

Days of Miracles and Wonders

Isaiah 35:1-10 (The Jews are imagining wonderful “miracles” as they hope for the end of their exile)

Matthew 11:1-5 (John the Baptist inquires of Jesus and is reminded of all the recent miracles around Jesus.)

Preached by Carolyn Bohler
Redlands First United Methodist Church
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I sat in front of my computer, with its blank screen and prayed for a miracle. I prayed that this sermon would miraculously appear on the screen before my eyes. I didn't know how long to expect it to take for the miracle to happen, but I needed it to appear on the screen relatively quickly. It didn't.

What is a miracle?

What about the USA men's soccer team in their recent international play, well, except for their game with Mexico this week? What about Tiger Woods' comeback? Or, what about the 59 year old golfer, Tom Watson, who almost won? What about Mark Buehrle's "Perfect game" recently? Are all those miracles? Will Tyson Gay or Hussein Bolt pull off a miracle today? Personally, for those of us over 40, I think Glucosamine Chondroitine is a miracle. More seriously, what about the release of the two journalists by North Korea? Or the American from Miramar yesterday?

What *is* a miracle or a wonder? What do **you** think?

In the musical, *Fiddler on the Roof*, a poor tailor named Motel asks the father of the girl he loves for her hand in marriage. Motel has been afraid that he would be rejected, as too poor, but the father, Tevye, agrees to their marriage! So, the tailor sings, "Miracle of miracles, God gave her to me." He even cites the *Bible*. He sings, "God pulled a Daniel ...on me." referring to Daniel staying alive in the Lion's Den...

Both of our Scripture passages—the poem from Isaiah and the excerpt from the Gospel of Matthew—speak of miracles, but from different perspectives.

Isaiah the prophet writes poetry—maybe 500 or so years before Jesus lived—speaking to the people on behalf of God. Isaiah encourages the people, promising them a future in the Days of Miracles and Wonders.

The Gospel of Matthew is written during those very Days of Miracles and Wonders, when Jesus does what he himself calls acts of compassion—and Jesus is becoming well known for them.

When the prophet Isaiah wrote, his people were not living in la la land. Isaiah's followers lived with troubling realities. They were slaves; they suffered. Yet Isaiah prompted them to expect miracles—to look forward to days when the desert itself would rejoice! Those who fear will not need to fear. There would be all sorts of healings. And, they would return to their homeland via a highway through the desert—as free people.

It may be tough to get our minds around events 2500 years ago, so imagine Harriet Tubman saying about the same words as Isaiah. Consider Tubman encouraging the slaves in the south to expect miracles—to look forward to days when those who fear would not need to fear. Imagine Tubman telling them they'd be free people. For black slaves in the south the Underground Railroad, that is, the network of Blacks and Whites who helped slaves leave the south and head north—even to Canada—*was a miracle*.

It may be tough to get our minds even into our own country's history over a century ago. So, consider this: a prophet arising in Afghanistan or Iraq right now, or Sudan, or the Middle East. Consider that prophet encouraging military troops and civilians—all people—to expect miracles, to look forward to days when those who fear would not need to fear and all could return to their homes—free.

That's what Isaiah was doing—encouraging discouraged people...with his genuine expectation of Days of Miracles and Wonders. The people wanted miracles, prayed for them, envisioned them, anticipated them—and the One, the Messiah, the Prince of Peace, who would make all this happen.

Flash forward from Isaiah to John the Baptist. John had recognized the Prince of Peace. John declared that Jesus was the one—the messiah. But eventually John was imprisoned for his certainty. In prison, John, who had been so sure, began to need some reassurance. So John asked his own disciples to go ask Jesus **directly**, “Are you the one for whom we wait?” Jesus doesn't answer quite so directly. Instead, Jesus names acts of compassion that he has done: people who were blind have received sight. . . the poor have good news brought to them. To others, those **were** the Days of Miracles and Wonders.

Seldom do we ask, “What is a miracle?” Instead the question usually is, “Do you believe in miracles?”

Knowing that I wanted to preach about miracles, I have tried to hear different viewpoints from some of you. I'm going to ask for your patience...not as much patience as the Israelites had, waiting centuries--just enough patience to allow me to tell you what I've discovered to be four opinions about what miracles are.

1. A miracle is *God intervening* in nature to make very special, wonderful things happen.
2. A miracle is an amazing set of events that truly is *inexplicable*—not able to be explained, given what we would expect to occur.
3. A miracle is God acting, but not intervening in any way that is unusual for God, because God *naturally* and *always* intervenes as *one* factor in every moment.
What makes it a miracle is that we humans all together get our barriers out of the way—so that events line up more fully as God is guiding.
4. A miracle is a wonderful event that can be *explained by scientific means*, if we gathered enough facts.

