

“External Miracles Don't Cut It”

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Scripture Readings

Psalm 23

Acts 4:5-13

(see below)

Insight for Worship

True Christianity n. 501 by Emanuel Swedenborg

These days people are asking why miracles do not happen anymore the way they used to. There is the belief that if they did happen, we would all acknowledge God from the depths of our hearts. The reason miracles are not happening today the way they used to is that miracles are coercive; they take away our free choice in spiritual matters. They make us more earthly than spiritual. Since the time of the Lord's Coming, everyone in the Christian world has had the capability of becoming spiritual. We become spiritual solely from the Lord through the agency of the Word. If miracles induced us to believe, we would actually lose this capability, because, as I just mentioned, they are coercive and take away our free choice in spiritual matters. And when it comes to spiritual things, everything that is forced on us intrudes into our earthly self and closes the door, so to speak, to the spiritual level in us that is our true inner self. It deprives our inner self of all ability to see anything true in the light. After that, our only thought about spiritual matters would be reasoning on the part of our earthly self, and our earthly self sees everything that is truly spiritual upside down.

Our Bible story in *The Book of Acts* this morning is a very powerful one for me, for several reasons:

- 1) Because it reminds us of the permanence of the Lord's glorified humanity remaining present and highly influential in life, especially for all who believe in the truth of Easter.
- 2) It illustrates for us how compassionate and courageous the Lord is, as we see shown in how loving and merciful both Peter and John were that day when they came upon the crippled man at the gateway of the Temple, knowing that putting God's love into action like that through an awe-inspiring miracle would be a very risky thing to do.
- 3) This story gives us a platform to consider a very important question as believers in God's Word: why is it that external miracles (such as giving a blind man back his sight, or healing a crippled person enabling them to walk again, or raising people from death, as Jesus did with Lazarus) are usually not used by the Lord anymore to inspire love and faith inside of us? Is there a reason for this?

I appreciate the many stories we find in the New Testament not long after Jesus' resurrection that first Easter morn, because among other things, they show us wonderful things that kept on unfolding within the lives and journeys of the Lord's disciples, who now reveal an amazing change within them after they had been visited by their Risen Savior, even behind locked doors. One of the most meaningful and glorious evidences to me of the truth and permanence of Lord's glorified and Divine influence in life after His resurrection is the amazing CHANGE we see exhibited by the eleven disciples, shown in part in our story this morning. They went from being forlorn and deeply anxious and afraid to being calm, steady, loving, faithful and *unafraid!*

The immensity of their total change in their attitude and behavior is the greatest indication to me that the Lord's post-Easter visitations with them were genuine and transformational! Also, that they were now feeling and experiencing the very power and guiding Divine influence of the Risen Lord, which the Scriptures refer to as the Lord's "Holy Spirit"--which our theology tells us is the outpouring power and actions of God's Life-Force. This change in the disciples was now flowing through them and guiding them to not only preach the great message of ongoing salvation in the name of the Lord, but also to manifest it in many powerful acts of kindness and miraculous healing.

And so, on this special day in the lives of Peter and John, they would be the hands and the lips of our Lord as they walked toward an outer gateway to the Jerusalem Temple. We read about how this encounter unfolded:

"And Peter directed his gaze at him, as did John, and said, "Look at us." ⁵ And he fixed his attention on them, expecting to receive something from them. ⁶ But Peter said, "I have no silver and gold, but what I do have I give to you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk!"⁷ And he took him by the right hand and raised him up, and immediately his feet and ankles were made strong. ⁸ And leaping up, he stood and began to walk, and entered the temple with them, walking and leaping and praising God." ~Acts 4:5-8

I'm certain that all of the Lord's disciples knew full well what would happen to them once they began their active ministries in or near the Holy Temple, which remained in the control of the Sanhedrin, the same Council that arrested Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane, and who then inspired Pontius Pilot to condemn Him to death using the Roman military on Good Friday.

The court before which Peter and John were brought was the Sanhedrin, the supreme court of the Jews. It was made up of over 70 members, all seen as the primary "movers and shakers" within and around the massive Holy Temple in Jerusalem, where Jesus had preached and done many miracles before His execution. In Roman times the Sanhedrin had the right of arrest. The one thing it could not do was to pass the death sentence, except in the single case of a Gentile who trespassed upon the inner sanctum of the Temple. The primary goal of the leaders of this council was to preserve the status quo, and they didn't waste time in bringing Peter and John before them after news of their miraculous healing had spread.

For most people, being brought before this large, intimidating council of Jewish elders would be a terrifying experience, for they were the very ones who had judged Jesus to be a blasphemer and then doomed His fate being partners of injustice with their cronies, the Romans. But rather than feeling intimidated, Peter opens up boldly and courageously, allowing the guiding, Divine influence of the Lord to give him the eloquent and purposeful words needed in that moment!

