

You Asked for It: It's a Miracle!....or Is It?
A Sermon by Louise F. Westfall
Fairmount Presbyterian Church
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Text: Hebrews 2:1-4, John 20:24-31

Do you believe in miracles? In preparation for this sermon, I did a quick google search for the word in a *Plain Dealer* one day last week. The search revealed that “miracle” appeared in its pages four times: one in an ad for a Nordstrom’s swimsuit line, one heralding the benefits of a diet supplement, once in reference to the Browns, and once in Jeff Darcy’s political cartoon depicting the Minneapolis bridge disaster and highlighting the heroic efforts of the young man who risked his own safety to rescue schoolchildren trapped in a bus. It confirmed for me that “miracle” –like so many other religious concepts—has crossed over into everyday usage. As the daily newspaper will testify: miracles happen.

The request for this sermon was not focused primarily on miracles in general. Rather, the member wondered: *How should Christians take the stories of miracles in the Scriptures?* He wanted some specific guidance on the role of biblical miracles to our faith. What do you think? First, let’s bring some of them to mind: There’s Moses striking his staff upon the ground at God’s command and splitting wide the waters of the Red Sea, allowing the children of Israel their liberation walk on dry ground. . . Jesus turning water into wine—the best wine. . .or calming a raging storm with a single invocation of “peace, be still”. . . Jesus restoring life to a young girl on her death bed. . . his own resurrection after death by crucifixion, evoking the breathless witness of Mary, “I have seen the Lord”..... the mighty winds of Pentecost and the baptizing tongues of flame that ignited bravery in the apostles and birthed the church. Miracles!.....or are they?

What do you think? The member who requested this topic acknowledged that it is complex and controversial, and that he

himself oscillated among different perspectives. Little wonder, since right off the bat there seems to be an obvious tension between the rational and the religious, the natural and the supernatural. Richard Dawkins, in his best-selling book *The God Delusion*, denigrates biblical miracles as products of the pre-scientific mind—easy to discard in a post-enlightenment age. At the opposite end of the spectrum we find those who affirm miracles as crucial to the substance of Christian faith, to be believed as factual events. Not every Christian regards miracles as facts, however, or as required articles of faith. A smorgasbord of other views dominates twentieth-and-twenty-first century theology: miracles are metaphors, for example; (I've heard the miracle of turning the water used for purification rites into outstanding wine explained as a metaphor of abundance; Christ's ministry is about life, and not just any old life, but life that is choice and overflowing with goodness). Some consider miracles as distractions from the central gospel of God's grace given in ordinary human life; as someone said to me recently, "What anchors my faith is Jesus' teaching and our work for the Kingdom of God. It doesn't have anything to do with weird events or superstitious stories." Still others think of miracles as stories meant to help us comprehend the incomprehensible—to give us new eyes and ears for perceiving the transcendent. A star can be a fiery ball of burning, gaseous matter, or it can be a source of navigation in the night sky; interpreted even as a sign.

When we turn to Scripture, we may be surprised to find a similar spectrum of understanding about miracles. On the one hand, ancient people were much more ready than we are to accept a universe in which God (or a pantheon of gods) continually intervened in human life. The story of Job, for example, features a conversation between God and a shadowy, other-worldly figure called "Ha-Satan" or "the accuser" which sets up a contest to test Job's faith—and his patience. Or the tale of Jonah who thinks he can outrun God until God catches him in what must be the granddaddy of all fish stories. We also find in the Bible human beings endowed with supernatural powers. When Moses worried about how he was going to gain

an audience with Pharaoh in order to deliver his “Let my people go” speech, God gave him a staff that when he threw it down, turned into a snake. (As a child, I always liked the part where Pharaoh’s court magicians threw down their staffs and turned them into snakes too—and then Moses’ snakes ate theirs. Ha! Our God’s better than yours. –sigh- an attitude which unfortunately prevails today and makes people willing to kill one another to prove it)

In biblical times, the ability to perform miracles confirmed that a person possessed divine power and blessing. Jesus certainly fit this category, spellbinding the crowds with authoritative preaching backed up by powerful healings and exorcisms and command over natural phenomena. Curiously, Jesus resisted being called a “wonder worker” and often urged followers to keep silent about his power, as if this might overshadow his primary purpose.

Still, the Bible seems to regard miracles as “signs” – particular demonstrations of God’s activity in human life. In the epistle reading, the author of the letter to the Hebrews wonders how the people can pass up the salvation that has been offered by a God who has “added his testimony by signs and wonders and various miracles...”

Nowhere in Scripture does the question of miracles matter more than in the resurrection of Jesus. Nothing strains credulity more. Yet if Jesus were not raised from death, the apostle Paul wrote, then our faith is of no value. The gospel reading I’ve chosen relates one of the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus to his disciples. If we’re going to mine miracles, we may as well go for the gold. As I read it, see the scene in your mind’s eye. Try to place yourself in it—among Jesus’ friends and followers, the men and women who had traveled and talked with him, been at his side when he healed, broken bread and enjoyed many meals together. Eyewitnesses all to his astonishing ministry. But then, heartbreak. Betrayal...arrest....trial...public execution...burial in a borrowed tomb. And now, some of them claimed to have seen him!

