

EPIPHANY 2

SERMON for Jan 16, 2022

at Grace Lutheran Church

YEAR C

by Pastor Jim Hill

TEXT: John 2:1-11

TITLE: "Miracles"

Jewish weddings in Jesus' day were big celebrations, and there was usually lots of food and wine, and probably, dancing. Jesus and his disciples attended, which indicates that he was not a "party pooper", not averse to enjoying himself with family and friends.

Well, the servers ran out of wine (for whatever reason) and this was a major catastrophe. No doubt it would have brought shame upon the families of the bride and groom.

Jesus' mother Mary comes up to Jesus and says, "They have no wine." – a hint that maybe he could or should do something about it. This indicates that Mary had some faith in her son. It's surprising that Jesus puts her off so sternly, calling her "woman", as if to say: "You no longer have a special relationship with me, so you don't have the authority to tell me what to do, or even hint that I should do you a special favour." In spite of this rebuke (and that's what it is – the NRSV English translation softens the harshness of Jesus's words) – Mary is not offended. She gives an order to the servants: "Do whatever he tells you."

This shows that Mary had faith, and her faith was confirmed and validated when Jesus actually did this miracle.

As for Jesus' disciples, they believed in his miracle-working power after he did the miracle. Verse 11, the last verse of today's Gospel Reading, is the key verse. It says: "Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him."

The writer of the Gospel of John is telling us here, and it's emphasized throughout this Gospel, that the main purpose of miracles is to inspire faith, to engender faith, to inculcate faith in the hearts and minds of his disciples, or potential disciples.

Jesus' miracles were not magic tricks, done to impress anyone; hardly anyone at the wedding knew that a miracle had occurred! The steward of the feast didn't; after he tasted the wine, he said, "Oh, you saved the best wine for last!"

So this miracle was for disciples' sake, to engender faith in them, to elicit belief in himself as the Son of God. It was to inspire faith in them, faith that Jesus was indeed God's representative on earth, revealing God's divine intervention in and among the people of Israel, and ultimately, to reveal God's miraculous presence, in person, on the stage of human history.

But of course, if you survey the miracles of all four Gospels, you'll see that Jesus did perform miracles for people who already had faith, in order to strengthen their faith. We tend to remember those stories more easily, the ones where afterward Jesus said, "Your faith has made you well. Go in peace." (Luke 8:48) So Christians often get the mistaken idea that Jesus healed only those who were righteous, or those who exhibited a strong faith – as if these people were blessed with a miracle because they deserved it.

But that's rarely the case. For example, once Jesus healed a man who was paralyzed from birth. He was brought to Jesus on a stretcher and lowered down through the roof of the house! In this case, it was the faith of the man's friends who carried the cot that prompted a miracle from Jesus.

I like Webster's dictionary definition of miracles: they are "extraordinary events manifesting divine intervention in human affairs." ... extraordinary events manifesting divine intervention in human affairs.

According to this definition, I can tell you, I've seen many miracles in my life. I'm sure you have too.

For instance, in my 38 years as a pastor, I visited many people who were dying in a hospital, and there were several cases I recall, when doctors told the family, "I'm sorry, but your relative only will live for, at most, another few days." In the cases I recall, the doctors were absolutely certain of their prognosis because the cancer was too massive for the person to survive. Yet after prayers, in several cases the cancer disappeared within a few days and the person lived for years afterward. These were real miracles of healing.

There have also been several congregation members over the years, who told me of supernatural experiences they had, but they told me in confidence, because they were sure that other congregation members would think they were mentally ill. But, they thought that I, as a pastor, would understand them and believe them. And I did!

Over the years, I've become more and more certain that nothing is impossible for God. And I could give you many more instances of miracles that I've been privileged to observe.

So there are 3 points I'm wanting to make. One is: There's no way to predict when or where a miracle might occur (even at a wedding!).

My second point is: There's little correlation between the miracles of Jesus and the people involved in them. God does miracles for people of all kinds, those of great faith and little faith, righteous and unrighteous, deserving and undeserving, people who pray and people who don't pray.

The third point I want to make is that miracles are signs (as John calls them in his Gospel). They are signs of God's power that we can see and appreciate, signs of God's presence and sovereignty and grace that breaks into our everyday lives – not only the dramatic, unexplained happenings such as instantaneous healings, chance meetings, or near-death experiences; but also in the more commonplace, yet no-less-miraculous events of everyday life, like the dawning of a sunrise, the rebirth of creation in the spring, or the transformation of men and women into children of God, or the gift of love given, received and shared. All these things are miracles.

