

MIRACLES (Trusting God Is the Issue)

Do we really think that Jesus died on the Cross so that we could find a parking space when we wanted one? Do we really want to live the Christian Life, or do we merely want to play “trivial pursuit”? Seattle has been the fastest-growing city in the country for several years now. Up north I kept hearing remarks about how traffic is as bad in Seattle now as it is in Los Angeles. Both have too many cars, inadequate highways, too few parking facilities. But fortunately, “really truly Christians” are granted special dispensation, and rules and realities that apply to normal people do not apply to them. That is how we know God is real, and that we are correct in our beliefs and are therefore granted special favors. We get to control the weather. We get special protection from various diseases and disasters. And we get parking spaces when we need them. Of course, we have to learn how to pray right – and really mean it.

This is superstitious nonsense, of course, but I do frequently run into people – nice people, serious Christians (they assure me) – who play with these and other scenarios in their heads all the time. Can you imagine the chaos if God granted a few of us the power to control the weather or the stock market or even the outcome of horse races? And why is it that people who make such claims never keep a careful log to support their claims?

Do you ever wish we could hold a serious, tightly controlled contest each year between Jews, Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, and Hindus and find out who is really getting special favors from God? “The Super Bowl of Religions” we could call it. Wouldn’t that be a really exciting event each year? And whichever contestant won, we could shoot them, just to see if God would stop the bullet.

Our world is beautiful, but often harsh. For many years now I have been a Pastor with the privilege of being with people in some of the harsh times. Most of the church folk I have known are unbelievably courageous, stalwart, faithful, forgiving, and loving in the face of life’s toughest challenges. But crisis time is not a good time to start thinking about our faith. Crisis times catch us with whatever level of faith we really have. And to the degree that we feel abandoned by God when things get really hard, well, that puts a magnifying glass over all our pain and fear and anguish. If a person thinks God is doing special favors for others but not for them – if a person thinks God is

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saving somebody else's child but will not lift a finger to help their child – that is devastating. Yes, but if a person comes to believe that God has saved their child but will not save somebody's else's child, that can be even more detrimental to the life and fellowship of Christ's followers.

So I want to talk to you about MIRACLES. There is a lot I do not know about miracles, and many of you will pay no attention to what I will try to proclaim. But a great many Christians have never thought very carefully about what they do expect and believe about miracles. This is a place where we are sworn to help each other to walk the Christian PATH or WAY with as much honesty and authenticity as we possibly can. So we do not have time for the usual fluff and feathers from the pulpit. As usual, you are not expected or required to agree with anything I say, but you *are* supposed to give it serious and prayerful consideration.

What is a miracle? What is the difference between superstition and faith in God? How many sincere Christians do you know who want God to change the rules every day, all along the way, just for them? And how many sincere Christians do you know who love to tell stories about how God granted them special favors, convinced that this would make God look good in the eyes of others and perhaps even help to convert them? Is there any difference between bearing witness to Jesus and lying to people, if we think it will have a good effect on them?

I want to start a serious conversation in this church about miracles. I am hopeful that you will participate in this discussion as we go. We will continue the conversation in a more open forum this afternoon in our Sanctuary Chat. I am constantly asked questions about miracles, and people come to me genuinely hurt or perplexed – or worse – because they have no clear perspective about miracles. They say things like: God helped somebody else or saved somebody else's child, but God does not seem willing to help me. My friend died or my children died or they are lost in an evil world, and God does not seem to be helping, though I have prayed as ardently and faithfully as I know how for many months now.

It is true that our prayer lives are often in a shambles, and sometimes we even stop praying because after enough disappointment, we end up convinced that prayer does not do any good, at least in our case. Maybe God plays favorites and others are getting better results

than we do. But no matter how much we hurt or how much we wish we could have more trust, a life of faith does not seem real to us; it does not work for us.