When I read of Peter's awesome speech as they were surrounded by such a dangerous, large group of religious leaders, I see this moment as one of history's great demonstrations of spiritual courage. Peter's speech was given to a gathering of the wealthiest, most intellectually learned and powerful groups in all the land. And yet, we can look back and witness this poor Galilean fisherman standing in front of Rome's henchmen, knowing that he was risking his life, just as Jesus did. Peter understood the peril he and John were in, and yet he stood there very strong, calm and resolute. It is the same power of the Lord's Divine presence and influence that has led me throughout my ordained ministry, which also is present within anyone who loves and believes in our Lord.

There are many shapes and sizes to being courageous in life, and to allow the Divine influence of the Lord to work through you. Significant historical acts of courage would be things like when Harriett Tubman secretly led slaves into freedom using her "underground railroad." Or, Mother Teresa living amongst the poorest of the poor in Calcutta, India, showing them love and dignity, helping them to thrive, learn and grow! Or, when women and men put their lives and reputations on the line fighting for voting rights for women in America back in the mid-1800's.

More everyday moments of vital courage that continue to be needed today are: to continue engaging in new experiences, like attending a meeting of an interfaith gathering to discuss how we can make a vitally needed difference in LaPorte; or to choose to attend a public forum meeting and then choose to speak your mind regarding our massive drug and alcohol problem, or perhaps about how to combat obesity. Or, when a teenager stands up for another student being picked on at school. Or, when an intimidated girlfriend or wife stands up for herself and chooses to leave an abusive relationship. Any act of courage we do today gives us experience of God's living, Divine influence now, which increases our inner strength for tomorrow, and for what's needed ahead.

Lastly, our New Testament lesson today helps us consider one last issue, which many wonder about in modern times: why is it that in modern times, even among those who are full of love and faith in the Lord, there are so few overt miracles being done, as they were in the days of Christ and His disciples? Our theology helps us understand the key to this puzzling question. The issue is that external miracles tend to be coercive, pulling us away from thinking freely about spiritual things. They influence people to think more naturally rather than spiritually. Indeed, "We become spiritual solely from the Lord through the agency of the Word." External miracles tend to force people into thinking spiritually, rather than through a more gentle approach, such as through freely choosing to attend worship services, or

meditation gatherings, or prayer circles, etc. Also, external miracles appeal to the natural degree of our minds, rather than to opening up to a much deeper level of spiritual Light and discernment of spiritual truth.

External miracles can and do still happen in modern times, such as the two miracles that happened through me and other people praying to God for His healing support in Omaha during my chaplaincy years. Yet, ever since the Lord's First Coming in the life and person of Jesus Christ, humanity has grown to be more spiritually open and free inside. This means that each individual is preserved and protected by the Lord, who is our Divine Shepherd. Thus, even amidst life's challenging pressures, demands and problems, when we choose to partner with God through meditating on the Word, we are given the great power of being able to rise above our stressors and pain, flying high over them "on eagles wings," able to consider which direction or choice in life is good and true.

External miracles usually do not "cut the mustard" of life. Rather, it is through daily reading and reflection upon God's Word, by listening to and reading helpful sermons or other messages centered in the Lord's truth and Light, by listening to inspiring music or by worshipping together where "two or three are gathered" in the Lord's name. Then our Good Shepherd can gently lead us internally beside still-spiritual waters of peacefulness within, we can trust in the Lord's protection during difficult times, and the Lord can lead us to find "green pastures" of nourishing insights that light our way! This Divine guidance leads us into being useful at work and at home, and to being very courageous in anxious times, as Peter and John were standing before the Sanhedrin, who hated our Lord and all who stood for His name.

May God continue to use and speak through us, just as He did with Peter, James and John, yet causing not so many *physical* miracles, but rather *interior* ones, as we are touched and influenced by the Lord's Love and Light---which give us the words we need in moments of difficulty that swiftly become moments of glory!

Amen.

Psalm 23

A psalm of David

The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.

² He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: He leadeth me beside the still waters.

³ He restoreth my soul: He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake.

⁴ Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for Thou art with me; Thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.

⁵ Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: Thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.

⁶Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.

Acts 4:5-13

⁵The next day the rulers, the elders and the teachers of the law met in Jerusalem. ⁶Annas the high priest was there, and so were Caiaphas, John, Alexander and others of the high priest's family. ⁷They had Peter and John brought before them and began to question them: "By what power or what name did you do this?"

⁸Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them: "Rulers and elders of the people! ⁹If we are being called to account today for an act of kindness shown to a man who was lame and are being asked how he was healed, ¹⁰then know this, you and all the people of Israel: It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed. ¹¹Jesus is

"the stone you builders rejected,
which has become the cornerstone.'

¹²Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved."

¹³When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus.