

When I was about twelve or so, I was invited to participate in that most Presbyterian of rituals, confirmation, after which I'd be eligible, I was told, to vote in congregational meetings.

I hadn't really lost any sleep over the fact that I couldn't but I was game.

In order to highlight that voting in church elections was a very important responsibility, all of the adolescents who were to be confirmed were to meet at the church on seven subsequent Sunday afternoons in the church historical room with our associate pastor, Brant Baker. I'm not quite sure what Brant ever did to God to deserve us, but somehow he persevered with our group and worked us through the particulars of Presbyterian governance, introduced us to the elders of the church, arranged mentor meetings for us, and this is the part that elevates him to sainthood in my estimation: he assigned us term papers on biblical passages.

Assigning the term papers is not what elevated him to sainthood. Grading them was.

My topic was the miracle of the loaves and the fishes, and I quickly found out more than one or two facts about this story – namely, that it appears in all four Gospel accounts.

Clearly it's pretty important.

I went to the church library, pulled down all the commentaries on this story in each of the Gospels - if I close my eyes I can still smell the pages of the ancient, never used books in the church library - and I attempted to make sense out of this miracle.

I went through a few different scenarios, and I remember this quite well, I proposed that when Jesus engaged in the act of taking this food and distributing it, he opened the

floodgates of the generosity of the gathered crowd and so everyone quit hiding their lunchboxes and it turned out there was more than enough food for everyone once they pooled their resources.

I've always had something of a pragmatic mind, and for me as a twelve-year-old, there wasn't anything that I saw that bore out miraculous multiplication of food. There had to be a pragmatic solution. What better solution than sharing, no?

Well, I got my term paper back, and Mr. Baker had written in the margins that this was a perfectly plausible possibility, but that he hoped that I would at least consider the *possibility* of a miracle.

For any of us with a scientific bent to our brains, miracles strain at the bounds of credulity. But that wouldn't be the case for our pre-scientific method counterparts. We tend to look at facts empirically, or we should by most accounts. We look at evidence, weigh the possibilities, and draw a conclusion. If what follows exists in opposition to the facts, we're likely to consider it miraculous. It's pretty straightforward.

But the ancients wouldn't have seen it that way at all. All of life was a miracle. If it rained, it's because God did it. We see atmospheric conditions, they saw God's intervention into the working of the world. If the sun rises, God did it. We know the earth rotates on its axis and so every 24 hours or so, we make a full circle and watch the Sun progress across our horizon. Same with illness and healing – we know there are certain medical protocols that can be used against life-threatening diseases and under the right circumstances, they work, and sometimes things happen that contradict that knowledge and we see it as miraculous, but the ancients would have seen the entire art of healing as God's activity.

I sort of think of the ancients of having a miraculous world-view while we have a non-miraculous one. Sure, we see miracles when things work out unexpectedly, but we don't expect them. The ancients expected them. They understood that everything that happens in life happens within the constant care of God.

When the whole world exists within the constant care of God, we don't need lunchboxes to explain the possibility of the multiplication of loaves and fishes... it's just within the realm of God's providence.

Here's the rub – I know we like to think that we're more sophisticated than the ancients, and certainly we have a greater quantity of scientific data than they had, but I've come to believe their worldview is the right one and we would do well to take notes. We lost something when we ceased seeing the world as a miracle and this story of Jesus points us back in the right direction.

You see, when we look at the world through the lens of a miracle, we see it differently. There's a fundamental reorientation of life that comes from being able to see God's providing activity in the day to day.

This view of the world takes cultivation – I'm not sure that we can undo centuries of conditioning to see the world entirely scientifically – it takes work to learn to see the world as existing within God's care.

Please note, I'm not advocating for the flat-earth society here – I really believe that science and knowledge are vitally important gifts of God for our common life together – the students and teachers return to the public schools tomorrow and I am pretty sure that that is the most important thing our community does together is to provide for education.

