

What's your reaction when someone tells you they saw a miracle?

I don't know about you, but I tend to approach claims of the miraculous with a healthy amount of skepticism – not because I doubt that my God is all-powerful and can do more than I ask or imagine (*not that at all!*), because I understand that we are far removed from the days of Jesus and the Apostles.

There are a lot of blessings, a lot of gifts or special opportunities, I look forward to in my career as a pastor in God's church – the miraculous gift of healing is not one that I expect. When I go and visit one of our church families in the hospital with a terminal case of cancer, or recovering from bypass surgery, or healing after a car crash I don't expect, and I don't think they expect that it is my job to show up in that hospital room with a baggie of dirt, spit in the dirt to make a little mud, rub it on whatever part of that person is broken and miraculously heal them - again, not because God couldn't do that, but because I understand that we are far removed from the days of Jesus and the Apostles.

2000 years ago, at the time of Jesus and for his disciples in the first years of the Christian church, that kind of healing happened, but that is simply not God's normal way of operating in his church today. I don't know of any WELS pastors with the gift of healing.

I approach miraculous claims with a healthy amount of skepticism not only because we are far removed from Jesus' day, but also because the Bible makes clear that not all miracles come from God. The Bible warns us that the devil will use counterfeit miracles to draw people away from Jesus. So, the Bible itself warns us to have a healthy amount of skepticism when someone claims to have witnessed a miracle.

So, I'm a skeptic when it comes to modern miracles, and I hope you are too. I certainly know, and you do too, that God can, has, and will do the miraculous, but God himself warns us that just because someone says they saw a miracle, doesn't mean it was from him.

But I wonder if this healthy skepticism sometimes leads us to fail to see the miracles of the Bible for what they really are... to appreciate them the way we should.

When I read one of the many accounts like Mark 7 or Acts 3 today, as the words register in my mind, it is easy to think, "That's pretty cool. Jesus just stuck his fingers in a guy's ears, spit and touched his tongue, and instantly he could hear and speak, that's impressive. Peter takes a crippled man's hand and instantly his legs (which would have been just a pile of atrophied tissue) instantly had muscle, and structure, and coordination so he's able to run and jump all over the place, that's cool." But very easily, the lesson of these miracles could stop there.

But is that the reason Jesus did miracles - so that folks around him could say, "That's pretty cool. Neat parlor trick you got there Jesus?"... Did God have these miracles recorded in the Bible so that folks like us could sit back in a padded pew 2000 years later and think, "Cool... wish Pastor Hoff could do that (we'd have no problem packing the pews of this church if Pastor had a little razzle-dazzle like that up his sleeve)?"

These miracles certainly display how "cool" and awesome our God is, but God has them recorded for more than just the "cool factor". The miracles of the Bible aren't just little show-off moments for God and his followers; they are much, much more. In these miracles of Jesus and his disciples, God has a very important message for you personally.

The miracles we read today, they're not just some neat story that should be mildly and briefly entertaining to us 2000 years later. These miracles are messages, sermons from God for you.

You see, God wants you to know something. He wants you to know that he sees you. He's not just some oblivious God who created this world, set it spinning, but is just too busy to understand what is going on in your life. He sees you wrestling in the mess that sin has created in this world and he sees the messes that are coming in your future – ones you worry about and ones you couldn't even see coming.

God understands how this world that you live in works. He's the one who had to tell Adam and Eve just what their first sin would mean for them and everyone born from them. Pain, suffering, meaningless toil and labor – that describes much of the world in which we live, and God knows that.

We live in a world where people are born blind, where people are born deaf, where people are born lame, or mute, where people get cancer, Alzheimer's, Parkinson's ... and on and on and on it goes.

We live in a world full of people like Isaiah described: feeble hands and knees that give way – they are just plain tired. They work all day every day and for what? A paycheck that will fly out the door much quicker than it came in, a year or two of health or rest that will be gone before you know it, fleeting peace and tranquility that never last...

We live in a world full of people with fearful hearts – hearts that try in vain to forget that in the very near future you or someone you love will get sick or hurt or lose something precious or die.

