

10th Sunday of Ordinary Time C “Creatio Ex Nihilo and a Teaspoon of Kierkegaard”

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This weekend we have two beautiful stories about the power of God raising the dead to life with Elijah raising the widow of Zarephath’s son and Jesus raising the widow of Naim’s son. When we try to understand miracles, there are two basic questions theologians like to deal with: first, what constitutes a miracle and, second, why does Jesus perform them? Never fear, I will touch on both topics today.

Bishop Barron suggested once that the best way for understanding the first question, what constitutes a miracle, can be found in a doctrine we teach about God. This doctrine describes God’s ability to create something out of nothing, *creatio ex nihilo*. As an aside, isn’t that a great term...*creatio ex nihilo*? Let’s say it all together...*creatio ex nihilo*! (Next time you play scrabble, you will be positively feared). Why is this *creatio ex nihilo* a characteristic of God? Well, you see, everything you and I create comes from something else. For instance, if I want to build a table or a chair, I do so using materials that already exist, such as wood or metal. Even if I get creative with an art piece, the forms, mediums and even ideas that go into the art piece have a history to them. We are incapable of creating something out of nothing. With God however, there was a time when absolutely nothing existed in this universe, and so when God creates, he can do so *ex nihilo*, out of nothing. And when we experience something truly created out of nothing, the experience is miraculous.

So how is this doctrine, *creatio ex nihilo*, helpful for understanding the readings this Sunday and miracles in general? Well, it seems to me, we see God’s power to create something out of nothing in all three readings. For instance, take our first reading from the book of Kings. Our reading today is a continuation of the story of Elijah who God calls to visit the widow of Zarephath. You have to understand the importance of the widow in the story. In biblical times, if a woman was a widow, this was typically a desperate situation because, in her culture, she wouldn’t have had any means to take care of herself. There were no safety nets like social security or welfare. During times of drought there usually weren’t enough resources in the community to care for the widows. Death by starvation was common.

By the time Elijah makes it to the widow, it is a time of drought and he is starving also. He asks the widow to make him a little cake out of flour and oil so to help keep him from dying of starvation. The widow tells Elijah her situation: that all she had was enough flour for one more meal, and that afterwards she and her son were going to die. Elijah promised her that her flour and oil reserve would not run dry. And behold, that is exactly what happened, a miracle of God creating something out of nothing. This was a remarkable sign to the people in her community giving them hope in God. Our first reading begins after this episode.

You see, after everything that had just happened, after a year of plenty, the widow’s son died. Because in this culture, a widow had no means to care for herself, the death of her son was also a

death warrant for her. The widow confronts Elijah with “how can this be?” She even blames herself, “is it because of my sin that my son is now dead?” Elijah grieves with her and after praying loudly to God on her behalf, the son comes back from death itself. What this story demonstrated to the people who heard this in antiquity was, no matter how dark the situation in life might be, no matter how hopeless life may seem, do not lose hope because in the darkest hour, God can create *ex nihilo*, God can create something out of nothing so we should never lose hope.

The same thing goes with our Gospel reading. Here, no one asked Jesus to perform this miracle. This alone is striking. It says Jesus simply witnessed a widow’s dead son being processed through the streets. Again, a widow losing her only son was also typically a death warrant for her in this culture. It says, Jesus was moved with pity and raised her son back to life again. Those who witnessed this immediately made the connection that Jesus is like Elijah, and therefore the fulfillment of prophesy. They also received hope from God who, even in the darkest hour, can create something out of nothing.

Even our second reading carries on this theme. In our second reading from St. Paul to the Galatians, Paul is sharing with his readers what he was like before Christ converted him to the Gospel. You see, Paul wasn’t just someone who decided to change behavior after reading a book or attending a retreat. Paul was a viciously zealous persecutor of Christians prior to his conversion.

He presided over the executions of Christians, as we see in the Acts of the Apostles with the stoning of St. Stephen. You see, before Paul encountered Christ, he wasn’t just a bad man; he was a bad man who thought he was doing God a favor through his murderous deeds. He writes, you know “of my former way of life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God beyond measure and tried to destroy it”. This was Paul’s way of articulating, “The gospel preached by me is not of human origin. For I did not receive it from a human being, nor was I taught it, but it came through a revelation of Jesus Christ.” Once again, even in the darkest heart in the darkest time, God has the power to create something out of nothing, and gave us St. Paul.

And so, an invitation this weekend it seems, is to consider the areas in our life that seem hopeless right now. Consider the areas in our lives that are particularly bleak right now. Consider the areas in our life where we feel nothing can be saved, and contemplate the power of God called *creatio ex nihilo*, that can create something out of nothing, to consider the faith of the widow of Zarephath, to consider the faith of the widow of Naim. Even if we think of ourselves as hopeless, we are invited to consider what God can do with someone with a history like Paul’s. If God can take someone like Paul and give us St. Paul, what more is possible for us with a God who can create *ex nihilo*, and give us something out of nothing.

And as wonderful this homily would be if I ended on that note, we have only touched on the first of the two questions I started out with. We have the second question to consider, why Jesus

performs miracles. You see, when discussing miracles, I think it is important to give us all a small teaspoon of Soren Kierkegaard, another favorite theologian of mine. The reason for this is because, even though stories regarding miracles are wonderful, they should also make us somewhat uneasy. To be fair, Kierkegaard believed in miracles but he was nervous about them because he was sickly his entire life. This shaped his philosophy and theology. We don't know the rules God uses to provide a miracle to this person and not that one, and this gave Kierkegaard a reason to fear and tremble. The Kierkegaard in my head also says it is important to remember that if we go to the Holy Land and try to look up the people who Jesus raised from the dead, we will remember that the end of their stories is that they made it to the afterlife another day. And so, this homily would be incomplete without discussing Jesus' purpose for miracles, why he performs them.

Yes, miracles happen, miracles happen today, I've seen miracles, many of you have witnessed miracles, however, miracles are meant to be signs of hope that light our path to heaven, nothing more. Miracles are the "means" not the "end". This makes everything we experience in this life, the joys and sorrows, and times of plenty and times of drought as helpful preparations for the eternal life God desires for us.

Yes, God creates out of nothing, but even the miracles we encounter along the journey of life are meant to light our way to the greatest *creatio ex nihilo* of all, namely the cross. On the cross, we encounter a God who sacrifices himself for us for the sake of our salvation. On the cross, we encounter the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. And on Easter morning, what was a lifeless body became a resurrected body that is quite different than what we see with the widows' sons. In the resurrection, we will be given an indestructible body that lives on to everlasting life.

And so, even with a little teaspoon of Kierkegaard in the message, we can by all means pray for miracles because miracles can and do happen to give us hope on our journey towards everlasting life. However, in your times of suffering, grief and pain do not lose sight of the greatest miracle of all, namely that God loves you and has a future for you regardless of what life throws at you. God loves you with an everlasting love the world cannot give. When we are in our darkest moments, when we feel reduced to nothingness, even when we feel nailed to the cross, we have a God who will join us on the cross and will create something out of nothing that will endure for eternity through Christ our Lord. Amen.