

This is the 4th Sunday out of the past 5 that our Gospel lesson is taken from the first chapter of Mark. Mark moves quickly, and there's lots of stuff in chapter 1. And much of it centers on Jesus healing people and casting out demons. To Mark, this miraculous healing ministry of Jesus is one of the most important things about him.

Yet, it sometimes puts up a barrier with 21st century Christians. The idea of miraculous healings makes some people nervous. They might say, "Well sure, it's in the Bible, but people were so primitive back then that they would fall for anything. We modern people are much more sophisticated. You don't expect me to believe that God intervenes in the world and breaks natural scientific laws in order to do something supernatural do you?"

Now there are lots of folks who think this way, both outside and inside the church.

In fact, the first major thinker to say that miracles were impossible was the philosopher David Hume, who wrote over 250 years ago.

In a nutshell, Hume's argument is this, 'God is not about to break the natural laws he himself has set in place. Therefore God would never do something miraculous. And you'd have to be a simpleton or a moron to think that he would.' Now that argument has held powerful sway over both Western culture and the church for over two centuries.

However, in the past few decades, theologians have begun to shift away from Hume. I won't bore you with the details. I don't want to see your eyes rolling up in the back of your heads. But in a nutshell, Hume makes assumptions based upon rigid Newtonian physics. 20th and 21st century science left such rigidity behind. Relativity, Heisenberg's uncertainty theory, quantum mechanics, indeterminacy, chaos theory, all leave plenty of room for singular exceptions to general rules.

Science has known this for decades. Theology is beginning to catch up.

Perhaps it's important to remember what miracles meant to people in the Bible. Miracles were not about overriding natural laws. That was not on their radar screen. Miracles rather were demonstrations of the power of God. Miracles in scripture are nothing more, and nothing less, than signs that God is powerfully active in the world.

It's been my experience that big flashy miracles don't happen very often. I know a priest and a bishop who have each experienced big miracles. The bishop witnessed a miraculous healing of a boy's burned leg. The priest witnessed a pot of beans that was feeding disaster victims in Central America mysteriously feed many, many times more people than it should have possibly fed. But such miracles are rare. In fact both of these individuals have hung on to the stories of these miracles for years, precisely because they're not an everyday occurrence.

I haven't been a firsthand witness to any miracle quite that flashy. But there is something that I experienced firsthand that makes me wonder.

About 20 years ago, when I was still serving in Kansas, I got a call. One of our dear older ladies had been downtown working at Episcopal Social Services downtown, and she had collapsed from an apparent stroke. Renee was with me, and we headed to the emergency room, and got there even before her family. Joyce was on the table, she couldn't move her right arm or leg, and she could only talk with one side of her mouth.

Eventually her family arrived. The doctor came in and recommended administering a blood thinner. After discussing possible side effects, the family agreed.

While we were waiting for the injection, I got out my oil stock, the vial of holy oil we use for the sacrament of unction. We gathered around Joyce and prayed for her and I anointed her with oil. Then we waited some more.

We were talking with Joyce, trying to keep her mind off of the coming shot. Eventually we noticed that Joyce was not only joining in the conversation, but talking with all of her mouth, and gesturing with both hands.

We called the nurse in to ask if Joyce still needed the blood thinner. Eventually the doctor came in and examined her and said there was no need for the shot, she had full movement on her right side.

I was thinking of possible scientific explanations: the clot spontaneously broke up or moved somewhere else. But the ER doctor looked at me and said, "The nurse said you prayed for her."

I said, "Yes, we did."

And the doctor said, "That must explain it then." Ironically, the doctor was much quicker than the priest to see something miraculous.

Was it a miracle or just something spontaneous? I don't know. Only God knows. I know that I have anointed many, many other people in the past 20 years. Some of them get better. And some don't. That's part of the mystery of it all. God is not a vending machine. We can't drop a quarter in and expect to get exactly what we want when we want it.

But I know that God does is active in the world. I have seen signs of his work. Changes in a person's attitude. Healing of a broken relationship. Deliverance from forces of addiction. Faith being present in a person who had previously had no faith. Thus I know that God is living and well and active, in my life, and in others' lives.

Maybe that's what miracles are. Maybe miracles are nothing more and nothing less than signs that God is active in the world. God's power of life and love active in the world. God's power just as present now as it was in Capernaum almost 2,000 years ago.

May we be open to receiving his power. And may we always be looking to see his hand at work in the world about us.