I have told this story before. I had a friend on Mercer Island some years ago. She got a divorce and had to move out of her large home and into an apartment. The apartment was up a half flight of wooden stairs, then onto a small landing, then into the front door of the apartment. She was telling me about the move, which was happening that afternoon. And she said, "I'm just praying really hard that my refrigerator will fit through the door." I looked at her quizzically, and she caught the look and asked, "What?" I said, "I was just wondering: are you asking God to shrink the refrigerator, or to expand the doorway?" "I don't care," she said, quite seriously. "I just want God to make it fit." "You don't need prayer," I said. "You need a tape measure." Membership remains small in the churches I serve. It had not occurred to my friend that it was irresponsible to try to dump this problem onto God when she should have been taking care of it herself.

The real issue behind all our conversations about miracles is trust. The more we trust God, the more incredible our lives become. But what happens to our trust if we are completely thoughtless in our expectations? What happens to our relationship with God if we ask God for things we should know God cannot or will not do? Jesus had a deep humility in His prayer life. Even in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus is careful about a request which, under the circumstances, is far more sane and sincere than many of our requests: "*If it be possible,*" He prays, "*let this cup pass from me.*" And the astounding follow-up: "*Nevertheless, not my will, but Thy will be done.*" Jesus does not want to be crucified – unless it will serve some incredibly important purpose that God sees clearly and that Jesus cannot see or understand in that moment.

Do we spend a lot of time and energy praying for God to go against God's own rules and principles of Creation? Is it then God's fault if our senseless prayers go unanswered? Is it fair to make up our own rules – dead against God's rules – and then bitch and moan because God will not respond and do it our way? Sometimes we do not need prayer; sometimes we need a tape measure.

At times people get thrown off course because they read about events that happened long ago, yet the people from long ago who told

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about those events did so without the same understanding for nature's laws that we have now. For example, God made the sun stand still for Joshua so that Joshua could have a longer day in which to kill more of his enemies. That did not trouble people who lived on a flat earth and had no concept of a solar system with all the planets in orbit around the sun. Sometimes days seem longer or shorter to us; things go incredibly well, or everything takes longer than we expected. But we would not explain this by claiming that God had interfered with the rotation of the earth in such a way that all life on earth would be instantly destroyed. Most of us do not expect God to act in such an erratic way. There are more probable explanations that do not require God to go against the way Creation is designed or against the principles by which it runs.

Did Jesus really bring enough bread and fish out of thin air to feed five thousand men, not counting women and children? Is this the Christian program for feeding the hungry? I surely hope so, because then I don't have to learn anything about being generous or sharing with others. I can let the story be meaningless, and I can go on like I always have: letting love and caring be something left up to miracles. If I can believe in miracles, I do not have to change my life, get more faithful to Jesus, or let the Holy Spirit guide and direct my choices or my purposes.

We learn and we are able to grow – and grow up – precisely because God refuses to work miracles in the way many of us want God to do miracles – and the way we often *pray* for God to do miracles. How often have we seen the sun come up in the West? How many times have we seen a star break loose from its normal course in the sky and come dancing around to rest over a special barn in order to herald a special event? We learn and grow precisely because God will not keep changing the rules, will not save us from our own or each other's evil, and will not save us from the consequences of our choices and our behavior.

Martin Luther is a great hero of mine. His first conversion involved a thunderstorm in which Luther was totally convinced that God was personally angry toward him. He thought that the lighting bolts were a sign of God's anger and that they were directed at him personally. In Luther's time, most people assumed that when Zeus or Thor or Yahweh became angry, thunder and lightning came crashing about. Is that what *you* think?

