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Sermon  
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Park Congregational Church  
Worcester, Massachusetts

“What Is a Miracle?”

Scripture Text: John 2:1-11

Dear people of God, there’s a story about a Christian who is shipwrecked, and who is hanging on for dear life on a piece of flotsam floating around in the ocean. Yet he believes intensely that God will perform a miracle to save him. A motorboat goes by and the driver throws him a lifesaver, but the Christian yells, “No, go away! God will perform a miracle to save me!” And so the motorboat speeds away. After a while a helicopter hovers above and drops a rope ladder to him, but again, the Christian shouts, “Go away! I have faith that God will perform a miracle to save me!” And so the helicopter ascends away. After a while a submarine surfaces and sends two deep sea divers to go rescue him, but the Christian shouts, “Go away! God will perform a miracle to save me!” And then finally no one else arrives, and the Christian drowns. When he meets God in heaven, the Christian asks, “God, I had faith that you would perform a miracle to rescue me and you didn’t. How come?” And God answers, “What do you mean I didn’t come to your rescue? I miraculously sent you a motorboat, a helicopter, and a submarine! What were you expecting?”

In today’s gospel reading, Jesus performs a miracle. At a wedding in Cana, he turns a great deal of water into wine. Some of you may have actually witnessed a miracle that reminds you of something like this one. Well, I haven’t. That doesn’t mean that I haven’t experienced miracles in my life. I just haven’t experienced any

miracle like turning water into wine.

One of the most controversial and misunderstood topics in religion is that of miracles. The controversy arises not only over whether or not miracles occur, not only as to when they have occurred or not, but also, as to what are miracles.

It's interesting to note that in the New Testament, extraordinary events are often not called miracles, but more often something like signs or wonders. Particularly in the Fourth Gospel, they are called signs. That gospel says that turning water into wine was the very first sign Jesus performed.

Let us suppose that a person whose life languishes in the grip of a deadly disease suddenly, unexpectedly, unpredictably is cured. Such an event is indeed a wonder. It's certainly an extraordinary happening. But what are we to make of it? Is this a miracle? Is it a sign? If so, to what does the sign point?

For those of you who have difficulty believing in miracles and think that if you lived 2000 years ago in the presence of Jesus, your faith in miracles would have been stronger, forget about it. We have a good example in the Gospel of Matthew of a miracle that wasn't acknowledged even by eyewitnesses. In fact, it was the greatest miracle of all: the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. The soldiers who guarded the empty tomb where Jesus's dead body was put were witnesses to his resurrection. They saw the whole thing happen right in front of them. In fact they reported it to the chief priests. But they took a bribe to keep their mouths shut. In other words, they saw with their own eyes that Jesus had risen from the dead, and yet, they did not believe it. Does this sound incomprehensible? It shouldn't.

If you begin with the presupposition that miracles do not, cannot, and will not

happen, they never will. We all know that our senses are fallible. We see things we want to see. And we don't see things we don't want to see. Sometimes when people are in extreme pain or fear, they become hysterical and claim to see a miracle. And sometimes when people see something that doesn't fit their expectations, they casually dismiss it as an illusion, a wish projection, or as Ebenezer Scrooge put it, an undigested bit of cheese, when he confronted Marley's Ghost in *A Christmas Carol*.

Our modern world has given us a full supply of resources for interpreting miracles as less than miraculous. Miracles didn't become a problem in the Western world until the 18th century and the rise of modern science. Before then, certainly there were those who disbelieved that Jesus performed miracles, but after that, at least among the intellectuals, including many clergy, the thought of anyone actually performing a miracle was excluded from the realm of possibility. Stories about miracles or anything else that didn't fit into a mechanistic, materialistic universe governed by ironclad physical laws have had a very rough time ever since.

Now no doubt much of this disbelief is the fault of religious persons themselves, especially self-proclaimed faith healers. Many of them have been exposed as frauds. They have claimed miraculously to heal those suffering from cancer and all kinds of dreaded diseases. They have claimed to heal those who suffer from backaches and various deformities. Well about 99.9% of the time, however, they are wrong. I don't say that they're liars, because many of them really believe that they are instruments of God's miraculous power. But after the hysteria and excitement have worn off, it becomes clear that no healing has taken place. The one time in a 1,000 that a miraculous healing does happen is no better than the overall

odds in hospitals, which any physician will tell you.

When I was a teenager, my mother, father, and I attended a week-long Bible Conference in the White Mountains of New Hampshire. The Conference was hosted by an evangelist and self-proclaimed faith healer by the name of Clinton White. On the final night of the conference in the beautiful cathedral which Mr. White built on top of one of the mountains in Lancaster, New Hampshire, he asked those who wished healing from physical diseases or deformities to come forward. One young man, with whom I had made friends a few days earlier, stepped forward in a comical way. You see, he was born with a deformity of the hip, so that he walked like Charlie Chaplin, his feet pointed outward when he walked. This Mr. White laid hands on him and pronounced him healed. And it seemed that he was indeed healed. He walked back to the pew like any other person, his feet pointed straight. This was probably the most amazing miracle I had ever witnessed. Everyone in the cathedral was astounded. They were all praising God and lifting their arms to heaven in adoration. I didn't have the opportunity to talk with my new friend again as our family had to leave early the next morning by plane back to New Jersey.

