

July 26, 2015
Falcon Heights Church UCC
Falcon Heights, MN
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Ninth Sunday in Pentecost
Psalm 145:10-18
John 6:1-21

A WORLD THICK WITH GOD

Jesus feeding 5000 people from a young boy's lunch. Jesus walking out across the heaving waves on an inland sea in the middle of a windstorm. Yes, biblical miracles are difficult to talk about. They strain our thinking, for one thing. Our scientific worldview gets challenged when we are confronted with stories of extraordinary things happening, in the Bible or in our daily lives. What we would call a "premodern" mind might be impressed, even convinced of God's existence and Jesus' power, by such stories. But the part of us that wants to observe and measure and calculate and prove, is not sure what to do with miracles...if they even exist at all.

The Bible is full of miraculous stories that seem to strain the brain: Red Seas parting to allow a rag-tag group of Jewish slaves to escape the Egyptian army. Women conceiving and bearing children in their 80s and 90s, or stranger still, pregnancy without sex. God talking out of a burning bush, a cloud of smoke, a flaming pillar. Jesus of Nazareth turning water into wine, walking on water, healing sick people, bringing the dead back to life, coming back from the dead *himself*. I tell you, these recorded events are a puzzlement to many of us. Events and acts that defy the laws of physics as we know them, and leave us wondering: "Do I have to believe these miracles happened to be a Christian? Is my relationship with God a sham, is my faith, inferior if I don't believe these stories to be literal descriptions of something that happened? Are these stories in any sense *true*?"

It is difficult for us to understand how people viewed the world 2,000 years ago in Jesus' time and further back before him. Imagine living in a world where "nature" is not a closed system that God has to somehow "interrupt" supernaturally to make anything happen. Imagine a world that simply functions each day because God wills it to be so and is active within that world in every moment. God's extraordinary and extravagant actions happening each day, in each interaction with other humans, animals, plants, the whole of creation. All suffused in the mystery of God's workings. Like the moisture-filled thickness we feel on a hot humid summer day, for people in Bible times, the air was thick with God. Life was permeated with the spirit world, with forces of good and evil, full of angelic hosts and God's glory. Strange and difficult for us to imagine.

But miracles weren't really surprising to first-century people; in Jesus' time there were lots of healers and wonder workers. The crowds didn't view this as God intervening from outside their rationally ordered world. They already

experienced that “earth is crammed with heaven,” like the British poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning would later describe to her Enlightenment-focused world. What was new with Jesus was how he used miracles to help people better understand the heart of God. The Kingdom of God does not work like the Kingdom of the Empire, where power and money, appearance and possessions, strength and violence rule the day. For Jesus, this Kingdom of God, God’s reign, is like this....like these happenings in these ordinary parts of life: wheat, weeds, mustard seeds, yeast, a young boy’s sack lunch.

This story of feeding many with little is the only story of Jesus to appear in all four Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John—clearly an important part of the oral tradition of stories of Jesus’ ministry that circulated before anyone wrote them down. Why mention this particular scene? Somehow, the Gospel writers each understood that this event was a picture of God’s reign. It showed God’s reign as a place where small things bring big changes; where God’s economy, way of dealing with the world, is one of abundant compassion, not scarcity and punitive judgment.

Crowds of people had been following Jesus, records the Gospel writer John. We can sense their yearning, desperation even, in how they clamored after Jesus. This may seem a bit off-putting to us. Perhaps it’s hard for us self-sufficient types to admit that level of need. They “saw the signs that Jesus was doing for the sick.” They crowd around him as he teaches, 5,000 men, probably twice that many women and children. Everyone seems to have lost track of the time, but Jesus turns to his disciples and asks: “What are we going to do about getting these people some food to eat?” “Yikes,” replies one of the disciples, “we just don’t have enough money for a project like that!” Another disciple speaks up, maybe even sarcastically: “Hey, this kid has some barley loaves and a few dried fish. Use that! But, what are they among so many people? This won’t make any difference!”

One commentator (Trygve Johnson, chaplain at Hope College in Michigan) blogging about this story notes that so often we see a situation of need and we feel like we have nothing to give. We assume we have nothing of worth to share, or we have so little that it seems ridiculous. Other people have more talent, or more money, or more faith than we do. Ours looks like just a pittance. Why bother? Yet God seems bent on giving by multiplying what little we have. “Bring your nothing to me. Be part of this. Come on, now, get the people to sit down,” says Jesus.

We want to focus on the scarcity, and our worry that there will be even less in the future. Too little in the church bank account, too few young families, too little energy around here. Over and over the Biblical message is that this is a God of abundance, and this God wants to multiply what we have. “Bring your nothing to me,” says Jesus. The disciples are asked to participate in the miracle, one where there will be not only enough for all these thousands of people, but

there will a dozen huge baskets left over. I'm not sure I believe this story in the same way I believe in the existence of something quantifiable, like this piece of paper or the law of gravity. But I am coming to *trust* in this story of God's incredible abundance and generosity.

Sometimes we stand in the presence of a miracle unfolding in front of us. Something starts to shift inside of us, but we aren't sure how to respond. Maybe a person starts to change or a situation takes an unexpected turn, new life is happening in front of us...but we just freeze. We can't seem to find the way in; we can't connect. "But what are they among so many?" we wonder.

Eugene Peterson, longtime local church pastor and author, describes this happening to him when his son announced that his young wife was pregnant with Peterson's first grandchild. Eugene and his wife jumped in the car and went to visit the young couple; his wife, Jan, was brimming with joy and expectation of this miracle of new life. But Eugene felt oddly out of it. Dull and flat. As they drove home, he complained to Jan about his lack of emotion. He even felt a bit irritated at her obvious excess of delight. "What's wrong with me? Why don't I feel anything?" he demanded. His wife answered, "Perhaps it's because you've never been pregnant." "Well, that's just great; so what am I going to do about that?" he snapped. His wife replied, "I suggest you build a cradle."

After mulling this idea around in his mind for a few days, Eugene trudged down to the public library and found pictures of cradles. He chose an early American hooded cradle design, sketching the plans, going to a specialty wood shop. In between pastoral calls and sermon writing, he would work on the cradle. Measuring, cutting the wood, bit by bit. When it was assembled he sanded over and over with the finest sand paper and steel wool, in between applying coat after coat of tung oil. And as he held that cradle and shaped and rubbed it, he found himself imagining the little baby growing inside his daughter-in-law. He found himself praying in wonder and gratitude for this developing child. And he realized his wife's suggestion had worked: he *himself* felt pregnant with expectation and excitement! That was a miracle in itself! He went from numb and uninvolved to being pregnant with anticipation and hope. And by the time the cradle was ready, he was ready to fully receive that miracle of a new life. (From Eugene H. Peterson, "The Pastor: A Memoir.")

I suspect that miracles are strewn at our feet every day, mostly located in small insignificant things. We trip over them, unnoticing. Or we stumble into them and don't know how to respond. God's miraculous actions fill the air like thick humidity. "I have nothing to contribute to this particular situation," we groan. "*Bring me your nothing,*" says Jesus. "Get the people to sit down. I need you all to participate here," says the God of the Universe. "Let's see what we can do with your nothing. Let's turn it into a miracle of hope and compassion."

Watch this week. This world is thick with the God who invites us to participate in miracles. Step right up; bring what little you have. Watch it multiply! Amen.

(Cradle story from: Eugene H. Peterson, "Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places: Conversations in Spiritual Theology.")