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If Martin Luther had not groveled as completely as he did – and had not promised to give his life to the church – the lightning bolts would have come closer and closer until they killed him. I do not believe that, but Martin Luther did believe that. And I am very glad that he gave his life to the church and ended up finding out personally how corrupt and wrong the church was about a great many things, until the Reformation broke us out of Catholicism and some of our superstition so that I no longer have to live under that kind of fear and terror. “The righteous shall live by faith – ALONE.” Screw the lightning, screw the Pope, and down with anything and anyone who wants to keep us from the grace and mercy and love of God. Luther turned out to be outrageous. But it started out with Luther being terrified, and it took him most of his life to work his way – with the Bible’s help and with the Spirit’s help – out of that dark, black place that most of the Christian world was living in at the time. Paul had seen it, but that was not enough. Luther had to see it for himself. And some of us have not kept up with either one of them.

God is not a God of magic and miracles. God is a God of principles and love – a God of enduring patience, with an abiding and almost unbelievable forgiveness, mercy, and grace. These are things we do not need if we live in a universe of magic, of unpredictable whims, of playing favorites. Some people talk like they wish God would change the rules from moment to moment and just for their benefit; we should be able to control the weather, and nobody we care about should ever get sick or die. We think it sounds good – when we are still being thoughtless. But it would be utterly and completely horrible if we got what we think we want.

So may I invite you to come be reasonable with me for a little while? What is a miracle? A miracle is when something happens that we do not expect – something that we do not think can happen under ordinary circumstances. There is nothing objective or provable about such a concept. We all have a different level of understanding and expectation. Eric McRae (my son-in-law) can do things with my smart phone that seem utterly miraculous to me. Sometimes he can even teach me how to do one of them. Then it is no longer a miracle. After a while, in fact, I can do the same thing without batting an eye. A miracle is when anything happens that we did not expect could happen under normal circumstances.

We have learned to be somewhat cautious about things we are pretty certain we know. And some of us are aware that we have finite

minds and that, beyond a certain point, our minds cannot comprehend any further. We call it the realm of the absurd. “Can God make a rock so big that God cannot lift it?” Little children often ask us, “If God made everything, then who made God?” Some questions must be set aside for a realm more advanced than this one. Peter de Vries liked to say, “It is the final proof of God’s omnipotence that he need not exist in order to save us.” Is that cute, or is that simply absurd?

My sister went into the East much further than I did. In some of the stories of Creation, it is claimed that the world rests on the back of a giant turtle. My sister loves the story of a little boy who was being taunted by an “unbeliever.” The skeptic kept asking the little boy for more information. “If the world rests on the back of a giant turtle, then what is the giant turtle standing on?” They went around and around for a while. Finally in exasperation the young boy insisted: “It’s turtles – turtles all the way down.” Sometimes my sister still says to me, “Don’t be stupid. It’s turtles all the way down.”

If we are not into the absurd, it becomes clear that there is no “Creation” without principles, without rules, without realities. We suppose and suspect that God chose the principles on which Creation as we know it rests. And to the degree that we trust God, we suspect that God made careful and intelligent choices about which principles to base this reality on. We keep learning that there is more potential and are more possibilities inherent within the laws and principles of Creation than we at first imagined. The flight of a Boeing 747 would have totally dumbfounded anyone and everyone in Jesus’ world. If you had walked them up to a Boeing 747 sitting on the ground and told them that it could fly, they would have known that you were stark, raving mad. So we keep finding out that there are possibilities in our reality far beyond anything we once imagined. We have every reason to believe that this will go on happening.

What is a miracle? Did Jesus know He was performing miracles? Or did He simply understand more about what is possible if we mix spiritual power into our physical realities? Do not accuse me of pretending I understand, but the more I ponder the healing miracles, the more I wonder if Jesus was always seeking the Spirit’s permission before He healed somebody. I cannot prove it, but I strongly suspect it. Jesus seems to me to be incredibly obedient. And He spends long hours in prayer. Was He trying to stay so in tune – so aware of the will of God – that He could tell what was possible, and when, and with whom?

