

What is a miracle?

Mark 1:4-11

January 7, 2018

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According to the New Oxford American Dictionary a miracle is “a surprising and welcome event that is not explicable by natural or scientific laws and is therefore considered to be the work of a divine agency.” Something surprising. Something inexplicable, out of the ordinary. Something we cannot explain by any other means, so we consider, so we infer, so we suppose, it must come from some kind of divine agency, from God.

So we relegate God to the margins, to the ever-shrinking realm of what we cannot otherwise explain, and as our knowledge of cause and effect grows, as we understand more and more of cosmic history and natural history, of human biology and psychology and sociology, there is less and less room for miracle. Which is why we don't see miracles any more.

We don't?

You've seen a miracle right here in this sanctuary this morning! Actually, two miracles, and these miracles have names: Avery and Josephine. Am I right? You cannot tell me that you can look into the face of Avery or Josephine or Harper Grace or Jimmy or Prince or Callie or Charley Mejia or Nevaeh and not see a miracle. Am I right?

And for that matter, don't just look at your children or grandchildren, look in the mirror. You are a miracle. Am I right?

That there is life at all is a miracle. How did we come to be out of that primordial soup, out of that vast waste, out of the chaos, out of nothing? Out of nothing! How does something come out of nothing? I'm not talking about how or when it happened. I know very little about that. I am saying that it is a miracle that it happened at all. That there is anything at all is a miracle. Why should we suppose that the existence itself of natural laws is any less miraculous than something that might seem to break them?

Let me propose a new definition of miracle: “A miracle is anything and everything that would not be apart from the power of God.” The only problem with my definition, of course, is that it covers pretty much everything. But that's not really a problem, because everything is miracle! There are no sharp boundaries between what is natural and what is miracle, between what can be explained and what cannot be explained. In fact, there may be no such boundaries at all.

The problem with the way we commonly use the word “miracle” is that it is akin to “magical,” but “magical” is “unbelievable.” Magic is what it is because it is not what it appears to be. But God's power, miracle, is what it appears to be.

Jesus is the embodiment of God's power. People were amazed by his authority, by the power of what he said and what he did, but Jesus was no magician and no miracle-worker, at least in the sense we usually mean it. When he was challenged by skeptics to prove himself by "performing a miracle," (actually, what they asked was that he give them a "sign") he refused. Jesus avoided sensation. Jesus resisted acclamation. Jesus did his best not to draw attention to himself.

But he did miracles. He healed sick people, released oppressed people, raised dead people, fed hungry people, forgave sinful people. Yes, forgiveness is as much a miracle as any of these other wonders. Jesus himself considered it a much greater thing to offer a lame man forgiveness than to tell him to get up and walk. Isn't it a miracle that you can be forgiven? That no mistake, so sin, no guilt, no shame from your past can be held against your future? That by the power of God you are offered freedom ... to live?

Jesus did miracles. How? By the power of God, the power of God to give and preserve life, the power of God to make shalom, the power of God that, far from being surprising or inexplicable, is the very power that made everything what it is in the first place. Jesus' miracles are never about proving himself or defying nature, but only about fulfilling his reason for being -- to save people, not saving them from the perils of life in this natural world, but saving them for the wonders of life in this natural world.

Jesus did miracles, but it would be misleading to call him a miracle-worker. The truly astonishing and wondrous thing is not that Jesus did miracles, but that he is a miracle: "You are my own dear Son." The miracle is God in Jesus, God with us, God among us, God sharing our common lot, God transforming our common lot by sharing it.

The miracle is not showing us some other strange and wonderful world that we have never seen before, but showing us this world as we have never seen it before, still familiar but now full of wonders. The miracle is not what is out of the ordinary, but that the ordinary is miracle.

The miracle is God's love ...

... the love of God that gave us birth
in the bright morning of this world

... the love of God that took our form
and made our peace

... the love of God that holds us close
until we know and are known

These last words come from a hymn by Jean Janzen, based on the writings of Julian of Norwich, a 14th century Christian mystic, who wrote of what she saw, of what she knew of God. It's a hymn we have never sung before, but is most beautiful and most fitting this morning. So we will sing it, but first listen to the words ...

Mothering God, you gave me birth
in the bright morning of this world.
Creator, Source of every breath,
you are my rain, my wind, my sun;
you are my rain, my wind, my sun.

Mothering Christ, you took my form,
offering me your food of light,
Grain of life, and grape of love,
your very body for my peace;
your very body for my peace.

Mothering Spirit, nurturing One,
in arms of patience hold me close,
So that in faith I root and grow
until I flower, until I know;
until I flower, until I know.