

Signs and Wonders
LaGrave Christian Reformed Church
August 22,2021-AM Service
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Acts 5:12-16, 9:32-35, 19:11-12, and 14:1-3.

Early on in this sermon series, a church member approached me after the service. He wanted to talk about the book of Acts. He'd been reading it for his private devotions and he wanted to say he'd been enjoying his reading. He also wanted to share an observation. "I know why the early church grew so much!" he said. "I know why so many people were converted! It was because the disciples could do all those miracles." It's a fair observation. Read the book of Acts, and on every page you read how God gave his disciples the ability to perform signs and wonders. The miracles are everywhere. And they are not just any old miracle the disciples are doing, they are amazing—they are astonishing. In Acts, Luke often calls these miracles 'signs and wonders' and they are a major theme of his book. Let me read just four of the many passages where they appear, so you can get a sense of how the power of God moves through these disciples.

So what did we just hear? "People brought the sick into the streets and laid them on beds and mats so that at least Peter's shadow might fall on them as he passed by." "Even handkerchiefs and aprons that had touched Paul were taken to the sick and their illnesses were cured." Peter healed the lame man, and all those who lived in Lydda and Sharon saw and turned to the Lord. People brought their sick to Peter and ALL of them were healed (5:16). Amazing stuff. Spectacular signs and wonders. And these are only a few of the miracles. I haven't even mentioned Paul raising Eutychus from the dead or Peter raising Dorcas.

I wonder, what is your reaction to these signs and wonders? Part of my reaction is grateful amazement. Wow! Wouldn't it have been amazing to be in Ephesus and see Paul heal people? I wish I could have seen the look on the face of the people who witnessed Peter heal Aeneas. How exciting for the disciples and for all the witnesses! God is good! But then my second reaction is, why don't I see some of these things in our churches today? Where are the signs and wonders? When people brought their sick to Peter and Acts 5 says they were all healed. Sick people come to me and I pray for them—I pray hard and with as much faith as I can muster, but they are not all healed. Far from it. I've never heard of a Christian Reformed minister who was able to bring healing by distributing handkerchiefs that he'd touched. And I've never heard of any minister in any denomination who healed people simply by having his or her shadow fall across the afflicted. What happened to the signs and wonders? The Spirit gave the apostles the power to do amazing things. How come the Spirit hasn't given the same power to me? Or to any of you?

Because we could use it. We all know people whose lives that are so miserable because of sickness, cancer, depression. We know people captive to addictions. Every week I come across multiple situations where I wish I could walk over to a hurting person, put my hand on them and make their pain go away. 'Holy Spirit if you could use me to free some of those captives, it could do so much good. And I would give you the glory. It would be so good for the church. People all over this town would turn to you!' In Acts you have a picture of a church full of signs and wonders. Our reality seems completely different. What's going on?

This contrast doesn't just appear when you compare our generation with Acts, way back in the 4th century people like Augustine and John Chrysostm—great church Fathers—noticed that

the church of Acts seemed to have far more miracles than the churches they knew and served. In his *City of God*, Augustine remarks that miracles are far less frequent and spectacular in his time. “For even now miracles are wrought in the name of Christ...but they are not so brilliant and conspicuous as to cause them to be published with such glory as accompanied the former miracles.” Book 22, chapter 8. John Calvin also acknowledged that miracles were far less frequent in his day. He actually wrote an essay in which he defended the church of the Reformation against people who said it wasn’t a real movement of God, because it wasn’t accompanied by signs and wonders. Augustine’s experience was different from the church of Acts. Calvin’s experience was different from the church of Acts. Our experience is different from the book of Acts. What shall we say about this change?

A popular way of explaining this difference is to hold to a view called Cessationism. Cessationists believe that the power to do signs and wonders was something that the Holy Spirit gave to the apostles and the members of the early church during what is called the *apostolic age*. The apostolic age is the era when the apostles—the people who had seen Jesus and learned from Jesus—were still alive. During the apostolic age, while the church was getting established, the Holy Spirit gave the disciples the power to do the wonders we read about in Acts, but after the church was established and after the Bible was in place, the Holy Spirit withdrew those gifts. They ceased. That’s a Cessationist view. It’s a popular position among Calvinist types. Here’s BB Warfield. Does anyone still remember that name? He was a noted professor at Princeton Seminary and fierce opponent of liberal theology. Here’s his take on the gap between our experience and what we read in the book of Acts. “[God] has given to the world one organically complete revelation [the Bible], adapted to all, sufficient for all, provided for all, and from this one completed revelation He requires each to draw his whole spiritual sustenance. Therefore, it is that the miraculous working which is but the sign of God’s revealing power, cannot be expected to continue, and in point of fact does not continue, after the revelation of which it is the accompaniment has been completed. It is unreasonable to ask miracles, says John Calvin—or to find them—where there is no new gospel.” There are many Calvinists who hold to some variation of that position.

What can we say about signs and wonders and their significance in scripture and their significance in the church today? Let me begin by saying the most honest answer to this question is I don’t know. No one knows. God’s ways and God’s mind are not always available to us. Anyone who tells you they can explain why this is happening is offering you speculation dressed up in the clothes of certainty. I will however hazard some ideas about why God might have dialed back his wonders. First, of all I am not comfortable with the Cessationist position, at least in its strictest form. I don’t think miracles and wonders have completely stopped. When you probe the lives of many Christians, you will hear stories of miracles. Deep spiritual events, remarkable coincidences, strange deliverances, near-death experiences, and unexplained healings. Probe beneath the surface of most Christian’s lives and there are stories of signs and wonders. Listen to people’s testimonies and they will tell you of mystical moments and miracles. God still moves. Miracles still happen.