God sees you right here, right now, in this world where, sure, you will have brief moments of joy, peace and contentment, but for every moment of joy there will be just as many, if not more, moments of sorrow, and panic, and depression and want.

God sees you and in the miracles of Jesus he wants you to know something... he cares. He cares about you, about every pain, every heart ache, every broken bone, every disease. He cares. This isn't how God wanted the world to go. This isn't how he wanted it to be for you.

Jesus' life, the miracles we read today, it's not just some neat story that should be mildly and briefly entertaining to us 2000 years later. This miracle is a message, a sermon from God. God sees you, he cares, and most importantly, he is doing something about it.

That first lesson from Isaiah unpacks this incredible sermon from your God: **Say to those with fearful hearts, "Be strong, do not fear; your God will come, he will come with vengeance; with divine retribution, he will come to save you."**

I wrestled back in high school. I started my sophomore year. Before that I had never wrestled a day in my life, but I had the opportunity to wrestle varsity. There was no one on our team that could wrestle the 160lb weight class. At that time I weighed 150lbs soaking wet, but who cares if the guys I would wrestle had ten pounds of muscle on me, I'd get the great experience of wrestling varsity in my first year.

Maybe you can guess how my season went... I don't remember my exact record, but I know my wins were in the single digits and my losses were well into the double digits...

I remember one match in particular, I'm about to go out on to the mat. I look over and this dude I'm about to wrestle is nothing but cut, ripped, sinew and muscle, and he had the skill to back up the brawn. He was the state runner-up the year before and the state champion the year before that. My coach comes up and this is his pep talk: "Just don't do anything to make him mad, and he'll probably just play around with you for a little bit and then pin you." I look over at my teammates and they are just laughing – like all out lol'ing because they know what is about to happen.

My mom had a different perspective. She hated not just that match but that whole wrestling season. She hated coming to my wrestling matches and watching me just get beat up on. She said she wanted to run down out of those bleachers and hit those mean boys over the head with her purse.

Thinking back on my teenage years, I'm glad she resisted those impulses, but I think that can help us understand what Isaiah is saying here.

Life has a way of beating the snot out of us. And if we are going to try and fight back against heartbreak, depression, disease and death by ourselves we don't stand a chance.

God sees that.

But he isn't like my high school wrestling coach who just says, "Good luck," and sends us out to face this world alone. He isn't like my teammates snickering from the sidelines at our petty attempts to defeat something way stronger than us.

He's more like my mom, who sees us getting hurt and he gets angry, so angry he promises he is going to do something about it.

Isaiah promises, **"Be strong, do not fear, your God will come, he will come with vengeance; with divine retribution he will come to save you."**

God sees you getting whipped around the mat and he gets angry because you are his child and whatever hurts you, hurts him and so he's coming, with vengeance and divine retribution, he is coming to save. He is promising that he is going to take your worries and your problems and he is going to beat the snot out of them.

And how will we know he will do what he promises? How do we know we can stop being afraid?

Well, Isaiah tells us, **"When you see the eyes of the blind being opened, when the ears of the deaf are unstopped, when the lame leap like a deer, and mute tongues shout for joy, then you know your God has come."**

When you see someone beating the snot out of all those things that beat the snot out of us in life, then you know your God has come...

Does that sermon from Isaiah change the way you look at Jesus' miracles?

It does for me... when I look around at this world and all the ways it is beating up on me, my family, and those I love, when I think about tomorrow and all the possible and probable ways it will strike again I look at Jesus and his miracles and it changes everything.

To borrow an analogy from one of my professors, it's like I'm standing in the back of a long, long line of people wrestling with every imaginable sickness – leprosy, cancerous, crippled, lame, blind, mute, deaf, but way up in front is there is a

commotion. I crane my neck and look up to the front of the line – there's people jumping and dancing and singing and shouting for joy as one by one my Jesus is fixing them, every last one of them one the way into heaven. Day by day, one step at a time, I walk closer to the front of that line and nothing in this world could make me happier.

My God sees. My God cares. My God came once and did something about it. My God will come again to save me, my family, and all those I love who trust in him.

Amen.