

## What is a Miracle?

Sermon for 6-6-10

Scripture: 1 Kings 17:8-24, Luke 7:11-17

A long, long time ago in the 9<sup>th</sup> century BCE when Elijah was a young man, Ahab became the King of Israel. He was a very wicked king and did much to provoke God's anger. Ahab married the legendary Jezebel, an evil and idolatrous woman whose father was the King of Sidon (now Lebanon), a region north of Israel. Jezebel and her family were committed to the worship of Baal and soon even Ahab became a believer, breaking the commandment to have no other gods except for the One God, Jehovah.

Elijah, a prophet, was sent by God to warn Ahab that he was doing what was destructive to the heart and soul of Israel. Can you imagine what a tough assignment this must have been for an inexperienced prophet from the backwoods of Gilead! He was told by God to inform Ahab that due to his evil and idolatrous behavior, it would not rain again until Elijah said so. Of course, Ahab and his court just laughed. When Spring came and there were no rains, Ahab was no longer laughing. Then the summer came and it was clear that a drought was upon them. In the meantime, Elijah had gone to hideout by a certain Wadi, which is riverbed—often dry except in the rainy season. The ravens fed Elijah as God had commanded. After a while there was no longer

water in the Wadi and the Lord directed Elijah to go to Zarephath in Sidon and that he would find there a widow who would feed him. In other words he was to ask help from a nobody that had nothing (Kate Huey). Now here we have a couple of people that are pretty bad off. When Elijah asked the widow for a drink of water and a morsel of food, she informs him that she has only enough supplies for one last meal for herself and her son. She was in the process of gathering sticks for a fire and to go prepare this last meal and then die.

Before progressing in this story let's think about this widow. She is at the end of her rope. Times are beyond hard. And as we know, when times are hard the poor are especially hard hit. Despair hangs heavy in the air. "The widow, the orphan, and the stranger"--these three appear together so many times in our Bible. They are usually grouped together because they represent an entire social class of people who are without voice. This trio was often the poorest of the poor in the days of Elijah and Jesus. Yet here is this widow willing to offer hospitality to a stranger. This stranger does promise that if she feeds him, the meal and oil will last until the drought is over. Yet why would she trust this stranger? Yet she does take the risk and we know that where there was scarcity there is now sufficiency; the three of them have food and water every day as God promised. She

risks giving all that she has and in doing so she receives life instead of the anticipated death. In the midst of famine and drought, thirst and hunger, it seems that this desperate widow still had hope. When there is nothing left, when we are empty, there is room to be filled, to hope, and to grow. Is this a Miracle?

Now if this were a fairy tale, we would end the story right here; however, this is a story of hard times, long, long ago. Soon the widow's son dies and she blames Elijah and very possibly herself for taking Elijah into her home. Yet again she takes a risk in her willingness to let Elijah try to heal her son. She opens herself to trust or at least to hope. Elijah stretches himself out on top of her son and prays to the Lord God for life to return to the boy and it does. He returns the son, now alive, to his mother. Is this a Miracle?

About a thousand years later in the village of Nain, Jesus also brings back to life a widow's only son according to the gospel of Luke. A little different focus here is Jesus' compassion: in verse 13: "When Jesus saw her, his heart broke. He said to her, 'do not weep.'" Compassion in Greek comes from the word for 'womb' and carries with it the meaning of caring from the depth of one's heart, or of feeling something viscerally.<sup>1</sup> So in this scripture we not only see the power of Jesus; we also get a glimpse into his

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<sup>1</sup> Pam Laing from Midrash online.

heart. It is this compassionate heart from which the life giving power of God flows. Both through Jesus and through Elijah, the prophet, we see that God's power is among us not just for judgment but for life, for transformation, even for resurrection. Is the revival of the widow's son by Jesus a miracle?

What is a miracle? Today the word is often used to refer to any amazing or wonderful occurrence. Others would define a miracle as an act defying the laws of nature, so is held to be supernatural in origin or an act of God. In the lectionary email group I belong to this subject raised much discussion. The majority of responders decided to ignore the miracle question and instead, focus on hope, and compassion. I aligned myself with those that labeled miracles as a mystery and at the same time believe that with God all is possible. The next step for me is to do what I can to bring about change, to not remain silent as I become aware of the needs of the stranger, the poor and the oppressed. I like the Sufi tale in which a mystic sees the great suffering of individuals and peoples, and cries out to God, "Why don't you do something?" God responds, "I have done something. I made you." Or another tale in a similar vein: One of my group emailers wrote that at the top of his worship planner he has the words, "God, why are there so many hungry in the world?" to which God replies "..funny thing. I was going to ask you the same thing.

For many of the theologians in this week's abundant emails, the miracle in these stories had nothing to do with the raising of someone from the dead. As in every miracle/healing story, maybe the true miracle is that God became one of us. This God walked on earth as Jesus, both human and divine. Even more of a miracle for me is that we now have God dwelling within us as the Holy Spirit—just as promised by Jesus. This Spirit gathers us together as a church family, loves us, teaches us, and sends us out.

As we go forward to Holy Communion, may each of us ponder what part God wants us to play in bringing about miracles. May your hearts be filled with hope, compassion and joy as you do amazing and wondrous things. Amen