

God Moves in Mysterious Ways

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God works in mysterious ways, his wonders to perform. That statement is so indisputably true, people assume it is a quote from Scripture, but it is not. There are Bible verses that teach a similar truth. Isaiah 55:8-9, for instance, quotes God as saying, "My thoughts are not your thoughts and my ways are not your ways. . . For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts." In John 13:7, Jesus tells his disciples, "You do not know now what I am doing, but later, you will understand."

The actual phrase, "God works in mysterious ways, his wonders to perform" comes from a hymn composed by William Cowper in 1774. The hymn is not included in our hymnal nor is it in any of the most popular hymnals of our time. Cowper wrote the lyrics to over sixty hymns but the only one that is known by some of us is the majestic and graphic "There is a Fountain Filled with Blood."

William Cowper suffered from chronic depression. One dark night in 1774, he decided the only escape from his intense melancholy was suicide so he called for a cab driver to take him to the Thames River where he intended to drown himself. London's famous fog was thick that night and the cabby either got lost or intentionally faked confusion so as to prevent Cowper from following through on his desperate plan. After driving around for several hours, the taxidriver expressed great exasperation at finding his way and told Cowper to get out of his cab. "The ride," he said, "is on me." Cowper stepped out the car and the cabby drove away. Peering through the pea soup-like fog, Cowper recognized that he was one block away from his own home. He later concluded that God sent the fog to keep him from taking his own life. I think God sent the cabdriver. In either case, Cowper was so touched by the mysterious ways of God, he composed the familiar phrase, "God works in mysterious ways, his wonders to perform."

We don't need proof of this maxim of faith, only examples. How did a boy from Kansas, raised in an all-white, conservative Southern Baptist church, educated in Southern Baptist institutions, with deep roots in Louisiana, end up the pastor of this American Baptist Church in College Park, Maryland, a thousand miles from any relative I have. God works in mysterious ways.

How did a young woman from Wisconsin, raised in Lutheran churches, educated in Catholic and Lutheran institutions with deep roots in Germany and Scandinavia, end up married to a Baptist minister in College Park, Maryland, a thousand miles from any relative she has? God works in mysterious ways.

How did people from Texas, North Carolina, Florida, Pennsylvania, Georgia, South Carolina, Virginia, West Virginia, California, Missouri, Kansas, Wisconsin, Michigan, Arkansas, Mississippi, Tennessee, Connecticut, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Oregon, Oklahoma, D.C., Maryland, Delaware, New York, Guyana, Central African Republic, Morocco, South Korea, China, El Salvador, Nigeria, England, Cameroon, St. Vincent, Haiti, Trinidad, Kenya, Zimbabwe, Rwanda, Brazil, Singapore, Malaysia, Liberia, Chile, Mexico, and a dozen other places end up in this church? God works in mysterious ways.

And how did Peter, a fisherman with minimal education, who rarely traveled south of his native Galilee, end up standing in Jerusalem before an assembly of people from all over the world and preaching to them about the life of an executed, itinerant preacher from Nazareth? God works in mysterious ways.

Although God's ways defy our total comprehension, there is a pattern that God often chooses to follow. A pattern, in which, if faithful and alert, we play a vital part. The sequence of events that make up this sacred design were displayed on Pentecost.

God's astonishing movement in human history always begins with a divine deed. In this case, it was the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the followers of Jesus. As they gathered in an upper room, the Spirit came upon Peter, James, John, Matthew, Andrew, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of Jesus, James and Joseph, the brothers of Jesus and several other believers. Luke says the Spirit came upon these early Christians like a mighty wind and visited each person one by one like tongues of fire.

This part of the divine deed seems to have occurred in the relative privacy of the upper room. Non-believers, in other words, were not witness to this visitation. They saw the next phase of the powerful event, however. For after the Spirit came upon the followers of Jesus, they began to speak in languages they had never learned. The combined cacophony of languages spilling out of this room was loud enough to draw a crowd.

Being a Jewish holy day, Jews from all over the world had traveled to Jerusalem and as they gathered to investigate the confusing clamor, they heard Galilean Jews speaking in their languages and dialects. Men and women who had never been out of Israel were speaking Greek, Latin, Farsi, Persian, indigenous languages from Libya, Asia, Egypt, Crete, Mesopotamia and numerous other lands.

Once the divine deed was accomplished, the second stage of the pattern occurred. People who witnessed the holy act looked on with amazement and asked "What does this mean?" Similar questions were posed after the birth of Jesus, the many miracles of Jesus, the death of Jesus and his resurrection. The same kind of inquiries were raised after the burning bush, the parting of the Red Sea, the destruction of the walls of Jericho, the chariot coming for to carry Elijah home, the protection of Shadrach, Meshach and Abendigo in the fiery furnace, Daniel's survival in the lion's den and a hundred other acts of divine intervention. In slightly more mundane circumstances, the question is asked following Abraham's journey to the Promised Land, Ruth's commitment to Naomi, Esther's coronation as Queen of Persia, David's selection as the future King of Israel, Jeremiah's faithfulness in the face of severe persecution, Isaiah's insight into the meaning of the Exile and John the Baptist's preaching at the river Jordan. In every case, people amazed and perplexed at what they had seen, asked, "What does this mean?"