That said, God doesn’t send as many signs and wonders as he did back in the early church. Why is that? I don’t know. Maybe the Cessationists have a point when they say the Spirit did more miracles in the early church as a way to establish the gospel message, but that once the church was more established and the Bible was in place, those miracles were less needed. Because even in Acts it’s clear that the miracles were never the main event. Faith in Jesus was the main event. The church was never meant to be a place you went to see miracles; it was a

place you went to become more deeply rooted in the life of Jesus, where you learned to be his servant, where you learned to pick up your cross and follow him. Miracles were supposed to point people to Jesus.

You hear that clearly in Acts 14:3. That verse is very clear about the purpose of miracles. Paul and Barnabas spend considerable time preaching the gospel of Jesus in Iconium, and “the Lord confirmed the message of his grace, by enabling them to perform signs and wonders.” The signs and wonders point to the message of grace. In Acts 8:6, it says this about the ministry of Philip: “When the crowds heard Philip and the signs he performed, they all paid close attention to what he said.” Signs and wonders aren’t the main event; they point to the main event. They point to the gospel. They point to Jesus.

Perhaps the Holy Spirit has backed off on the signs and wonders for the same reason Jesus tried to keep his miracles quiet. You know that, right? Jesus would often heal someone, he would perform this sign, this wonder, and then he would tell the person not to tell anyone about the miracle. He did that because he doesn’t want people to make it about the miracles. In his ministry Jesus does many miracles, but he has an ambivalent relationship with them. He deliberately downplays them...and sometimes he refuses to do them. Twice, once in Matthew 12 and the other in Matthew 16, people ask Jesus to give a sign and he refuses to give one. “A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a sign!” he tells the crowd. When miracles start to become the main event—something that you do see in some charismatic churches and in many health and wealth churches—you have a problem. Miracles are not the gospel; they are meant to point to the gospel.

In Matthew 24 Jesus even says that not all signs and wonders are of God. Just because a preacher claims to speak for me and does great miracles, that doesn’t mean they’re giving you the truth. “False Messiahs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and wonders to deceive!” That’s sobering. A church could be full of signs and wonders and still be deceived. All this to say, miracles have never been the center. Jesus is at the center. Acts 14:3—God enables signs and wonders as a way to confirm the message of his grace.

Here’s my favorite image of what a miracle is, a miracle is like a 60-degree day in February. Once in a while, late in February, at the end of a long cold winter, you will have a day where the temperature suddenly spikes to 60. Those days are amazing. People come out of their home. Kids put on t-shirts and pull out their bikes. Everyone is smiling. I remember one of those when I was about 14 and my friends all went out and played basketball in the driveway. We took our shirts off and we were all sweaty. In February! In Canada! It was like a miracle. As great as that day was, it would be crazy for my friends and I to expect the rest of February to be like that, to expect this miracle to be repeated every day. The 60-degree day was a wonderful gift to be enjoyed, and it’s a gift that points to something beyond itself. It is a sign that spring is coming. Winter’s reign is over. The cold will break, the darkness will end, the snow will melt and soon it will be spring. So, miracles are important in Acts. They tell the world that the king is coming and evil is defeated. But they were never meant to be the main event, they are meant to turn our attention to Jesus, to put our trust in him. They give encouragement to us weary pilgrims as we make our journey toward his eternal spring.

That’s what a miracle did for Fleming Rutledge. Fleming Rutledge used to be the pastor of an Episcopalian church in New York city. A formal church, a liturgical church like ours. Not a church given to speaking in tongues or great outbursts of emotion. In her first years as a pastor she was called to visit a young woman who had just graduated from an Ivy League college, but who had been diagnosed with some sort of crippling arthritis. Rutledge visited her at the family

home and found her in the backyard in a wheelchair. She was very unsure how to help this girl. She was very uncertain of what to say. She talked and offered words of comfort as best she could. At the end of the visit, as every pastor should do, she offered to pray with this young woman. She put her hand on the girl's knee and with hesitating words, asked Jesus to heal her. Jesus did. Two weeks later she was out of the wheelchair and walking around and 20 years later there has been no recurrence. "Nothing like this had ever happened to me before, and nothing like this has ever happened in my ministry since" she writes. But for her whole ministry, that moment has given her the confidence to know that God is strong, Jesus is alive, the Spirit is moving, and the eternal spring of his kingdom is coming.

And now that I've told you the story, let her miracle do the same for you. For you exhausted parent trying to hold your family together, trying to love people who are driving you crazy—his spring is coming. For you who have been living with depression and find yourself beaten down by the ups and downs of this disease—his spring is coming. To the young person out there trying to figure yourself out and trying to find your place in the world, feeling like no one gets you—his spring is coming. To the older person coming to the end of your life, feeling the dull weight of age and feeling fear instead of peace as you get close to the end—his spring is coming. To a world caught in an everlasting cycle of injustice and fear—to the people of Cuba and Haiti and Afghanistan—his spring is coming. God is strong, Jesus is alive. The Spirit is moving. And his spring is coming.

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