



More to the Story

By

The Reverend Melanie Hardison

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First Lesson | Psalm 33:1-9

Rejoice in the Lord, O you righteous. Praise befits the upright. Praise the Lord with the lyre; make melody to him with the harp of ten strings. Sing to him a new song; play skillfully on the strings, with loud shouts. For the word of the Lord is upright, and all his work is done in faithfulness. He loves righteousness and justice; the earth is full of the steadfast love of the Lord. By the word of the Lord the heavens were made and all their host by the breath of his mouth. He gathered the waters of the sea as in a bottle; he put the deeps in storehouses. Let all the earth fear the Lord; let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of him, for he spoke, and it came to be; he commanded, and it stood firm.

Second Lesson | Matthew 9:18-26

While Jesus was saying these things to them, suddenly a leader came in and knelt before him, saying, “My daughter has just died, but come and lay your hand on her, and she will live.” And Jesus got up and followed him, with his disciples. Then suddenly a woman who had been suffering from a flow of blood for twelve

years came up behind him and touched the fringe of his cloak, for she was saying to herself, “If I only touch his cloak, I will be made well.” Jesus turned, and seeing her he said, “Take heart, daughter; your faith has made you well.” And the woman was made well from that moment. When Jesus came to the leader’s house and saw the flute players and the crowd making a commotion, he said, “Go away, for the girl is not dead but sleeping.” And they laughed at him. But when the crowd had been put outside, he went in and took her by the hand, and the girl got up. And the report of this spread through all of that district.



Sermon

I wonder what it must have been like to be one of the disciples following Jesus and having a front-row seat to all that he said and did. I wonder how long into their ministry together it took for them to get used to being eyewitnesses to such marvelous things as miracles. Can’t you just hear the dinner conversation after a day like the one we just read in the Gospel of Matthew?

I imagine the disciples recounting the events of the day and marveling at all that happened. “First, this religious leader comes and bows down to Jesus... his daughter has just died, and he wants Jesus to bring her back to life. So, Jesus says let’s go. Then, as we’re headed that way, there’s the woman who’s been bleeding for 12 years--you know the one, her brother has the olive stall in the market? Well, you wouldn’t believe the compassion in his eyes when Jesus looks at her and tells her that her faith has made her well. It was amazing. Well then, we get to the girl’s house, and oh my gosh, Jesus reaches out to take her hand, and she stands up!”

It must have been a lot for the disciples’ brains to process each day, as they moved around the countryside with Jesus. At some point, the novelty must have become less novel, so I also imagine that at the end of an evening like this, as dinner winds down, someone probably also says, “Well, it is Jesus after all. Just a day in the life. Nothing to see here.”

And the disciple who says that would, in a way, be right. Miracles were not unusual for Jesus. The Gospel of Matthew alone contains 20 miracle stories. And there’s

a total of 32 miracles across all four gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. What all the miracles in the gospels have in common is that they address some sort of human suffering or need. They aren’t miracles for the sake of miracles or for proving Jesus’ powers. They all bring healing, hope, and new life to the people they touch. And they always attest to the love of God embodied in Jesus Christ.

For those hearing Matthew’s gospel in the Greco-Roman world, miracle stories weren’t all that incredible for them, either. Miracle stories were the norm; they were part of the fabric of the culture. New Testament scholar Eugene Boring (whose work on miracles is anything but boring) says miracle stories were part of the furniture of life in the ancient world. Just as none of us entering a living room would be surprised to find a couch or coffee table, miracle stories were not surprising for people in the ancient world; miracles were part of the furniture; people heard these stories all the time.

And Jesus wasn’t the only healer or miracle worker around. The disciples worked some miracles, Elisha, Moses, and Abraham before them worked

miracles, and others not mentioned in scripture were known to work miracles. Notable examples include Pythagoras, who miraculously crossed a sea, calmed storms, and stopped plagues (if any of that sounds familiar)—and Vespasian, who healed a withered hand and was also known to heal the blind with his saliva (again, sound familiar?).

So, it's important to understand how miracle stories function. The purpose of the stories in the ancient world wasn't the content or events of the story—it was the meaning the stories pointed to. Stories of a woman healed, a girl raised from the dead, and sight restored to the blind pointed people beyond the stories to the very nature of God.

For Matthew, sharing miracles wasn't about providing a historical record, proving that Jesus was a supernatural being, or even gaining new believers. Much more was going on that is hard for us to ascertain as readers of the printed word 2,000 years later. We hear about miracles, and our brains go into analytical mode, trained as we are in physics and biology. We want to know how this miracle happened and find the best explanation. But the laws of nature

weren't even part of the worldview back then. The ancients were so accustomed to hearing miracles, they weren't phased by the miracle events themselves. What their brains latched on to was who Jesus was saving: "A woman? Who'd been hemorrhaging for 12 years? Who was therefore unclean, and an outcast? An untouchable whom Jesus reached out to touch and save?" "And what's that? He healed a young girl? Who was dead—and therefore unclean? An untouchable whom Jesus reached out to touch and save?"