I have a book at home that I borrowed from Victoria Public Library called "Jesus Feminist", subtitled "An Invitation to Revisit the Bible's View of Women". The author, Sarah Bessey, writes about her experiences in Haiti, especially in working in a congregation led by a pastor named Gaetan and his wife, Madame, who feed and care for many orphans.

On page 146 she says, "I learned that faith can, in fact, move mountains. . . this is where I learned that sometimes our most holy mountain-moving faith looks more like spending our whole lives *making* that mountain move, rock by rock, pebble by pebble, day after daily day, casting the mountain into the sea stone by stone rather than watching a mountain suddenly rise up and cast itself."

She writes about the world-wide orphan crisis. She says it is (quote) "directly related to the economic and social development of families, particularly women. There are 440,000 orphans in Haiti alone, according to UNICEF, and this crisis is snarled and complex. But as the people of God, we have a choice: we either make excuses or we make the mountains move,

one stone at a time, one after another after another. Radical faith (she says) looks a lot like faithfulness, and look at what God can do with that.”

She goes on: “Here is something I’ve learned about miracles: Miracles sometimes look like a *kapow!* lightning-strike revelation; and sometimes miracles look like showing up for your counselling appointments. Sometimes miracles look like instant healing; and other times, miracles look like medication and patience and discipline. Sometimes it’s the daily unsexy work of loving people and choosing justice, even if no one ever notices. But know this (she says): God’s heart for humanity is good news for the poor, comfort for the broken-hearted, and release for the captives. God’s favour has come, and gives (here she quotes a Psalm) ‘a crown of beauty for ashes, a joyous blessing instead of mourning, festive praise instead of despair.’

And one last sentence from Sarah Bessey: “I suppose I’m a bit too liberal with the word *miracle* for most theologians. . . .”

I know what she means! For me, it’s a miracle whenever I feel the wonder of God in the fury of a storm, or the gentleness of God in the touch of a child, or the grace of God in the generosity others show to me, or the love of God that I’ve seen in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It’s a miracle whenever you experience a power greater than yourself and you believe that your life is secure in God’s hands.

I’m here to tell you, I believe in miracles. I believe God can heal the sick and raise the dead; but most of all, I believe God is at work in every aspect of our lives, pouring out his love for us, revealing his majesty and inviting us into a closer relationship with Jesus Christ.

One of the biggest miracles in my life was gaining the ability to speak in public. In my English classes in high school, whenever I had to go up in front of the class and make a speech, I would get up there and my hands would shake and my knees would knock and my mind would go blank, and I’d have to return to my seat – failed again. Well, something happened in grade 12 in a German course I was taking. The teacher, who had English as a second language, was unsuccessfully trying to explain to the class how to tell time in German, but was getting nowhere. Finally he gave up and said, “Jim, come up and explain this to the class.” Before I had time to think about getting nervous, I walked up to the front and explained it and sat down. I was kind

of in shock, because I not only did something I'd never done before, but I liked it. At that moment I knew I could become a teacher or a preacher. It was a miracle!

There was a news story of a miracle this past week, of a man who got a heart transplant. Except it wasn't a human heart that was put in, but a pig's heart! And it worked! That's a miracle. And I can imagine in the future (if the world survives that long, which will be a miracle) that we will have organ banks in major cities, where you can buy replacement parts for organs in your body that aren't working. It won't be like going to the store and picking out an item in the display case, but I'm sure some comedian will come up with a routine where he says to his partner, "Honey, I'm going to drive over and pick up a new kidney today. Wanna come with me?"

We live in a world of miracles. I'll close with the lyrics of an old sentimental song. It's somewhat saccharine, but it does describe what I feel:

"I believe for every drop of rain that falls, a flower grows;
I believe that somewhere in the darkest night, a candle glows;
I believe for everyone who goes astray, someone will come to show the way;
I believe above the storm the smallest prayer will still be heard;
I believe that Someone in the great somewhere hears every word;
Every time I hear a newborn baby cry, or touch a leaf, or see the sky,
Then I know why I believe." (Ervin Drake, et. al.)

Amen.