

THE MIRACLE & THE SCIENCE OF FAITH

1 kings 17: 8-16; John 5: 1-9

Have you ever witnessed a miracle? Think about it. Here we are today. We have just baptized John Adam in the name of our triune God. He is alive and he is here. We know the science of it all – the birth of new life, that is. But do we comprehend the miracle of it – not only a new life, but a life that is a spirit, a mind, a body all capable of development and in ways that have yet to unfold, rooted in deep relationship bonds of love? Isn't that a miracle?

A miracle is not about the science we can understand with our minds. A miracle is about the science that transcends what we can understand with our minds alone. A miracle is not about the mechanics of how something happens. It's about the possibilities that become real beyond anything we could imagine possible or real. Unless we understand the birth of a child that way, are we truly understanding it for all it is?

Let me provide another example. It was the 1990s. I was a minister in rural Quebec. The English-speaking community was small and all the churches worked together for various events and activities. I knew the Baptist minister and his wife fairly well. When I arrived, she had already been through one bout of cancer. It had been serious, but after surgery and chemotherapy, she was now in remission. She had a beautiful voice and would sing solos in church. Her voice had come back and she was doing what she loved best in worship. But after a few years more, the cancer returned, even more aggressively. Eventually she was hospitalized. When I went to visit her for what I thought would be the last time, she could barely speak without coughing. Her chest was full of fluid. She couldn't eat. For all the praying we were doing as churches, the science at this point seemed crystal clear. She would die within days.

I anticipated hearing the news any day. But weeks passed and no news. I checked with people I knew at the hospital. They said something astonishing. They said she was better. She was eating. She was talking. Had anything changed in her treatment? No. There was no active treatment. Another few weeks and she was released. Another few months and she was back singing in church. What had happened? The doctors had no answers. These things do happen sometimes, they said. In fact, they happened more times than many knew. The science seemed clear enough. But this was nothing short of a miracle. I eventually moved on from ministry in Quebec. When I left she was still singing solos at church. There were still no answers scientifically speaking. From the point of view of her church, however, the miracle of healing was about healing that went beyond medical science. It was a miracle of faith and of prayer.

Now let me say that this is but one of many stories I've encountered in ministry, where people recover against what seem like impossible scientific odds. On the other hand, I have many stories of people who prayed and were prayed for, people of genuine faith, courage and grace, who never made it. The science was brutally clear and there was no way into recovery. So how do we explain all this?

Let's begin with some hard science. In the last several decades a considerable amount of research has been funded on the links between faith and healing as well as prayer and healing. Conditions tracked include heart disease, cancer, as well as conditions like anxiety, depression and other auto-immune body-mind illnesses. Whether it's survival rates, recovery rates, longevity or quality of life, there is now substantial scientific evidence that praying for people in a heart-felt consistent way and having faith and hope in what's possible for oneself and for others can make a huge difference when it comes to health and healing. That's the science.

But what about the miracle? Where is the miracle exactly? How do we activate the maximum conditions for miracles to happen? Let's delve into our scripture readings in search of revelatory insight.

Our first reading from 1st Kings, chronicles the adventures of one of Israel's early prophets – Elijah. It's a tough time for Elijah. He's a prophet persecuted by a corrupt king and queen – Ahab & Jezebel. They hate Elijah because he's not into flattery but into honest truth-telling. The corruption in the court and the abuse of the vulnerable for the greater amassing of wealth and power is intolerable for a nation supposedly devoted to the God of the 10 commandments. So Elijah will not be silent even if he has to go into hiding to survive. To hide, he has to find people willing to risk their own lives because they believe in what he's doing.

This is also a terrible time for Israelites in general, especially the poor. There is a drought in the land and people are hungry. Resources are scarce. Elijah needs somewhere to stay and something to eat. Who can provide for him given their own needs? Who would risk their safety? Elijah finds someone. She is a widow with a child. Elijah asks her for some water and bread. She hesitates. She only has enough for herself and her child and even then, enough for a few days max.

But Elijah challenges her. Even though it may seem insensitive and thoughtless of him to demand it, he challenges her to help him and have faith. But what about the facts, the scientific facts? There is only so much food. An extra mouth to feed is an extra mouth to feed. But here's where the miracle begins to happen. What if your faith and your hope empower you to imagine that doing the right thing, even at your own personal cost, may

open up possibilities you cannot see if you're paralyzed by hopelessness and helplessness? What if faith and hope in choosing to do the loving thing above all else will open up options and choices you could never imagine? You see, true miracles are not magic. If it's just magic, it may be spectacular in itself, but nothing substantial changes in the person you become or the world around you. Nothing really has changed other than experiencing that one thing. But if we reread these ancient 'miracle' stories as stories of empowerment and transformation through an awakening of faith, hope and love in the people healed, then what do we see?

