

The problem of preaching miracle stories

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Jesus and Elisha perform great miracles. What do we modern westerners do with this?

It's possible you come from a church background in which the obvious takeaway is to pray for God to do the same thing in our lives here and now. Or maybe you believe such events are still possible, but less probable.

In any case, most of us preachers want to avoid suggesting that the difference between then and now is our lack of faith. So the temptation is to conjure up a homiletical metaphor, or to explain the way God now provides.

These miracles present a problem for preachers. We love Chris Angel specials on A & E, but Jesus and Elisha call on the power of the Spirit, not smoke and mirrors. This is a metaphysical conundrum for a culture that loves to ask, "How did that happen?"

Perhaps this tension—the tension created by the fact that we can't quite get it—is the point of entry into the text. A friend of mine holds two important professional posts: he is a professor of early Christianity and a dad. In a recent Facebook post, he described a conversation that unfolded as he walked his son Charlie through their evening catechism:

Me [the dad]: Who's older, God the Father or God the Son?

Charlie: Well, if God was a man, then the Father would be older. But God is not a man so... I don't know how to answer that question.

Me: Ccoooooorrrrrrect!!!

There is something so big about God that we can't quite get it all. Our inability to understand all of God creates the playground necessary to explore God.

In *The Dark Interval Towards a Theology of Story*, John Dominic Crossan offers this five-fold narrative typology:

Myth establishes world. Apologue defends world. Action describes world. Satire attacks world. Parable subverts world.

I submit that we can stretch this typology to at least some of the miracles of Jesus. Their revelation is twofold. They send beams of light from God's eschatological future into the present, reminding of things to come. And, as in this case, they subvert our understanding of the world's economic suppositions.

Preachers can preach this miracle as the power of God to radically change the way the community exists. This larger change is the long-term effect of the kingdom-pointing miracle.