

I Don't Believe in Miracles
Third Sunday after Pentecost
June 5, 2016
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Text: I Kings 17 & Luke 7

Introduction to the Old Testament Lesson

- In I Kings we hear of the great prophet Elijah – speaking God’s word – the word of YHWH, the LORD, to Israel and Judah
- But in this story Elijah is sent outside of Israel because the leaders have turned away from God – turned to the idol Baal – and Elijah is not safe in Israel
- There is a drought and famine in the land, reflecting God’s judgement of Israel and giving a sense of disorder and brokenness brought by turning from God
- We hear in this story of Elijah encountering a widow and her son; and we need to know that in that culture to be a widow was to be very vulnerable and poor, and that a son would be her only hope of providing a future
- It’s in that setting that the story unfolds:

“Do you believe in miracles?” That’s actually not meant as a question for you – that’s a quote. Do you know what it’s a quote from? That’s what the T.V. sports announcer said as the clock expired on a U.S. Olympic Hockey Team victory over the Soviet Union which led to a gold medal. Do you know the year? – hearing ‘Soviet Union’ should help – it was 1980; do you know the announcer? – it was Al Michaels. I actually knew all of those things without having to look them up: I was watching that game and heard it as it happened and was quite excited about the whole thing. This was back in the Cold War era, and it was a point of national pride for our USA youthful amateurs to beat the big bad professional Soviets (or so we were told). It was a “Miracle on Ice” as it came to be known; and I’ve heard it replayed a number of times since – as far as sports highlights and quotes go it is a rather famous one. On National Public Radio this week I heard some of a series that was comparing cultural landmarks for different ages – 25yr-olds; 45yr-olds; 65yr-olds (I’m kind of more in the middle of those last 2 groups ☺). And it was interesting to hear the differences in formative cultural reference points – from the

assassination of JFK to the Fall of the Berlin Wall to the attacks of September 11, 2001- some things shared and many things very different in the cultural landscape for those different age groups. Now I'm not sure where the 1980 'Miracle on Ice' fits into those generational touchstones - although I am sure that there are plenty of younger folks today who know nothing about it – but I bring it up as a cultural event that at the same time offers a way to see how miracles are spoken of in our culture and a way to wonder about the differences over generations of how people think about miracles.

Because on the one hand, you can step back and realize – ‘wait a minute: MIRACLE on ice? – the USA Hockey team beating the Soviets? - is that what a MIRACLE is? – it's impressive, exciting – but a miracle? Which can make you start to notice how “miracle” is often used around us these days. A ‘Miracle Ear’ hearing aid – it's pretty impressive, but a miracle? – perhaps: “really impressive technology ear”?! – but I guess that's not as catchy as a miracle.

Or how about this? – if you make a sandwich, you can add Miracle Whip! – which makes for a really delicious sandwich – but does this blend of ingredients qualify as a miracle? – is that what a miracle is? – maybe Amazing Whip or Yummy 100%fat Whip – but probably not a miracle. You can find all sorts of ‘Miracle’ products out there today – all the way from cleansers to ‘miracle drugs’ for serious diseases. But are these really the stuff of miracles? And so I wonder: does our culture today use the word ‘miracle’ for things that aren't, because generally people don't believe there really are? – miracles? More than any cultural divides among our generations today, is a much bigger divide between our culture now and back then in Scripture about miracles? – miracles told, accepted, important then? – but now simply relegated to the realm of human ingenuity?

Let's look at that. The stories we heard from the Hebrew Scriptures in I Kings and from the Gospel of Luke have some remarkable events that are described – the kinds of things that would typically be called miracles. But if you look at the story from I Kings 17 – the word ‘miracle’ is not used – which is interesting; so instead let's just hear what happens in the story:

The Prophet Elijah is in foreign territory; there is a drought - which leads to famine – food is scarce.

Elijah comes across a widow- asks for a drink? – OK; asks for bread? – ‘sir, this is the last bread for me and my boy – I'm about to make it, and then wait to die’

Elijah says: ‘don't be afraid; God will provide’ – and so it was; the oil and flour are sustained.

These are remarkable – powerful events...EXCEPT: the son becomes deathly ill; the mother is distraught; Elijah is upset; he calls on God; the son is healed. Remarkable – powerful events.

The woman says: “now I know...the word of the LORD is in your mouth”

OK – then the Gospel of Luke, chapter 7 – we hear what we call a miracle story – but Luke doesn’t use that word. In fact, here’s a fun fact – the word “miracle” never occurs in any of the 4 gospels – that’s interesting to notice – so let’s just hear the story as it unfolds...and as we do, we can’t help but hear an echo of I Kings 17:

Jesus notices a funeral procession – a widow’s only son. Jesus feels compassion: “do not weep”.