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It is not the most important part of the passage we read this morning, but I am amused at how much we want things to be miracles. Jairus has a twelve-year-old daughter, and she is very sick. Jairus is president of the synagogue in Capernaum, which is where Jesus lives – the center of His ministry. So Jairus knows something about Jesus and what He is capable of. He is also desperate. So he begs Jesus to come in the hope that Jesus might be able to heal his daughter.

We do not know what was going on inside Jesus. He is interrupted by the woman with the hemorrhage, but then He continues on toward Jairus' house. But if I am trying to understand, I have to assume that Jesus is sending a prayerful probe to the Spirit, asking about the true condition of Jairus' daughter. I have known some people who have amazing sensitivity on such levels, and I also presume that their gifts are not as well honed or developed as Jesus' were.

In any case, Jesus ends up announcing that the girl is not dead, but asleep. We might suspect she was in a coma. That does not imply that I think this was a false alarm. I know medicine was a very primitive affair in Jesus' time, at least in comparison to our time. But I do assume that the girl would have died if Jesus had not been there. Nevertheless, as I said, I am amused that we pay no attention to Jesus at this point. The girl is dead, and Jesus brings her back to life. That is a bigger miracle, so that is what we want. So never mind what Jesus says; never mind what Jesus senses or knows. The girl is dead. They laugh at Jesus and so do we, all these generations later. What does Jesus know? Let us tell the story our way. The girl is dead – never mind what Jesus says.

At this point, Jesus cannot afford distractions. He takes His three top followers and the girl's parents (risky, but their love is also strong). And without fanfare, He goes into the inner world, connects with the girl's soul, and calls her out. Is that a miracle in my book? One of the best! I love it! Never mind the problems in Damascus, global warming, or all the other poor and hungry people that Jesus is neglecting in this moment. Jesus heals Jairus' daughter. I think that is wonderful. I hope she lived a long and fruitful life. I hope she became a courageous and faithful follower of Jesus. As usual, Luke tells us far too little of the rest of the story.

But my question was: Did *Jesus* think of this as a miracle? Or did Jesus know a lot more than we do about how such things work? And why is it that we do not know more about how such things work?

How much time have we spent in the deep inner awareness of true prayer in the last month? How sincere and earnest are we about discovering and developing the spiritual gifts that God has placed within us? Sometimes a church fires their Minister; actually it is happening at an unprecedented rate. But have you ever heard of a church that fired its Minister because he or she was neglecting their prayers?

In any case, there are a lot of things God will not do for us no matter how hard we beg. In general, but with great consistency, God will not break what we call “natural law.” Not for us – not even for Jesus. The nails really did hurt. Crucifixion still killed Him. In short, God will not do any miracles for us if by “miracle” we mean the suspension or overriding of the laws and principles of Creation. With enormous INFLUENCE and with far greater understanding of what is possible within the principles of Creation than we have, God will and often does amaze and dumbfound us. But we should be spending some time trying to understand God’s ways – and with respect and appreciation, refrain from asking things we ought to know God will not do for us.

That said, do you really imagine that you trust God more or ask God for more than I do? Jesus has convinced me that the Omnipotent God cares about my sick child and your career and my friend’s love affair that has gone bad. Yet we constantly need to be asking what the Great Spirit wants from us – not just what we want from the Spirit. So once again I remind you: Jesus of Nazareth only helped a tiny handful of people in the tiny little backwater nation of Israel in His own time. And everybody that He healed died only a few years later. The power and purpose of Jesus the Christ is not limited to first-century Palestine or to twenty-first-century Orange County. We cannot understand the New Testament story if we do not wake up to Jesus’ true mission. He came to help us in the here and now, insofar as that is possible. But mostly Jesus wants to reconcile us to God – only, this God is eternal, and His Kingdom has no end.

Friends, I know you come here because you want to “Live the Life,” just as I do. This journey means we are learning to trust God more all the time. We cannot know or understand everything, but that does not mean we cannot know or understand *anything*. Trust God to help you in every way you will allow – and far beyond the ways any of us understand or expect. Never stop praying. But buy a tape measure.