

## MERIDIAN STREET UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

### Seven Miracles of Jesus: 1. Calming the Storm

Mark 4:37-39

It was one of those hot August nights, the kind that leaves the air so thick and sticky that most folks retreat to the security of air conditioning. There was a knock on our door which made me wonder who would be out on a night like this. Two striking young women in athletic clothes said hello. I immediately knew who they were because I'd seen photographs of them in our next door neighbor's house. They'd come from California to try out for the Indianapolis Fever basketball team and were staying with their dad. He'd told me they belonged to some evangelical group of Christians and were strong believers.

"Dad told us about your son," one said. "We were wondering if you would allow us to pray over him." "Of course," I responded and welcomed them inside, anxious to stop the rush of heat flowing into the house. We went through introductions and chatted for awhile until the other sister told us they intended to pray for a miracle. Tami and I placed our hands on Connor's head with them and listened to what I have called a "we just wanna prayer." "Oh God," one began, "we just wanna thank you for being our God." "We just wanna pray over Connor and his affliction." "We just wanna ask that he be healed and that you give his parents strength for the day." On they prayed and on we respectfully listened while our son looked up with an expression that showed more curiosity than anything else.

Throughout the Sundays of Lent we are going to take a look at what has been called in John's Gospel *The Seven Miracles of Jesus*. It is thought by some that the organizational structure used by the author of this gospel centers on these miracles to, as is stated again and again, "*reveal his (Christ's) glory, and (why) his disciples put their faith in him.*" John 2:11 NIV. We will take them out of sequence because I wanted to begin with a miracle story that can not only set a tone but point us toward a workable definition. Just what is a miracle anyway, and are they a part of our experience today? Maybe by the end of our Lenten journey including the story of the resurrection we'll have a few more footholds...more solid ground to stand upon.

Let's look first at the differing landscape. In Twelfth Night William Shakespeare has one of his characters mentions, "*They say miracles are past.*" And this is what many people in our day and age believe. The miracles of Jesus were wonderful events, and perhaps some of his disciples had those powers as well, but that was a different time, it was the golden age of miracles. You just don't see the classics like the seven miracles anymore;

turning water into wine, healing a boy near death while across town and far away, healing a man ill for 38 years, feeding thousands with only a few loaves of bread and several fish, calming a storm, giving sight to the blind, raising a man named Lazarus from the dead. That was then with Jesus, this is now without.

Contrary to Shakespeare's "miracles are past," there is another playwright and Christian poet named Thomas Carlyle who says in On Heroes and Hero Worship, "*The age of miracles is forever here!*" That is what many other people in our day and age want to believe. We hang onto the claims of people proclaiming "It's a miracle!" from lottery winners to cancer survivors. Miracles are a part of life as common as the flu season and as recurring as tax time. There are many miracle stories to be found and told.

That may explain the mindset of the pioneer evangelist Oral Roberts whose "Expect a miracle!" slogan became the mantra to a faith generation. For some reason that approach always bothered me, perhaps because it sounded so much like an entitlement. If you're right with God, expect a miracle! Yet I've known many faithful people who've never received the medical miracles Roberts claimed was within everyone's reach.

It has seemed to me that one of the qualifiers of miracles is that they more often than not come unexpectedly. They contain an element of surprise. Katherine Porter evidently held this point of view. She said, "*Miracles are instantaneous, they cannot be summoned but come of themselves, usually at unlikely moments and to those who least expect them.*" Porter expresses this in her book Ship of Fools which seems to echo the theme in today's lectionary reading describing the boat trip of the disciples.

*In the evening his disciples went down to the sea, [17] got in the boat, and headed back across the water to Capernaum. It had grown quite dark and Jesus had not yet returned. [18] A huge wind blew up, churning the sea. [19] They were maybe three or four miles out when they saw Jesus walking on the sea, quite near the boat. They were scared senseless, [20] but he reassured them, "It's me. It's all right. Don't be afraid." [21] So they took him on board. In no time they reached land – the exact spot they were headed to. John 6:16-21 The Message*

While the disciples were scared, they didn't summon anything. Jesus just appears and helps them through a difficult situation. The calming of the sea is one of the few stories that is found in all four gospels and John's version is radically different. Did you notice that he draws into the scene an event that the other gospels treat separately...Jesus walking on the water? Not only are they dealing with a churning sea, they may have been scared senseless by the sight of Jesus walking on the water. In Mark's gospel story Jesus is already on board asleep in the stern on a cushion. And in Matthew's gospel Jesus does something that I would say represents another qualifier of miracles. It's something John Donne observed in 1627. "*There is in every miracle a silent chiding of the world, and a tacit reprehension of them who require, or who need miracles.*" Matthew's gospel, "*And they went and woke him saying, 'Save us, Lord; we are perishing.'* And he said to them.

*'Why are you afraid, O men of little faith?' Then he arose and rebuked the winds and the sea; and there was a great calm." (vs 25-26)*

Jesus was certainly chiding the world or confronting and challenging the laws of nature. In just about any miracle we claim to see or experience the laws of nature are subdued. It's an unnatural occurrence in a natural world. And Jesus goes on to show a reprehension of them who require, or who need miracles by how he lashes out at the disciples with what seems to be a disgusted "*O you of little faith.*"

In Friday's Indianapolis Star Billy Graham's column "My Answer" dealt with a question he received from someone asking how we know the bible is true. Graham responded, "*I often recommend that people start with the Gospel of John. (Read it through and) as you do, ask yourself if it sounds like something people just made up, or if instead it rings true. I think you'll find it rings true - and for a very good reason: Jesus Christ really lived, and he really showed us what God is like.*" (March 3, 2006)

When it comes to John's version of our story it's easier to sense that it does ring true. If we can look past that "little" matter of walking on water, it's more of what Jesus says than what he does that approaches the miraculous. He doesn't give an irritated "you woke me up for this you men of little faith" remark. Instead he says, "It's me. It's all right. Don't be afraid." And this is probably the biggest qualifier of a miracle that we've mentioned today which is something that has the capacity to take away our fear; fear of living, fear of dying, fear of consequences, fear of loneliness, fear of change.

In the midst of the churning sea the story tells us that they still reached land - the exact spot they were headed to. "It's me. It's all right. Don't be afraid." If we take John's story at face value the miracle wasn't the calming of the sea - that didn't happen -- it was a calming of the heart, a subduing of the laws of nature or the human nature to fear. And that, my friends, is why someone like Thomas Carlyle could sing "*The age of miracles is forever here!*"

After an energetic amen we said our goodbyes to the two young ladies. Within an hour our son was in seizure again. But I remember that night, perhaps because it was so unusual. "I'd reached land - the exact spot we were headed to" which was the territory of acceptance. The storm, the fears had calmed. Maybe those two ladies had brought a miracle after all. "It's me. It's all right. Don't be afraid."

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