By sheer coincidence, I met this young man at Great Adventure Amusement Park in Jackson, New Jersey, a few years later. He was walking like Charlie Chaplin again. He said that he started walking that same old way the next day after the Bible Conference ended. He had been a strong believer in God. That's why he had attended the Bible Conference in the first place. He was now an agnostic, not knowing if there is a God, mainly because he viewed Clinton White and other faith healers like him as frauds. There's no doubt that the overwhelming majority of these persons who claim

to have powers of healing do a great disservice to Christianity.

But we cannot end there. Yes, there are many frauds, there are many who use Christianity for their own monetary gain. This is nothing new. The apostle Paul in his own time warned believers about such persons. But that doesn't give us permission to dismiss all miracles out of hand.

Critics of miracles contend that primitive, unsophisticated peoples of the ancient Near East attributed certain events to miraculous divine intervention because they expected this as normal. Divine intervention was their way of explaining the world. But I don't think that this proves they were gullible. First-century persons may have been wrong in attributing so many events and phenomena to the gods, but they certainly knew the difference between the way the world usually works and a miracle.

When Joseph the carpenter found out that Mary was pregnant, he assumed that she was "with child" in the ordinary way, and so, decided to divorce her for infidelity. He didn't right away jump to the conclusion that God had performed a miracle. The gospel accounts do not tell us of any struggle that Joseph underwent in believing that his virgin wife was with child, but I'm sure that was a tough one for him, just as it would be for any of us.

I don't think that biblical people were stupid or naive in these matters. They were like us. They generally saw what they expected to see. They viewed the world through their sense experience and their intellectual tools, just as we do. Perhaps that's why Jesus in the gospels doesn't appear to get much mileage out of his miracles. They don't seem to be as convincing as we often assume they should be.

Rarely does anyone move from seeing a miracle to believing that Jesus is the Messiah, because seeing is not believing, just as it is with us today.

In order to believe in miracles, you must first believe in the regular, ordered predictability of the world. And second you must believe that God is the one who has ordered it in this way. If you don't believe in the regular, patterned, predictable course of nature, then you would never know a miracle when you see one. Everything would be so chaotic and undependable that nothing could amaze you.

Once we believe that there is a God, and that God has ordered the world in a certain predictable pattern, then we are ready to define a miracle. A miracle is not a supernatural working of God, that is, God needing to interrupt or suspend the laws that are put in place. What we take to be the laws of physics, for example, are not ironclad limits which allow for no exceptions whatsoever. They are general laws that obtain, discovered through thousands and thousands of observations and experiments. That's why scientists speak of theories, for example, the theory of evolution or the theory of relativity. It's not that these theories don't have much evidence to support them. On the contrary, they have abundant evidence in their favor. But no physical law is so unchangeable that it cannot make room for the unexpected. In fact even  $1 + 1 = 2$  does not always hold in the physical world. I don't have time now to explain how that can be in this sermon, but relativity theory shoots holes in normal arithmetic like  $1 + 1 = 2$ . Does that mean that if  $1 + 1$  does not = 2, it's a miracle? I don't know. But I do know that in the world of relativity physics and quantum theory, normal arithmetic does not always hold.

We must understand that the world is God's creation, subject to the will of

God, not to some independent, clockwork mechanism that doesn't allow for any exceptions. The creation was originated, is upheld, and is ruled by a loving God who works all things according to the divine will. The world is not governed by some impersonal force that necessarily predestines that if you contract cancer, you will die. Sometimes the cancer reverses itself, and you live.

And so, back to our original question, "What is a miracle?" A miracle must tell us something. It's not just an extraordinary event that cannot be rationally explained. And what it tells us is not just something general, such as there is a God, and this God is capable of performing miracles. Miracles, according to the Bible, are signs. A sign communicates something. And it communicates something specific. A miracle is a sign that tells us something about God. A miracle points us to God. A miracle tells us that God is bringing about redemption in the world. A miracle tells us that God is working in a specific situation to bring good out of evil.

A miracle is not a violation of the creation order; rather, it is a fulfillment of that order. Miracles presuppose that things have occurred which are contrary to God's will and need to be corrected. Running out of wine at a wedding reception is not good. It's an embarrassment for the host of the wedding. And it prevents a joyous time of celebration from continuing. Jesus comes to the rescue of this married couple in Cana by performing a miracle, a sign that points to the coming redemption of God in Jesus when he will be the groom and all of us, the Church, will be the bride.

The final consummation of the world and its redemption is going to be one glorious miracle, which God is achieving now a little at a time. Just as Jesus turned water into wine at Cana, so God does that all the time in California or France or Italy

or wherever rain waters the fields and the sun matures the grapes. When Jesus turned the water into wine at Cana, a number of those present saw this as a sign that something mighty was at work in their midst. As the Gospel says, “This was the first of his signs which revealed his glory” (John 2:11).

Every day, in our hospitals, the blind see, the lame walk, and the sick are cured. We call it surgery. We call it medicine. We call it technology. We rarely call it a miracle, though the result is the same.

But once in a very great while, our eyes are opened, a veil is lifted from the universe, and we see God moving among us. In such moments, we see a sign and we are overpowered by God’s glory. And we, like the disciples, believe. Amen.