The message was that God's realm is coming, and God's salvation is for everyone—not just the elite, not just the men, not just those in power. And let's remember that the church was marginalized in those days. People who followed Jesus were weird, and the Roman Empire was not kind to them. So, for people already marginalized solely based on their gender or physical ailment or socio-economic status, belonging to the community of weird Jesus believers made them doubly marginalized or even triply marginalized. Hearing that God could love and save people like them was a profound word of hope—a miracle beyond the miracle story.

Now, just because I'm giving the historical and cultural context that miracles in the ancient world weren't nearly as exciting for people back then as they might be for us, doesn't mean we shouldn't believe that a woman who'd been bleeding for 12 years was healed. Or that we shouldn't believe that a girl who'd just died was brought back to life. I believe in a God big enough for those things to happen, and I am 100% here for all the miracles.

Some of you right now could turn and tell your neighbor about a miracle in your own life. Some of us are hoping and praying every day for a miracle—for the cancer to suddenly be gone, for the treatment to finally work, for the prodigal child to come home—and I am here to hope and pray for those miracles with and for you.

Because one of the most remarkable things about this story in Matthew is that Jesus says, "Your faith has made you well." He doesn't point to himself as a miracle worker. He points to the faith of the ones who are suffering: the faith of the woman with chronic bleeding, the faith of the father of the young girl. Our faith can make us well.

When my father—my deeply faithful father—was dying of leukemia under hospice care 20 years ago, he turned to me two nights before he died and said, "Where's the miracle?" All I could say was, "I don't know." I wish I'd said to him then what I know now: that miracles were all around us—in the science of medical care, in all the ways our community showered our family with love and support, in the ways we were growing and changing that we couldn't even see at the time.

We don't get to choose what happens to us in life, and we don't get to choose what God does with it. We do get to choose what to do with the things in our control. And if a cure is what we want but a cure is not what we're getting, I believe we do well to look for the other ways our faith can make us well—things like gratitude and prayer and scripture reading, hymns and sacred music, the gifts of community and kindness and love.

Jesus says, "Your faith has made you well." The word in Greek is *sozo*. And "to make well" is actually not the best translation in English. *Sozo* means to heal or save, and it has both physical connotations and spiritual connotations. Through the

ages, these words of Jesus have primarily been interpreted as being made well physically, as in cured, and while the story does speak of physical healings, I'm afraid that interpretation has done some damage. Where we get into trouble is when we expect our faith to result in an outcome of our choosing, when we expect that if we just believe enough, or just pray hard enough, God will deliver a miracle in the way we want and in the timing we want. And while we might wish for that to be the case, God just doesn't seem to be transactional like that.

But healing can come, and it can come in lots of ways: emotional healing, mental healing, spiritual healing, relational healing. Here again, we have to look beyond the specifics to what the healing might point us to, which is God's love for us, regardless of what we do or don't do. God's steadfast love for us, regardless of whether the miracle ever comes.

A few years ago, I was asked to officiate a memorial service for a man whom we'll call Jack. Jack was in his early 40s when he died from a drug overdose. Jack's mother, whom we'll call Amelia, shared with me that whether her son's overdose was an accident or a suicide,

there was no way to know. This was in the first year of the COVID pandemic, so Amelia and I met to plan the service in a chapel, wearing masks and spaced apart on a pew. Amelia revealed to me that she was torn up thinking about the fact that Jack might have taken his own life. Even bigger for her than that was how big a sin the church of her childhood had taught her suicide to be. She was sick with worry that her son had done the unforgivable, and she worried what that meant for him in the afterlife.

As we sat in the chapel in the fading afternoon light, our conversation started to turn to God. Amelia wanted to know if there was any possibility her son could be in heaven. So, we explored who God is and what God's nature must be. And as we did, we gently broached the question: What if God's love is bigger than any one thing her son could do, what if God's love is bigger than any one thing any of us could do? What if God's love is so big and so wide that it covers all? As I listened to Amelia process the possibilities, I watched her move ever so slowly from fear to relief, from despair to hope, from death to life. I watched a weight lift from her shoulders, as she let herself lean into the miracle of God's love and the

hope that God could be bigger than she had been taught, that God could be big enough to love her son, who may have taken his own life, that God could be big enough to welcome him home with open arms.

Isn't that the miracle? The wide, expansive grace of God. The deep, abiding love of Jesus Christ. And the sweet communion of the Holy Spirit who moves in and through our lives in profound and life-giving ways. This is the biggest and best miracle that any of us can know.

I have a proposal for how we treat miracle stories in the modern world. Whether they're miracles we read in scripture or literature or on film, or miracles that someone we know tells us personally, let us suspend our tidy logic and disbelief. Let us regard miracles the way the ancients did: watching for where the stories point us, taking them for more than they are. Let us believe in miracles as if we believe in a God big enough to make them so.

Whether it's a woman healed, a child brought back to life, or any other event that looks, sounds, and feels like a

miracle to you—at the end of the day, how much do the details matter? When we get lost in the details, and our brains can't make a miracle make sense, it's easy for us to throw the whole thing out. When we do, we miss the point that even the ancients understood—the miracle is beyond the story. The miracle is God's saving love, for all of us.

Amen.