I deeply abhor the anti-intellectualism that sometimes seems to represent Christian faith – whether it’s creationism museums or narrow-minded resistance to the teaching of appropriate sexual education, and if we’re being honest, the persecution of Galileo as a heretic wasn’t one of our finer moments... our track record for holding the miraculous world-view in tension with new knowledge isn’t great... but its vitally important to remember that God made physics as well as rainbows, and while in fact the physics can explain the rainbow, they can never explain why it is beautiful.

But if we can hold them together, the *knowledge* and the *understanding*, there is the possibility that we might experience that most remarkable of miracles, the *renewing of our minds*.

When we are able to see the world as living in God’s providence, we are able to see a transformed reality in which miracle and everyday life are one and the same.

And when that happens, the way is opened for us to live our lives with a theology of abundance.

We have talked about a theology of abundance before – and so you know what it stands in opposition to – a theology of scarcity.

A theology of abundance looks at the gifts that God has given us – the whole width and depth of creation and thinks to itself, “Wow, look what God has given us, what can we do with it?”

And a theology of scarcity sees all that abundance and thinks in converse, “Wow. There will never be enough to do all the things that need doing.”

If we can see the world as existing within God’s extravagant care, where all that we need is provided in abundance, where miracle of miracles, we go to bed at night, and the sun

comes up the next morning and life carries on in all its beauty and majesty, then we are freed to look at the world knowing that God is good, all the time, and that when generosity is poured out, it never goes to waste.

What a miracle.

How might that change the way the world works? What if God's people started seeing the world as miraculous, as full, as abundant, how might we live?

We are so in thrall to the understanding that we must compete for scarce resources. The law of supply and demand tells us that whatever is rare is more valuable and whatever is common is cheap.

But what if we saw the world miraculously? What if we saw the world as abundant?

What difference would it make?

What difference would it make for our schools if we looked at all this money in Atlanta that flies around the globe at lightening speed and thought to ourselves, "We have enough for every school to have enough?"

What if, as a nation, we looked at the children on our border and thought to ourselves, "What a precious, precious gift God has given to the world in these children. We know the law says, but this situation calls for grace."

What if, as God's people, we said to ourselves, "I know that everything that we see empirically suggests we should be suspect of those we don't know, but really, God's providence assures us we don't need to be."

I read a reprint of a wonderful op-ed piece in the New York Times this week, entitled, "The Tire Iron and the Tamale."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Justin Horner, *The Tire Iron and the Tamale*, March 4, 2011

In this piece, Justin Horner tells that three times in the past year, he experienced car trouble and was stranded on the side of the road. Three times he received help. Each time, it was from Mexican immigrants who spoke no English.

The last time it happened, he needed a jack to change a tire and no one would stop for him. This is already starting to look like a story of Jesus. He made a sign and put in the window that read, "NEED A JACK," and offered money. Still no one stopped. As he was despairing a van pulled over and a fellow got out and sized up the situation. He called his daughter who spoke English and they got to work. The next thing he knew, he broke the guy's tire iron. In a flash, his wife sped away and returned with a new tire iron so they could finish the job. When he was done, he tried to give the guy twenty bucks but he wouldn't take it. So he slipped the money to his wife. And then he tried to find out more about them from their daughter so he could send something – they were headed to Oregon to pick cherries, and then after that to pick peaches somewhere else – then they would go back home.

As they were leaving, the daughter asked if he had eaten lunch. He hadn't, so she ran over with a tamale and handed it to him and they started to drive off.

When he opened the wrapper of the tamale, he found his \$20 bill that he'd left with the wife. He ran after them, saying, *por favor, por favor, por favor...*

The fellow rolled his window down from the van, and with great concentration said, "Today you, tomorrow me."

Horner concluded, "Then he rolled up his window and drove away, with his daughter waving to me from the back. I sat in my car eating the best tamale I'd ever had, and I just

started to cry. It had been a rough year; nothing seemed to break my way. This was so out of left field that I just couldn't handle it.”

I suppose that brings us back around again to generosity, and sharing, and that is what this story is about. But it's about God's generosity and God's sharing.

And so I've come to think there are really two ways to look at this world: miraculous or non-miraculous. And from the table of abundance, from the table of blessings, the view is miraculous.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.