

*Cosmology vs. Anthropology*

Mark 4:35-41

The Reverend Rita Wilbur

21 June 2009

A few weeks ago my parents made their annual migration north to Colorado, and they deviated a bit from their route to stop by San Antonio. They never used to do that, but now that they have an adorable grandson here, it makes the side trip worthwhile. (An adorable daughter doesn't cut it!) Once Sam had finished charming the grandparents and was a bed, we grown-ups moved the conversation from trains, trucks, and "look at me!" to religion.

My folks told me how their adult Sunday School class recently did an exercise where everyone wrote down and shared what they believed. Sort of like their personal credos. I asked my dad what he had shared, and a lot of it was more about what he didn't believe. He didn't believe in a literal, personal God; he didn't believe in heaven and hell; he didn't believe the miracles really happened. He also had some amazing things to say about what he did believe: about how Jesus is, about the role of religion and the church, even about prayer. None of it was really a surprise to me, and I didn't even particularly disagree with him on anything. It's just that I would have put it differently. And that's what really struck me. In addition to my dad, I've known other scientific-minded types for whom the miracles are a real stumbling block, and while I hear what they're saying and I respect their viewpoint, and I don't even really disagree with them, nevertheless the miracles are not a stumbling block to me. I have no problem at all with miracle stories, or even with saying I believe in the virgin birth.

After my folks left, I thought a lot about why these issues matter so much to my dad and not to me, and I finally had an epiphany. It seems to me that folks like my dad – or dare I say it, fundamentalists (and wouldn't my dad turn purple if he heard himself spoken of in the same breath with fundamentalists!) – what they share is a view of religion as being about cosmology. In other words, religion explains the way the world and the universe work. Why does the sun rise in the east and set in the west? How did the world come into being? Why do people die? etc., etc. And they're not wrong in that viewpoint. In earliest human history, religion was very much about explaining how the world works.

But then came science, in particular the modern scientific method, which came up with a different way to explain the universe, through principles of observation, hypothesis, and experimentation. The scientific method is testable and therefore objective in a way that religion can never be. So scientific cosmology came to be seen in competition with religious cosmology, forcing people to choose between one view and the other. Scientific-types like my dad feel that they must reject religion in favor of science. Fundamentalists feel forced to reject science in favor of religion. It's a very serious dilemma, and one that results in a lot of conflict.

But it's not the only way to view religion, and this is the epiphany I had. Because for me, religion is not so much about cosmology as it is about anthropology. In other words, I don't look to religion to explain how the world came to be. I look to religion to explain who we humans are, and what is our role and purpose in the universe. Everything in the Bible, I look at not from a universal perspective, but from a human perspective. The creation story to me is not about how the world came into existence, but rather about how we humans are, and what our relationship to God and one another and to the rest of creation is. These are questions that science can never answer.

This is why the miracle stories are not a stumbling block to me. Because they aren't about how God supersedes the laws of nature. Rather, they give us insight into human beings. I don't think my view and my dad's view are mutually exclusive. Rather, they can overlap. They are just different perspectives, and we need both views in order to cover each other's blind spots. So with this in mind, then, let us look at this miracle story we heard today.

We are still early in Mark's gospel. The first two chapters, which we talked about in the season after Easter, are full of mostly healing stories – another stumbling block for the scientific-minded. But you might recall how we looked at how those stories are more about how Jesus' gospel teaching liberated people and set them free from narrow-mindedness, from social censure, and so forth. Chapter four is a set of parables, which scientific-types are much more comfortable with. They all agree Jesus was a great teacher!

Now Jesus has wrapped up his sermon, and they all climb into a boat to travel to the other side of the Sea of Galilee. While Jesus is asleep, a great storm arises, throwing the disciples into a panic. They wake Jesus up as if they expect him to be able to do something about it, and so he miraculously calms the storm and gently scolds them for their lack of faith. And then – bizarrely enough – the disciples fret to each other, “Dude, who is this guy?” The question I want to pose is: what does this story tell us about us human beings? What light does it shed on the human condition?