Hear God's Word to those of us who haven't, in the reading from the Gospel according to John, in the 20th chapter at the 24th verse. [JOHN 20:24-31]

The philosopher-skeptic David Hume defined "miracle" as "a transgression of a law of nature by a particular volition of the Deity." As an agnostic, Hume was troubled by the notion of a Divine Being who would interfere in the natural order of the world. And when the question is put that way, I find myself agreeing. It's pretty obvious that God doesn't suspend gravity in order to cushion the landing of a beloved elderly person who trips and falls. God doesn't break in and miraculously shore up a bridge's faulty support structure. If Jesus raised Jairus' daughter or Lazarus from the dead, why didn't he raise my father—or your child or our friend? No, I do not trust a God who violates the laws of nature—particularly when those laws appear to be violated very inconsistently.

But this does not cancel God's activity in human life. Judeo-Christian faith has always affirmed God's personal interest in the people God has created precisely for relationship. The meaning of the covenant God established is drawn from God's "interference" and engagement with them—with us! God loves people, God calls people, God saves people, God speaks to people. God is eternally persistent too, always trying to get our attention, never content to abandon us to our bad choices or our petty grandeur. God designed a breathtaking universe and gave us great gifts and powers and free will as caretakers of it. God sent leaders, teachers, prophets, rulers, and finally a Son to help us understand who we are, how much we are loved, and what we are to do about it—and seems undeterred by human failure to "get it." The story of our faith is of God who works through human history, within the created order, and through the lives of persons and communities to redeem the whole world. The marvel of that, the wonder of a God who loves like that, seems nothing short of miraculous.

Contrast this understanding with the deism of many of our country's forebears, who envisioned God as a Divine

Watchmaker, skillfully fashioning an exquisite timepiece, carefully winding it up, and then stepping back, letting it wind down in its preordained way, without personal involvement. There's really no room for miracle in this worldview, just the steady and predictable ticking of the divinely-calibrated clock. Does anybody really know what time it is?

Reformed theology challenges the place God is located in the deistic framework: at the edges, far away from human life and removed from its struggles and joys. Instead, God is understood to be deeply, intimately involved with humanity. Reformed faith carves out space between the perspective that says God is strictly hands-off and it's all up to us, and the perspective that says God is pulling all the strings and we are little more than puppets, praying for more miracles.

In that middle ground, the biblical stories of miracles—except for Jesus' resurrection—may be regarded as either factual or non-historical with little effect on Christian faith. I'll say it explicitly: I don't believe the truth of our religion hinges upon the credibility of miracles. Jesus' resurrection is the one exception because it is so central to the essence of our faith. God is the God of life and God of the living! God's love overcomes all that would hurt or destroy us. That God has exercised power over the natural outcome of death and raised Christ to rule eternally is a sign of God's love for humanity and God's willingness to break through ordinary reality to bring us life once and for all. That is a miracle. And it is hard to believe. But look at what merciful treatment Thomas the doubter received! When he needed proof; when he demanded physical evidence, Jesus did not reject him. "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side." Friends, on even this essential of Christian faith, Jesus understood that some would doubt; some would question; some would not believe. Thomas has many brothers and sisters. Jesus seems to suggest that they will miss some of the blessing of faith—of coming to believe without tangible proofs. Yet he extends peace to everyone, skeptic and stout-hearted alike. God's love is unconditional and not dependent

upon our acceptance or rejection of it. God's love is not confined or limited by even so threatening an enemy as death.

And that, my friends, just may be the most compelling argument of all. Where there is great love, there are always miracles. It's a fundamental way of seeing the world; of recognizing the divine within each person and shaping our decisions, priorities, and actions around that reality. We are immersed in miracle. American novelist Willa Cather expressed the hope of sharpened spiritual insight: *The miracles of the church seem to me to rest not so much upon or faces or voices or healing power coming suddenly near to us from afar off, but upon our perception being made finer, so that for a moment our eyes can see and our ears hear what is there around us, always.* [Cather, *Death Comes to the Archbishop*] Scientific knowledge can contribute to that honing of perception; it seems the more we know, the more we understand how little we know; how immense the universe; how mysterious the human heart. [8:30: The photographs of deep space taken from the Hubble satellite, revealing a universe of spinning galaxies, exploding stars, and vast reaches, evoke awe and wonder.] [10: The photographs Missy showed the children, revealing a universe more vast and beautiful than our imagining evoke awe and wonder.] Farmer-philosopher Wendell Berry likewise finds the miraculous in the natural world. *The miraculous is not extraordinary but the common mode of existence. It is our daily bread. Whoever really has considered the lilies of the field or the birds of the air, and pondered their improbable existence in this warm world within the cold and empty stellar distances will hardly balk at the turning of water into wine, which was, after all, a small miracle. We forget the greater and still continuing miracle by which water (along with soil and sunlight) is turned into grapes.* [Berry, *The Art of the Commonplace*]

No matter where you personally come down on the subject of miracles, we would not have been faithful to the subject if it remained in the sphere of theological reflection, more or less interesting, but entirely theoretical. Finally we have to ask “so what?” What is the meaning of miracles for us and for a growing faith? If biblical miracles help you believe what can’t finally be proved, well and good. If they don’t, well and good too. And then, take one more step and consider: How might God work a miracle through me? A story from the monastic tradition: the seeker went looking for a spiritual community to call home. He came to one promising community and fell into conversation with one of its members. He asked, “Do you folks believe in miracles?” “Well that depends on what you mean by miracle,” came the response. “Some say it’s a miracle when God does what the people ask. Here we believe it’s a miracle when we do what God asks.”

Friends, do you believe in miracles?

NOW TO THE ONE WHO BY THE POWER AT WORK WITHIN US IS ABLE TO ACCOMPLISH ABUNDANTLY FAR MORE THAN ALL WE ASK OR IMAGINE, TO GOD BE GLORY IN THE CHURCH TO ALL GENERATIONS, FOREVER AND EVER. AMEN!

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