This woman sees this prophet who is persecuted, this prophet who represents the true God of justice against a larger corrupt regime. She is awakened to act with faith and hope even though it may do her and her child in sooner than later. But she goes for it. She chooses to be generous to Elijah. And somehow doors open. It's a miracle for sure. But what happens inside her is a miracle just as much as what happens to her tangible circumstances. How can someone change like this and rise up like this when all around people are hopeless and helpless, waiting to die? Through Elijah God is working to awaken a woman to what's possible beyond the apparently impossible. Somehow, Elijah, she and her child survive the famine and she is empowered to hope that God is still alive and active, even though the powers that be are diabolical, and the economic and social realities around her are bleak. God is alive and active in simple, hidden, miraculous ways, and the widow is a living witness to this reality. Who knows how she can then affect the people around her with faith and hope too, that they can get through this and that they as a people can rise up and get a better deal from their rulers. Wouldn't that be a miracle?

Let's look at our gospel story for another example of how the miraculous becomes real. Jesus encounters a man who is crippled and unable to see. He is among other people who are also sick with various ailments. They are all near this pool of water purported to possess miraculous healing capacities. But this can happen only when the water is stirred by some natural phenomenon in the ground. Our science today would be able to figure out what really happens to stir the water underground, but the point is: people claim that when the water is stirred, anyone who gets into the water may be healed. It's magic. But the man in our story is terribly helpless and virtually hopeless. He has been sick for many years and has never managed to get himself in the pool of water at the right moment. Why? Well he can't move himself and everyone else is so busy getting themselves into the water at the right moment they don't care enough to help him.

This man's disease is not just physical, then. He is helpless and hopeless and he's deprived of active, caring love coming his way. So what does Jesus do? First of all, Jesus bypasses all the supposed magic of the pool. Let go all those magic pills and remedies and therapies advertised. Jesus is interested in the man himself. He shows him genuine love and concern. He then challenges him to give up his helplessness in mind and spirit. He challenges him to

rise up, to claim responsibility for his life and his illness. There's lots he can't change. But what can be changed with the right inspiration and empowerment? What can he do to maximize the healing energies in his body through his thinking and his spiritual powers activated by a divine current?

You see, healing in the gospels, like in other parts of the bible too, is always about the mind and spirit as much as it is about the body. The science can document concrete healing happening. But the miracle is in how people are changed and transformed even before any kind of physical healing happens. In fact, people are changed and transformed even when physical healing doesn't happen or even when the prognosis is fatal. Blessing and transformation happens in so many ways we cannot fathom when we are stuck too narrowly in our hopes for too specific an outcome alone. With a lot of love and a lot of faith and hope, people can be changed in their whole inner outlook, and the healing energies within them are maximized. Miracles happen in all kinds of ways when we have the eyes to see them and the hearts to experience them as miracles.

In the case of the man in our gospel story, his paralysis is healed. Who knows how he became paralyzed in the first place. But until Jesus the healer encountered him, showed his abundant love and attention, and then challenged him to rise up, he was stuck in his paralysis. The widow, like all those around her, was living the doom and gloom of a fatalism that was like a blanket covering all the people. She, like the paralysed man, were just two individuals. But Elijah and Jesus saw something in them, miraculous possibilities in their humanity, incredible potential for transformation as human beings not defined by their illness or misfortune.

And this, my friends, brings it all back to us here today. We know the science of health and illness much more thoroughly and comprehensively today than in biblical times. That's a great thing. But it can also become an obstacle. It can narrow our vision to specific outcomes and undermine our openness to the miraculously possible and real every single day in so many ways. The birth of new life is a miracle, because even though we may understand the science of it, the possibilities of life when love and care are poured into it, are limitless. People live and die every day. Sometimes we can explain it. Other times we cannot. But how we live it can make all the difference not only for ourselves, but for the world around us. How can we become a blessing in ways that can transform others? How is God in our life a ground and source for such transformation? How are faith, hope and love active ingredients in maximizing healing energies?

May we be awakened to the miraculous possibilities and realities all around us and within us, and may we give abundant thanks whenever and however they happen; Amen.