

What about Jesus' Miracles?

Colleagues,

Two summers ago we were back in Lithuania where we'd been as ELCA Global Mission Volunteers in 1997. On the morning of our departure to head back home, a dear Russian friend came to say farewell. But before he got that far he said: "I want to be baptized." After the shock wore off, we checked the precedent of Philip and the Ethiopian royal officer (Acts chapter 8) and followed through on his request—kitchen basin, remembered order of baptism, Marie's hand-made certificate, the two Christians taking us to the airport as witnesses. We're still not clear about what sort of local Christian community gives Sasha [not his real name] a Christian context, but we continue to push that envelope with him. And we stay in e-mail contact. Now and then he even telephones us—even once here in Singapore.

One of his recent questions was about miracles. Here's what he said and here's what I said.

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

Dear Sasha, I'm sending copies of this to X and Y, because I want to enlist them onto my "team" for continuing conversation with you in Klaipeda. I don't know if you have any Christian community—even two or three folks—surrounding you. So, if not, you need one. Even an independent thinker as you are. For after the baptized confess Jesus as their Lord, they [you] are "stuck" with all the others who also call him Lord. That is not

MY idea. It's HIS idea. So capitalize on it.

We received your e-mail last week in which you say this:

"I need your direction in one question, which is of some importance for me. Unfortunately, this importance is only intuitive, so I can't explain it yet. I need to know someone's opinion about the Miracles Jesus made. Of course you know what I mean. Not How he healed the blind, or resurrected Lazarus, but WHY?"

Here are some thoughts just off the top of my head.

- 1. To ask WHY is a very good question. For my students I have distinguished between the word Miracle and the word Marvel (in Latin, miraculum and mirabilium). The marvel elicits wonder. The issue is not HOW something happened, but WHY it happened, why it happened at all. And especially why did it happen for me? The word serendipity, a relatively new word in my English vocabulary, is close to that. Serendipity is always surprising good things that I never expected, and they happen to me.*
- 2. So let's talk about Jesus' marvels, which I think is the best way to translate that word, especially since they are regularly called "signs and wonders." That already signals the marvel element. In fact, in John's gospel the word sign or signal is the primary word he uses for such actions of Jesus. Thus as rescue operations they are something different from what is usually happening, even from what God is usually doing.*
- 3. The rescue operations are obviously for people in need. One regular focus for such operations is that the people need release from something that is "possessing" them. This is often expressed as demonic possession. But here*

we need to bridle our Enlightenment mentality ["Nonsense. Demons don't exist."] and focus on the word possession itself. Not just in ancient superstitious ages did "powers" take over people's lives. Sometimes a whole nation gets "possessed" by an ideology. But as a Russian you know that. And as an American I know that too. Because today our country is possessed / obsessed with a Messianic mentality to save the world. All such possessions are finally demonic. They are finally destructive.

4. In the New Testament Jesus engages the ownership issue to release people from alien owners and put them into a new life-giving ownership. The plot usually runs like this: some destructive power – physical, mental, social – has "ownership" of the victim. The person is helpless to break free from that destructive owner, and comes to Jesus for help. The deepest need expressed is to be set free from that affliction which is "owning my life." Jesus regularly consents. "Ownership transfer" is his own Messianic mission, not just to liberate the folks from the destructive owners, but to get these folks re-owned by God, who was the original owner / creator of all these humans in the first place.
5. God's ownership mediated by Christ is the opposite of destruction. It is life and health and peace. Put all three of these together and you get what the word "righteousness" means. The frequently-used words Redeemer, Redemption, regularly mean just that: restored to the original owner. New Testament talk about Kingdom of God is exactly that. It is not about heaven or going to heaven but it is re-connecting with God as my "owner," the one to whom I belong. And Jesus' role is as God's agent for this. He is God's son who "lays down his life" so that such ownership transfer for sinners [for all of

us who are “owned” by other “lords”] can happen. That’s what Holy Week in the western church calendar is all about. Good Friday and Easter Sunday are God’s work of cosmic ownership transfer.

6. Central here is the “marvel,” not the “miracle.” It is not HOW did this serendipity happen, but WHY did it happen at all? And the answer is simple: God wants his lost kids to be brought back home. So Son Jesus is sent by the Father to save the lost kids, to bring us back home to “Papa.”

Well, those are some first thoughts. It’s now time for me to head out for my Sunday morning chores at the Thai Good News Center, a Thai-speaking Lutheran congregation here in Singapore. These Thai people (50,000 of them in Singapore) are mostly cheap labor used for S’s booming economy. They are prime candidates who need to be redeemed from alien owners. But that’s also true for many of us rich folks. And possibly also for you.

Marie sends her love.

Peace & Joy!

Ed