Jesus touches the bier carrying the body (which by the way made Jesus ritually unclean). -

“Young man – rise” – the man sits up, speaks.

And it says: ‘Jesus gave him to his mother’ - I King 17 verse 23 says: ‘Elijah gave him to his mother’ This is not an accidental echo – Luke is making sure we see the connection.

So 2 stories – 2 remarkable stories echoing one another. I pointed out that neither one uses the word ‘miracle’ – which takes nothing away from the stories, but actually can I think provide a way into them. If we don’t focus first on the story being just about a miracle, then we start to listen to the story being about the characters – about God, about Elijah, about the woman and her son; in fact if it is just a miracle it in a way distances us from the story – if it’s just an extraordinary event to impress us about God, is that really what we need? But a story of life’s circumstances – of need and life and death and ‘to whom will you turn?’ – that is a story I understand.

Several years ago I saw the story from I Kings dramatized by a group of Western Seminary students led by Professor Tom Boogaart, a member of Hope Church. It was very simply and effectively done- the actors spoke in Hebrew, with simple actions playing out the story. I remember that as the woman poured out her pitcher of oil to make bread, that then above her a figure of God would pour back in to fill her pitcher; she poured out – God filled... That visual made such a deep and lasting impression with me – beautiful; powerful.

You see here’s the thing: if you want to keep playing out this story, the miracle stopped at some point – right? - the oil and flour stopped; we could even note that eventually this woman and son died - right? The bread and healing were remarkable, but limited– so doesn’t there have to be more to the story? Such as - what does this story say about God? It tells us of that image of the God of life that fills us; of the Word of the LORD which

speaks the fruitful path of faithfulness and hospitality and blessing; of the LORD who is our true healer. Life requires more of this story than a miracle - this story speaks of God who is our hope – who is present and provides.

When we listen to Luke 7 – it’s not told as part of the highlight reel of a miracle worker – Jesus putting on a show to wow the crowds. Instead it’s a story about Jesus – a widow - a son; a story of life’s circumstances and needs which we can understand. What does this story say about God? - it tells us that here in Jesus Christ, the God of Elijah, YHWH, the LORD is made known. It says that in ordinary people’s lives, God reaches out to those on the margins - the God of compassion – the God of life. Because here’s the thing: that woman and son died eventually; and on that day there were others in need who were not touched by Jesus – right? - if this story is just about a particular moment, does it mean much? Life requires more of this story. This story turns us to the God of compassion; calls us to know the Lord of life.

So – you see the sermon title? ‘I Don’t believe in Miracles’ – well just like the sermon title a couple of weeks ago, which was “Truth Changes”, I’m just being a bit obnoxious here (which in my case is no surprise) and hopefully a bit playful too. The sermon title ‘Truth Changes’ sounded like I’m saying truth is relative, but was actually a focus on how the Living Truth of Christ changes us. This sermon title could sound like I’m discounting miracles – but instead what I mean to say is this – that miracles are not the object of our faith, God is: “I don’t believe in miracles - I believe in God” - we believe in the God present to us in Jesus Christ; present in us through the Holy Spirit. Throughout the writing of scriptures there was actually a wariness about miracles in the wrong hands - miracle workers seeking to manipulate people for money and power and fame. The focus of the stories we are given is on the characters: on the LORD of life who is faithful; of people seeking faith in the midst of need; the focus is on our Lord Jesus revealing God with us, among us.

The sermon title is meant to express how these stories should put our focus on God, on our Lord. But the truth is too that I know inside me that I do shy away a bit from miracles – I find them perplexing not because they happened then but because they don’t always happen now. In all the suffering and need in life in which there is no miracle, it is difficult – it can make people feel that faith is inadequate, that God is absent, making the suffering worse; when you don’t have a miracle, then what are these stories are for? But here’s the thing: the writers of the Bible knew that same thing - people of faith knew - the church knew, that such miracle stories were not some sort

of cure-all for all. These stories were told to reveal God in the midst of life - so I want to have faith to come close to these stories— not to put my faith in miracles but in God – the God of faithfulness and life, of compassion and revelation.

Because truth is, my friends - this world and this life is miraculous – it is a gift of God. And if we are looking for wondrous events in our lives, then for God’s Spirit to work in us acts of compassion and justice, of love and hope – such are the wonders this world and this life truly need – the miracles of faith that give life and endure. This is what these stories speak to us this day: that the LORD is among us, faithful in all circumstances; that the compassion of Christ holds us, touching our lives with true life. These stories point us to what we truly believe in: the Lord of Life who is with us – the Lord and giver of life for us and all God’s children. Thanks be to God. AMEN.