If someone does not answer this question, then the event is catalogued as spectacle and has no life-changing power on those who watched it unfold. The apostle Paul put the problem this way in Romans 10:13-15 "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? And how are they to proclaim unless they are sent?"

That is where we come in. We are the ones sent to help people who have experienced an encounter with God, answer the question, "What does this mean?" The reason our faithfulness to this task is so important is revealed in the next development in this story. After the amazed and perplexed people asked, "What does this mean?" some folks answered, it means they're drunk.

There are always secular explanations for every manifestation of God's mysterious movement in human life. The plagues experienced by the people of Egypt were attributed to the work of magicians. The prophets were declared to be insane, corrupt or spies working for enemy nations. The birth of Jesus was said to have been a cover up for Mary's out of wedlock pregnancy. His miracles were alternately explained as tricks, acts of the devil, the deeds of a mad man, or works of deception orchestrated by Jesus and the recipient of the miracle. The empty tomb was said to be evidence that the disciples stole Jesus' body. The testimony of the women who first heard the angels declare Christ was risen, was dismissed as indications of hysteria.

The secular explanations did not end in the first century. The popularity of Billy Graham was explained away solely as propaganda campaigns waged by anti-communist publishers and captains of industry. Dr. Martin Luther King's success as a Civil Rights leader was said to be the results of international communist agitators. The destruction of apartheid in South Africa was attributed wholly to economic boycotts. The Christian liberation movement in Central America was defined as the work of socialists. The astonishing growth of Christianity in South Korea and many parts of Africa has been explained as a cultural phenomenon due to strong family connections. The worldwide effectiveness of Habitat for Humanity is chalked up purely as the result of an exceptional organizational model.

Without fail, when God acts in human history, people see the astonishing deed and ask, "what does it mean?" And without exception, there is always someone there to offer a purely secular explanation. In this story, they said, the believers at Pentecost were drunk. Fortunately, God had sent Peter to give an alternate explanation. He announced to the amazed and perplexed people that the multi-lingual witnesses were not drunk, but instead inspired by God to deliver the message of Jesus' life, death and resurrection. Then Peter connected the work on display to the Risen Lord. Acts 2:32-33 reports, "This Jesus, God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses. Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father, the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you both see and hear."

God puts us in place to be near folks who experience an encounter with the Spirit, so that when they ask, "what does this mean?" we will be there to say, "It means that God has reached out to you." "It means, the risen Lord has come to you." Our voices are to counteract all the other voices that will tell those same people the divine encounter is the result of their hysteria, their instability, their hormonal rush, their weariness, their ignorance, their gullibility, their despair. Our voices are to give an alternate explanation to those who will say the mighty acts of God are actually merely political maneuvers, economic consequences, organizational triumphs, lucky breaks and simple coincidences.

Lastly, after telling the people in the streets of Jerusalem what God's divine deed meant, Peter helped those who accepted his explanation, respond. For when they heard that the astonishing events they had witnessed were the work of the risen Christ, they asked, not, "what does this mean?" but "what shall we do?" Peter replies, repent of your sins and be baptized for the forgiveness of your sins and to demonstrate your faith in Jesus, the risen Lord.

Notice that the people in this story did not create the divine event. God did that. We cannot create an encounter with God's Spirit or the risen Lord. Only God sends such gifts to humanity. What we do, is stay alert to signs that someone around us has been touched by God and help them understand what has happened to them and then guide them through the response of repentance and faith.

Last week I saw a news piece on NBC about a tragic event that unfolded on April 18th at a subway station in Queens, New York. The entire episode was captured on a security tape. A woman entering the subway turnstiles was accosted by a mugger. A bystander saw the crime unfolding and intervened to save the woman. In the process, the good Samaritan was stabbed by the mugger. The criminal ran off as did the woman who was helped. Then the heroic man stumbled out of the station and collapsed on the sidewalk in front of the turnstiles. For the next hour,

over 25 people passed the man on the sidewalk, looked at him, took pictures of him, rolled him over and yet not a person did anything to help him, failing to even call 911. By the time the police passed by, the man was dead.

As I watched the film, I thought how, in much less lethal ways, I pass by people every day who are amazed and perplexed about some encounter they have had with the spirit of God. Already friends and acquaintances have offered explanations that have cast doubt on God's work in that person's life. God has sent me to be faithful and alert and offer a witness that confirms that the mystery they have experienced is indeed divine. Yet I'm late for a meeting, consumed with my own problems or wary of involvement and pass by without a word. God forgive me. God forgive us.

God works in mysterious ways. And we're are part of the mystery. If you've had an encounter with God, I want to assure you that it is real and I offer my services to help you respond to this mystery. I want to fulfill my role in the great mysterious work of God and I encourage all whom God has mysteriously brought to this place, to do the same.