

"SIGNS AND WONDERS"

April 23, 1995

Acts 5:12a

Robert S. Wilch

I know a family whose son was in a tragic automobile accident. He has been paralyzed ever since and there is now no hope that he will ever walk again. His father and mother were devastated. But then their heart-break turned to anger. Their anger was directed at the other driver and at God. They have not been to church since. I have no way of knowing whether they remain angry at God or if they just don't think about Him anymore. Is what they are doing fair to God - to themselves?

I want to paraphrase a story told by Martin Buber, the great Jewish philosopher and story teller.

There was a time when the Will of the Lord whose hand has power over all things allowed an endless torrent of pain and sickness over all the earth. The air was heavy with tears. Even the angels gathered about the throne of God were not immune to this sadness. One of the angels grew restless because of the suffering he saw below. Even when the angels sang, his voice had a note of discord to it. His thoughts rebelled and contended with the Lord until he could stand it no longer. Pulling himself together, he came before the Lord and begged God to place the entire administration of the earth in his hands for one entire year. Other angels trembled at this audacity. But God looked at him with great love and granted his request.

And so a year of joy and sweetness visited the earth. The angel poured the wealth of his merciful heart over the most anguished of the earth's children. The groans of the sick and dying were no longer heard in the land. The fields never had such abundance before. At harvest time, there barely was room to store the crops. Proud and contented, the angel basked in his glory for when the dominion over the earth returned to the hands of God, the people of the earth would enjoy his gifts for years to come.

But one cold day, late in the year, a multitude of voices rose heavenward in an anguished cry. Frightened by the sound, the angel rushed to earth dressed as a pilgrim. Entering into the houses, he found that people were cursing the Lord for these false blessings. Bread baked from the harvest had the taste of clay and fell apart in their hands.

The angel returned to the heavens and collapsed at the feet of God and cried, "Lord, help me to understand where my power and judgement were lacking."

And God said, "Behold a truth which I have known from the beginning of time, a truth too deep and dreadful for your delicate hands . . . it is this, that the earth must be nourished with decay and covered with shadows; that its seeds may

sprout forth - and it is this, that souls must be made fertile with flood and sorrow, that through them the Great Work may be born."

Parker Palmer, in *The Active Life*, says that when he asks people whether the angel reminds them of anyone, they often name themselves. "We know what it is to be filled with distress and indignation over an obvious evil, to be driven by a desire to do good, to want desperately to save someone or something, to right a terrible wrong. But many of us know, too, what it is like when our angelic intentions turn out to have unexpected and even demonic results."

But make no mistake about it, there are many like the angel who feel that they could do a better job than God. They cannot believe that God, if He is good, would let bad things happen to good people. So they put God to the test and if God does not perform the way they want, they reject Him or discount Him. I wish they would not do so because when they do they have nothing left. They have lost everything.

The pre-Easter edition of *Time* magazine dated April 10, 1995, has as its cover story and lead article, "*Can We Still Believe In Miracles?*" It is well done and worth reading. It quotes Jesus, "Why does this generation ask for a sign?" It was an angry question of Jesus. He wondered, according to *Time*, about the hunger for miracles in his time as well we might wonder about it in ours. What he heard everywhere he went was "Touch me." "Heal me." "Save me." There is no doubt that he did touch them and healed and saved them but all the while realizing that miracles, produced on demand, could sabotage and undermine the very faith they were meant to strengthen. And then I quote, "For the truly faithful, no miracle is necessary; for those who must doubt, no miracle is sufficient."

The Israelites escaped the chasing Egyptians and no part of the escape was more dramatic nor more a sign of God's aid to the downtrodden than the great scene at the Red Sea when the Israelites faced the water on one side and felt the hot breath of the Egyptian army at their backs on the other. If God intervened into the normal order of his own creation by Moses lifting the rod, so be it. If any other explanation is closer to the truth than this, so be it also. What we have for sure is the testimony that the flight of the Jewish people had, and it had to have, continuing assistance from on high for it to succeed.

And that is where we can come to grips with this matter of signs and wonders - miracles in our time. We live in God's world where, by His Grace, freedom abounds. It is a freedom that some of us use for good and some of us use for evil. Some who mourn the loss of children or spouses or parents in the barbaric tragedy in Oklahoma City may need to rail at God for awhile to manage their terrible grief. If they need to do that, God can stand it. In fact, He suffers as much as they do, if not more. But what would you have wanted Him to do? Change the minds of the bombers from evil to good? He's always trying to do that with all of us but some do not want to hear or to change. Surely these men's parents will be distraught when they find out it was their son. Could he have stalled the truck? Made Ryder refuse to

rent it? Disarmed the bombs? Made everyone late to work? No wonder the angel wanted to make the world better. How would you have God do it? Do you really believe that your plan would be better than His?

Drunken drivers cause accidents and people are killed. Leaders of countries take their nations to war and people are killed. In all events like these, we can identify the culprit.

But how about illness? I suppose some cancer is in the world because of our life style - but so far as we know, not all. Some bodies are attacked by insidious and deadly diseases we know so little about. AIDS, our new enemy came out of where? We may not know. We do know how it is passed on from one to another to another.

I said before, the faithful don't need miracles and for doubters, no miracle is enough.

For me, life, no matter what it brings, is a miracle. The Virgin Birth at Christmas is too much for some. For me, birth itself is a miracle, but I can't deny that miracle, because seeing my children is more than enough to cast away all doubt.

When my father died, a doctor friend commented how fortunate Dad was because his death came swiftly and mercifully. And he added, "It is not unusual or surprising that we get sick. The real miracle is that we stay well." If he is right, then miracles are taking place minute by minute in your body and in mine, warding off what could harm us. We never used to know very much about bad or good water, edible or poisonous foods, tainted food, the presence of all kinds of germs which literally cover everything we touch and our fingers too. Now we know about those things. Are you not willing to believe that every passing day that we enjoy good health is a sign that God has made this world good for you. So give thanks for each one.

And when the time of testing comes, let it be another reminder that the Great Work of God can also be continued through this testing. People who live through the worst of trials and keep their faith, their optimism and even their good cheer, are not fools. They are people who have felt the power of God in their life and that is enough of a miracle to them. These are the people who receive all they expect; all that they look for and for them, that is enough!

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