I recall just a little over a year ago, when John was teaching Sr. High Sunday School in Orange County. One of the lessons was on miracles, so he asked his students what *they* thought a miracle was. The first to answer said, “The Birth of a Baby.” The next Sr. High Student said something like, “No, that's natural. A miracle is God intervening in natural events.” I think that those two different immediate responses are typical of how adults would respond, too.

Now, what about the question, “Do you *believe* in Miracles?”

You'd think that particularly “religious” people would say, “Oh, I believe in miracles! Oh, Yes!”

Yet, one of the most prominent Christian Theologians for several centuries in Europe was strongly *against* believing in miracles. Why on earth, we might ask? Frederick Schleiermacher was against believing in miracles because he was convinced that God *is* completely in charge of the world. God's will always happens. What sense

does it make to say God intervenes when God's making everything the way it is in the first place?ⁱ

Had you ever thought of such a Christian position on miracles?

Some who would call themselves secularists—people not very interested in religion, might also say there are no miracles. Their arguments might be like this: all things are explainable, by natural law, if we knew the laws from a larger perspective. Some things are especially wonderful, and we can be glad—people experiencing fantastic healings, for example—but if we knew more we'd see that those healings *do* follow natural healing possibilities.

So, you could be either a very religious Christian or a secularist and not “believe” in miracles, if miracle is defined in a narrow way—as God's special interventions.

The Bible itself is really ambivalent about whether God is in complete control of the world. There is much that implies that God is not the whole decider of what happens.ⁱⁱ

I realized that it's not just beauty that's in the eye of the beholder; miracles are also in the eye of the beholder.

To New Englanders it was a miracle that the Red Sox won the World Series a couple years ago after 86 years. Some may point to secular statistics, but others no doubt were sure it was God's intervention. Yet, to some Angles' fans or NY Yankees fans, on the losing end of this World Series, there was no miracle at all—just a bunch of guys winning some baseball games against strong odds.

The tailor Motel sang, “Wonder of wonders, miracle of miracles” ...because he got to marry Tzeitel. But there was another guy who had been in the picture. He, too, loved Tzeitel. Perhaps the father's blessing to Motle's proposal didn't seem like a miracle to the other guy. Maybe it's a miracle when all are blessed, such as when the Berlin Wall came down 20 years ago.

While I often name several positions and leave you intelligent, faithful, spiritual people to see where you stand, today I'm going to make an unqualified plea: We Christians **have to** believe in miracles.

Why do I say we have to believe in miracles? Because we, like the ancient Israelites, or the US slaves, need to anticipate the miraculous. Some of our families include estranged members, so our families suffer. The world is struggling with wars that are killing people, especially young people. Many people within a couple miles radius from this site, including some of us, are struggling with incredibly difficult situations. *We have to believe in miracles because the present situation is not okay for so many.* For ourselves and for others, there has to be hope for the desert to bloom.

If we or others are struggling, that's the time when we have to hear the prophet's voice reminding us: the desert *will* rejoice; we'll walk the road to freedom. These ARE the Days of Miracles and Wonders, and we have to believe that, expect that.

When I say miracle, I mean: “wonderful healings, reconciling events, wise breakthroughs of discovery, the birthing of beauty . . . the causes of which seem beyond our current understanding, or are simply awe-some, and in which God quite naturally is involved.”

We may be like John the Baptist, who recognizes Jesus, but, sometimes, *like* John the Baptist, we need some reassurance. As we pray and wait, and believe in miracles, which we must, we might ask, like John, “Is it true?”

If that's us, then we can look around and see the compassionate acts of Christ still occurring. Plenty of wars have ended; many families do reunite; bodies heal. People who do not have much receive from those who want to give, and those who receive bless those who give. **There will be miracles—whether you explain them as special acts of God, as natural events that are wonderful, or as God's persistent interventions making it through human barriers.**

I didn't get my miracle when I sat down at the computer and prayed that my sermon would appear. I had to work many hours, leave the computer, come back another day, talk to people, research, think more, and type more, until the sermon finally appeared. My goodness—the sermon *did* appear. It just took much longer and more work than I had wanted initially. Come to think of it, maybe that's true of most miracles— healings or reconciliations. There is much prayer, preparation, and pondering—then, *after all that*, the miracle occurs.

ⁱ Frederick Schliermacher, a very famous theologian for several hundred years in the 17th century...really someone who became a household name for European Christians, was very much against “believing” in miracles... (179 Schl)

ⁱⁱ p.52 notes