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A SEASON OF MIRACLES: POWER, SIGNS, AND WONDER

Luke 1:26-38

December 4, 2016

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Advent is not just a season of miracles. It is a miraculous season. Everything about it is absolutely extraordinary and we will spend the next few weeks discovering the essence and the core of God's amazing and astounding work of becoming God in the flesh some two thousand years ago.

Of course, the whole of the Bible, from beginning to end, is filled with God's miracles. It started when God pulled creation out of the proverbial rabbit's hat, brought the world into being out of thin air, and will end when all the dead are raised at the last trumpet.

To understand the essence of the miracle of Advent, of course, we need to know what a miracle is. It turns out not to be as simple as we might at first think. To begin with, there is no word for "miracle" in Greek! The English word "miracle" comes from the Latin, *miraculum*, meaning "evokes wonder."

In fact, there are four Greek words we translate into the English "miracle": *ergon* (works), *teras* (wonders), *dunamis* (powers), and *semeion* (signs). Our common understanding that a miracle is an act outside of natural laws is only an incidental concern of a Biblical miracle.

This means a miracle is a powerful (*dunamis*) act that accomplishes profound work (*ergon*) evoking wonder (*teras*) that all becomes a sign (*semeion*) of God's presence.

It is God's power we shall explore this week. We all know that power is a two edge sword. Lord Acton said that power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Ancient people had a deep fear of the gods because they feared the gods would use power the same way humans do. Thus, in Greek mythology, we have scores of stories of the gods brutally punishing for minor offenses or for sharing their power. For example, Prometheus has his liver

eaten by buzzards for eternity for giving humans fire.

This fear of godly power carried over into the Old Testament. *El Shaddai* is a Jewish title for God that means "God Almighty", that is all powerful, and it refers specifically to the power to create or to destroy.

The root word for *Shaddai* is *Shadad* meaning, plunder, overpower, or make desolate. Amy Grant's song, *El Shaddai*, though sweet and endearing, did not do justice to this name of God. *Shaddai* is the destroyer God which is conveyed in Isaiah 13:6 "Wail, for the day of the Lord is near; it will come like destruction from *El Shaddai*!" However, in Hebrew *Shadayim* refers to the female fertility and we see this theme for *El Shaddai* carried out in other texts. For example:

Genesis 35:11 reads "I am God Almighty [*El Shaddai*]: be fruitful and increase in number." This name for God is purposely ambiguous because the people had yet to fully comprehend God's true nature. That would not come until God descended in the flesh and dwelt among us.

In Luke 1:35, Mary is told the power (*dunamis*) of the Most High will overshadow her. *Dunamis* is the divine power elsewhere translated as miracle. When God placed Jesus in Mary's womb, God placed the essence of divine *dunamis*.

We can see throughout Jesus' life that he has this power. Jesus controls nature when he calms the sea. He exerts dominion over evil spirits when he rebukes them and he brings healing to the desperate and the weary whose physical bodies have rebelled against them.

And yet, perhaps it is not quite correct to say that Jesus performs miracles. As we shall see, it is not so much something Jesus does; it is something

he is. Thus when the woman with the 12-year hemorrhage merely touches Jesus, she is healed.

The very presence of Jesus is miraculous. It is filled with power. We all know of this power instinctively. Having Mother present when we had our tonsils taken out instantly gave us strength and eased our anxiety.

All power has a source. My car has great power rooted in the energy intrinsic to the gasoline, that is from life lived millions of years ago. That life was compressed over the course of millions of years into oil. Jesus' power comes from a rather surprising source.

Isaiah 53:5 tells us that we are healed by his wounds. Jesus' power, his *dunamis* to heal, derives from his sacrifice. This self-giving is critical to understanding the nature of Jesus' power. It is not a super power that he uses to heal, like Superman who can shoot laser beams from his eyes to melt steel.

Listen to what Gandhi said...

Power is of two kinds. One is obtained by the fear of punishment and the other by acts of love. Power based on love is a thousand times more effective and permanent than the one derived from fear of punishment.

Gandhi almost had it right. Jesus' power is not based on love. His power is love, that is the source of his *dunamis*. 1 John tells us that God *is* love.

Thus he heals by 'his stripes'. He received those stripes because of his willingness to never ever give up his mission to be a *dunamis* of love. Jesus' loving presence is so strong that he can actually bring physical healing through it.

Jesus does not so much exercise power based on love. Love *is* power. It is the greatest power the world has ever known. And the proof is found in the devotion of billions across the planet who follow him as Lord.

In this life, those with compassionate love carry a measure of this miraculous *dunamis*. I have seen it and you have received it. It is the essence of

Joanne's ministry. Her steadfast caring breaks down people's defenses. Soon the tears flow. Laughter might even come. Hugs ensue. And when you're done, your sadness has changed its character. She showers such love and care upon those who are grieving that they *feel* physically better.

Harvard physician Cynthia Thaik writes,

The heart of the matter is that it is the heart that matters. To achieve optimal heart health, your emotional and spiritual heart is just as important as your physical heart, and care must be given to all aspects of this vital organ.

Thaik explains that the positive emotions of love produce dopamine, which increases feelings of joy. Love reduces stress, thereby reducing excessive cortisol. Love also pumps up oxytocin, a hormone that improves the immune system. Love staves off depression, decreases pain. Here is quite a shocking fact: apparently married men who suffered from angina (chest pains) experienced far less angina if they felt loved by their wives, even despite high risk factors like high cholesterol, high blood pressure, and diabetes. (Dr. Dean Ornish's book *Love and Survival: Eight Pathways to Intimacy and Health*)

Science has been looking for a miracle drug for ages and we have known it all along - love! But it can do more than give us a good night's sleep.

God's loving *dunamis* is not only used for healing the body and mind but the soul as well. It is this same loving *dunamis* that God uses in Jesus Christ to heal the world – the grandest, most powerful miracle of them all.

We can see in various places in scripture that Jesus' power to heal and his power to reconcile the world to himself are one and the same. Paul knows this when he writes in Ephesians, "the immeasurable greatness of his *dunamis* for us who believe, according to the working of his great *dunamis*." Here Paul is specifically referring to God's reconciling act of raising Christ from the dead. Jesus' resurrection saves us not because of some mystical connection between vivifying an

innocent corpse and the remission of sins, but because it is the unequivocal proof of God's powerful, merciful, gracious love.

The incarnation of God in the world, of Jesus being born to Mary, is the beginning of that proof. In this miraculous season I have but one charge for you – be a part of the power of the miracle of Immanuel and heal the world – go and love. Amen.