

HOMILY FOR October 6, 2019, based on Acts 9:36-43 and Luke 5:1-11

Did you notice that both the epistle and gospel read today were miracle stories? What do you make of miracles? Of the two stories today, which are 2 out of a great number of miracle stories, in one Jesus causes a miraculous draft of fish to be dragged in by not 1 but 2 boats so overloaded they were beginning to sink, notwithstanding the fact that the fishermen hadn't gotten a bite all day—or, perhaps more accurately, they hadn't netted anything. In the other story, Peter, this time, not Jesus, is the miracle worker; he raises Dorcas (aka Tabitha) from the dead, after a journey to reach her body. What do we make of this? What would you say to a friend who told you he/she couldn't buy into Christianity because it's so miracle-ridden, and who can take that seriously? How have you explained the miracles to yourself?

There are several tacks to take to deal with the miraculous in the Bible.

- 1) You could say that the Bible, every word in it, is the Word of God, and that being so, God, God-self, composed the narratives of the miracles. So one must believe it. Despite the fact that it begs the question, many fundamentalist Christians use this argument. Would you?
- 2) You could say that miracles really have nothing to do with the religion of Jesus. That we should just ignore them as primitive thinking, superstition, magical thinking, lack of confidence. The true religion of Jesus is his sublime moral code of love, of love of others as of self, or more than self. His teachings, as in the Sermon on the Mount and throughout the parables—those

are his real legacy, as was, of course, his self-sacrifice on the cross.

Are you familiar with Thomas Jefferson's "Bible?" Jefferson thought much on religion; about Christianity; he considered himself a Christian, but could not believe in any claims of miracle in the Bible or any non-rational claims of the divinity of Jesus by Christian theologians. He bought 2 copies of the Bible, got out his scissors and razor blades, and laboriously cut out from the 4 gospels all passages containing miracles, most mentions of the supernatural, the sections of the 4 gospels that contain the Resurrection, and most passages that portray Jesus as divine. Then he pasted up on new pages all that was left, combining the several gospels to make one narrative, leaving out redundant passages where the stories are repeated, and came up with what he called *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth*, or what is now popularly called the Jefferson Bible. So Jefferson thoroughly rejected all miracle content as not essential, and even inimical, to true religion. Is this what you would say to the problem, because problem it is.

3) Here's another way you could go. You could say: I wouldn't claim that religion has to be solely rational and ethical, and reject the miracles on that account, but certainly the world-view of the 1st century is different from that of the 21st. Their world-view embraced miracle and mystery because the world seemed so full of it. So much was causally inexplicable. Miracle was a much-used category of explanation. Now that science has gained so much in 2000 years, and we know so much more about the causal explanations of phenomena, it is

right to reject the miracle stories as being an archaic, pre-scientific way of explaining the happenings of the world. They aren't essential to a true belief in Christianity for 21st century people who understand science. This is a prevalent view, left right at this point. But my 4th point, and the argument I prefer, accepts this argument whole-heartedly, yet adds to it a more positive interpretation of what the category of miracle could mean to us.

4) I'd like to propose a re-understanding of miracle. Regarding the 1st argument, the one that says the Bible is a God-dictated book, I would reject it because I think the Bible was written by God-inspired authors of the 1st century. And I'd say that not every passage is literally true, but nevertheless has meaning that can be true. I'd reject Thomas Jefferson's argument that true religion is sublime morality. It is that, but much more. I'd agree with much of the 3rd argument—that we can reject miracle on the basis of our success in the development of science and the ability to know causes of phenomena. I'd agree that we do, indeed know much more, and that we live in a different world from the 1st century, and it is appropriate to reject the old interpretation of miracle the way they saw it. Sure, they didn't know what causes blindness, deafness, leprosy, and we have a much better medical handle on these condition. But...I think there's a much richer "but."

I think we need to explore what's implicit in the idea of miracle that the 1st century authors were using in the miracle stories. The miracle stories are in a context that provides for a great richness of interpretation. Look at what's happening in a

miracle story. They're usually about major, major critical events in a person's life—life and death itself, e.g., raising from the dead; or leprosy, a life-changing terminal disease that requires sequestration from normal life; or blindness; deafness. We're not just talking about finding a parking space. Note that in each of the miracle stories, the miracle brings forth life-changing potentialities. The miraculous draft of fish, practically sinking 2 boats, that's a bit life-changing for fishermen, and especially so when the text actually tells us that it's about something more than fish, it's about the fishermen becoming fishers of men. Tabitha, whom Peter returned to life—how can the message be more life-changing than having life restored to one? The message is that God can give us new life, new potential. God in us can turn around our life in this life, e.g., the woman caught in adultery, and God in us can give us new life with potentialities after this life. Both are miracles. And that's the hidden message behind and below the literal miracle. That there is a new vocation other than fish. That there are new insights for the blind. That there are new voices for the deaf. That there are exciting new possibilities in your life if you let yourself be healed, miraculously. That being open to miracle in a new sense means being open to new possibilities, to thinking outside the box, to invention, to creativity that you hadn't seen before. This is why I wouldn't drop the whole notion of miracle, I'd re-invent it. Miracle points to new life, new meaning, new understanding, new hearts. These are not something we want to drop out of our life—rather we want to celebrate them.

In the way of miracle stories being stories of opening circumstances, I thought of a circumstance of a niece of Charlie's. Our niece, a para-legal, and her husband were pretty destroyed by the recession a decade ago. Their house went underwater in terms of mortgage payments. They had to sell it for little to get out of the mortgage, and move to much lesser housing a greater distance from both their jobs. His work was cut back on, but they had enough to just make it, as her para-legal job was still ok. Then she noticed in job ads that a law firm in Hayward, which she had formerly worked for happily, was expanding to Fresno. She thought she'd apply, but she wondered if she was too old now—if they'd want someone young and cheap. She got an interview, and, miracle of miracles, she was offered the job. The interviewer next said, "How much salary are you expecting?" She hesitated a bit, needing more than the \$50,000 she was then making, but not wanting to ask for too much and lose the possibility. As she took time to think, the interviewer interrupted by saying, "Would \$75,000 be ok?" This is the point of miracle stories! Would new life be ok? Would 2 loads of fish be ok?. Do you want to see something exciting? Do you want to hear voices that you haven't heard before?

It's not that circumstances will always change for the better, that lives will always turn around, that cancer diagnoses won't happen. They also are a part of life—for some, much of life. And the miracle stories – they might be thought miracles because they're so rare--they're the intrusions of love, hope, joy that we must celebrate.

This answer to the problem of miracles is not blinkered by literalism. It does not reject life's real potentialities and excitement and hopes for an agreement that it's better to live prudently and

kindly, although certainly it is. It does not reject miracle because we know so much more than the 1st C authors did, although certainly we do.

Those 1st century authors knew a lot, and maybe they even knew that they were encoding within the idea of miracle the very idea of hope and creativity that is possible in this life. The idea of miracle for us means the possibility of a changing future, a rich future—this is what's on offer in the miracle of Christianity. The miracle stories of the 1st century translate to the stories of hope, of circumstances turning around, of lives turning around, of leprosy overcome, of the blind seeing, of the lame walking. Learning to live with Christ is learning to stretch to change our lives for the better and to change the lives of others; learning to use our creativity and our dedication to change our lives and to change the lives of others; learning to catch hold of the excitement of the challenges of life, for our sake and for others. Would you take a razor blade and carefully cut these parts out?