Or let me ask it another way: how many of you have ever been on a boat in a storm? I haven't! But I have seen the movie *Titanic*. Or how about the harrowing story of the flight from Brazil that ran into a storm and apparently fell apart. It's always just a little scary to venture away from *terra firma*, whether in the air or on the water. We are literally out of our element. There is a primal fear that we have gone where humans ought not to venture, and we are trusting in our vessel to keep us safe. But there is nothing so scary as a storm, because the truth is, the weather – nature – is far beyond human control. Mother Nature can destroy us with the blink of her eye.

One commentator noted that the sea symbolizes chaos, particularly during a storm. The Bible itself begins with such a scene: In the beginning, the earth was formless and empty. One translation says it was under a roaring ocean covered with darkness. And the Spirit of God moved over the face of the waters. The anthropological interpretation of that creation story is that the world was in chaos: formless, destructive, incapable of supporting and sustaining life. But then God spoke and shaped that chaos into an order that brought forth this world and everything in it. So this storm that besets the disciples represents the possibility that the world might fall apart into chaos once more.

Indeed, the disciples are new at this. They only got called together in chapter three. They haven't been with Jesus long, but already they are beginning to discover that there's something kind of dangerous about him. In chapter three, right after the disciples are assembled, the scribes show up accusing Jesus of being possessed by the devil, and his own family show up worrying that Jesus is nuts. The crowds following him around have grown so big that in the beginning of chapter four, Jesus had to get into a boat and push off from the shore to teach them. In other words, he was in danger of being consumed by a mob. That very boat is the one that the storm now threatens. And the disciples are realizing that Jesus himself has unleashed a storm. Or more to the point, while some people are responding to Jesus as if he brings life-giving news, others – the scribes, his family, potentially the crowds – others are responding as if Jesus is a threat, something dangerous, something chaotic. And they aren't entirely wrong about that, either. Jesus is definitely here to shake things up, turn things upside down, to totally rock our world. This ain't no pleasure cruise!

If we look at it that way, it makes more sense what the disciples say when they turn to Jesus and cry, “Don't you care if we perish?” Because if Jesus goes down, they'll go down too. It reminds me of those lines from one of my favorite songs

in *Jesus Christ Superstar*, “I think you’ve made your point now. You’ve even gone a bit too far to get the message home. Before it gets too frightening, we ought to call a halt. Could we start again, please?” They are afraid, and with good reason, that the storm against Jesus will devour them all.

But then Jesus calms the storm. “Peace! Be still!” Like God in the act of creation, bringing order out of chaos with a word, Jesus does the same. It’s all the more significant when you realize how many ancient creation stories are violent, about gods being chopped into pieces, bloodshed and destruction. For God to simply say, almost like a suggestion, “Let there be light!” is amazingly nonviolent for a creation story.

Jesus does not wrestle the storm into submission. He speaks gentle words. “Peace! Be still! Be calm!” He speaks these words often to the disciples whenever they are afraid, “Peace! Do not be afraid!” He will say these words again when the storm will seem to have silenced him forever in the crucifixion. The resurrected Jesus will appear to the disciples with a reassuring, gentle message, “Peace! Be calm. Do not be afraid.”

The storm appears as if it has the power to stop Jesus, to silence him, even to destroy him. But Jesus’ power is far, far greater, because he has the power to calm, to create, to heal, to set free. Even the forces of chaos will bend to his command. So Jesus says to the disciples, “Why are you afraid? Have you no faith? I got this.”

And the disciples are filled with awe because this is not the way they’re used to seeing power displayed. Power is usually shown through use of force, the ability to wreak or threaten destruction. Jesus is playing a different game altogether. Chaos may rally against him, but Jesus can calm it with a word. “Who indeed is this, that even the winds and storm obey him?”

That’s what this story tells me. Not about supernatural wonders, or a God who suspends the laws of physics. Rather, it tells us several things about ourselves: that some people feel threatened by the good news Jesus brings, that they may seek to stop him through the storm of violence and destruction, that we his disciples may get frightened, may fear that those dark forces are stronger than Jesus and will consume us as well. We may even fear that Jesus doesn’t care if we perish. But he does care. He will not let us be destroyed. He brings peace, he brings calm, if we will but trust in his kind of power. Now that I think about it, that’s pretty miraculous after all.