the Achilles heel of Naturalism, although he did not intend it to be so. Our ability to reason, and our persistent conviction that our reasoning has substance and validity, is the key that opens the door to Super-Nature, whether we want it to or not. **And so miracles are indeed possible.**

This brings us back to the question of just what, exactly, miracles *are*. **A miracle is most emphatically not something that breaks the laws of Nature.** Rather, a miracle is "an event which is not producible by the natural causes that are operative at the time and place that the event occurs."⁸ **Miracles occur when God allows the realm of Super-Nature to intersect with Nature. This intersection adds things to Nature's chains of cause and effect that weren't there before.**

For example, "If God creates a miraculous spermatozoon in the body of a virgin [—an insignificant task for the one who spoke the universe into existence—that spermatozoon] does not proceed to break any laws. . . . The moment [anything] enters [Nature's] realm it obeys all her laws. Miraculous wine will intoxicate, miraculous conception will lead to pregnancy . . . miraculous bread will be digested" (pp. 60-61).

"A miracle," Lewis wrote, **"is emphatically not an event without cause or without results. Its cause is the activity of God: its results follow according to Natural law.** In the forward direction (i.e. during the time which follows its occurrence) it is interlocked with all Nature just like any other event. Its peculiarity is that it is not in that way interlocked backwards, interlocked with the previous history of Nature.

"And this is just what some people find intolerable. The reason they find it intolerable is that they start by taking Nature to be the whole of reality. And they are sure that all reality must be interrelated and consistent. I agree with them. **But I think they have mistaken a partial system within reality, namely Nature, for the whole.** . . . Miracles and the previous course of Nature are as well interlocked as any other two realities, but you must go back as far as their common Creator to find the interlocking. You will not find it *within* Nature" (p. 209).

⁸ William Lane Craig, in Lee Strobel, *The Case for Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), p. 62.

So where have we arrived after all this? Well, we've probably come back to where most of us began. Once we accept the existence of God—which our stubborn and persistent appeals to reason virtually require us to do—then the occurrence of miracles becomes somewhat expected rather than surprising.⁹ It will be our task over the next several sermons to consider where miracles fit in the scheme of God's relationship with us.

I hope you've been able to follow the general trajectory of my argument this morning. I've asked you to work harder than I usually do. And, while these considerations have been important, the most persuasive argument by far that there is Something Beyond comes from personal encounter of and personal relationship with God the Father through Jesus the Son in the power of the Spirit. **Once you have met God for yourself, life is never the same again.**

The Good News for Holy Week—indeed, for every week—is that God is “there.” Actually, God is *here*, and God is not silent.¹⁰ *“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the LORD, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart”* (Jeremiah 29:11-13).

Have you met Him?

⁹ While disagreeing with Lewis is something I do with trepidation, I am not so sure as he that affirming the validity of reason proves the existence of God as compellingly as he does. The biblical test of prophecy has always been the question of whether very specific prophetic affirmations come true just as they were predicted. In similar fashion, even if our reason were to be the result of the “random fluctuations of chance atoms,” it seems to me that the validity of our reason could be—and is—confirmed by the predictive ability of that reason. Examples of such validity could be multiplied without number, but the simple facts that airplanes can fly and that spacecraft go where we intend for them to go, connecting with planets when and where we expect them to, seem proof enough.

¹⁰ See Francis Schaeffer, *He Is There, and He Is Not Silent* (Tyndale, 1972).

The Idea of a Miracle

1. “A miracle is an interference with Nature by supernatural power” (C.S. Lewis, *Miracles*).
2. To appeal to the miraculous as an explanation for events around us is usually to remain in an ignorance of the natural world that is fundamentally disobedient to God’s ancient command to “fill the earth *and subdue it*” (Genesis 1:28).
3. We’ve been taught that Nature—“the universe”—is all there is, and that nothing exists beyond the Nature that we know (philosophical “Naturalism”).
4. Miracles—if they exist—come from something outside our Nature, and Naturalism tells us that there is no such Something.
5. But if Naturalism is really true, then however we may perceive it, we humans actually have no freedom whatsoever, because everything we do is the inescapable result of complex chains of cause and effect reaching back into infinity (“Determinism”).
6. The Determinism required by Naturalism means that we have absolutely no reason to consider our thought processes to be valid: they are totally predetermined. But unless our reasoning is valid, no science, no knowledge can be true.
7. René Descartes’ famous statement, “*I think, therefore I exist,*” is the Achilles heel of Naturalism, though he did not intend it to be so. Our ability to reason, and our persistent conviction that our reasoning has substance and validity, is the key that opens the door to Super-Nature, whether we want it to or not . . . and miracles become possible.

If we wish to accept our own thinking as valid, then sooner or later we must admit a prior Rationality that exists absolutely on its own. This Rationality is the Source of our own thought. **Rationality “is the little telltale rift in Nature which shows that there is something beyond or behind her”** (C.S. Lewis).

8. The underlying reason why persons hold to Naturalism instead of Supernaturalism really has nothing to do with miracles. The reason why persons refuse to accept the possibility of God’s existence is that if there really is a God, then there really are objective standards for our lives, for which we are—and will be *accountable*. That’s the real reason.
9. A miracle is most emphatically not something that breaks the laws of Nature. Rather, a miracle is “an event which is not producible by the natural causes that are operative at the time and place that the event occurs” (W. L. Craig). Miracles occur when God allows the realm of Super-Nature to intersect with Nature. This intersection adds things to Nature’s chains of cause and effect that weren’t there before.
10. Once we accept the existence of God (the Something beyond Nature that is required in order for our thinking to be valid), then the occurrence of miracles becomes somewhat to be expected rather than surprising.