

Do We Believe in Miracles

Luke 13:10-17

Hebrews 12:28-39

A Sermon by Rod Kennedy

Our story has a woman bent over for eighteen years, a shocked congregation, an uptight religious leader, and a miracle of healing. What are we to make of it all? Can we still believe in miracles?

Set the scene by looking at a woman bent over for eighteen years from some unknown sickness. She is much more than a woman bent over. She is womanhood wrapped in unbearable burden. She stands for all the women who have ever been discarded, abused, hurt, and mistreated by sexism, ignorance, and injustice. Listen, any time you are faced with a choice between a shocked church and a suffering woman, help the woman.

What does Jesus do? Of all things, he calls the woman over and says, **“Woman, you are set free from your ailment!”** Jesus lays hands on her and heals her.

But our story has an antagonist. The leader of the synagogue protests with righteous indignation. The uptight mayor in the movie *Chocolat*, the coldest, most austere, most awful example of religion getting up on the wrong side of the bed, says to the strange woman, who made great chocolates, “Let me try to put this into perspective for you. My ancestor expelled all the radical Huguenots in this village. You and your truffles present a far lesser challenge.” **Cold!**

Well, what did Jesus say to this representative of cold religion? The Lord answered him, “You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water? And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan has bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the Sabbath day?” A religion where oxen and donkeys can be untied and led to water and a woman, bound for eighteen years, is supposed to remain in bondage to keep from offending the scruples of the synagogue is a cold religion.

Well, before we settle into the warmth of sweet Sunday smugness, isn't it possible that the church would be just as shocked if a healing happened here on Sunday? The church gave a pick slip to the healing ministry decades ago. We packed up the work of the great Physician and sent it to the hospitals, and we turned his miracles into case studies in psychology. Like the synagogue ruler: **NO MIRACLES HERE!**

Do we believe in miracles? Robert Bruce Mullin, in *Miracles and the Modern Religious Imagination*, surveys the controversial history of miracles. So when Catholics insisted that miracles continued after the New Testament (holy sites, relics, and communion) as proof that the Roman Catholic Church was the one and only true church, Protestants responded with the belief that the age of miracles ended with the death of the last

apostle. Catholic claims sent Luther and Calvin into theological hissy fits. Luther said ecclesiastical miracles were “lying wonders,” a “tom foolery” of the devil. Calvin said they were fraudulent, diabolical, and unnecessary. The believer’s faith should not rest on signs and wonders, but on the promise of God in Scripture. Anglicans insisted that miracles ceased in the fourth century. This made it possible for them to connect their faith to a golden age of the church before the bishop of Rome was made pope. Church politics and miracles – how odd! As one historian puts it, “**The miracles of one party are never owned by another.**” And when we add the cessation of miracles to the Protestant commitment to Enlightenment skepticism, miracles are in danger of extinction.

But do we believe in miracles? Here are our basic choices: 1) The age of miracles has ceased. 2) The church should still be doing miracles just like Jesus did (Pentecostal position, “Roadside Resurrection” short story of preacher who actually had the gift of healing: What would we do with it if we had it?). 3) Modern miracles do happen but should be explained as mind over matter, as therapeutic, psychological, or emotional healings. 4) Miracles do occur but they should be interpreted in light of the present (but this has expanded the concept of miracles outside the gospel framework and includes New Age thought. 5) Miracles do not happen (Progressive clergy), and are an embarrassing piece of baggage that the church can safely discard. 6) Miracles may occur in the context of religious ritual (Service of Healing and Wholeness). Professor Mullin says, “**Personally, I accept the great miracles of the Bible and remain open to the existence of postbiblical miracles, but as an individual the miraculous does not play an important role in my beliefs.**”

Allow me to offer another take on miracles. My starting place is the God whose almighty power is **a consistent loving presence. THE PRESENCE OF GOD** – always at work in the center of everything. We have this tendency to blame God as unjust or unloving when God doesn’t, on command, produce miracles for us. An Old Testament character, angry that his healing wasn’t meeting his expectations, said, ‘I thought that for me he would surely come out, and stand and call on the name of the Lord his God, and would wave his hand over the spot, and cure the leprosy!’ We often get miracles confused with magic, and this has made faith healers multi-millionaires in America.

Miracles are not the product of God receiving applications for the granting of a healing to a lucky few. Miracles are not grant applications where God rejects most of them and approves a few. Miracles do not occur because God likes some people more than others or because some people know the right strings to pull or buttons to press or passwords to enter. Ultimately these are all silly and unflattering ideas of God.

Now add an overlooked reality: Miracles are up against powerful forces and sometimes all the prayer, faith, and holiness in the world is not enough in a given experience. Even Jesus could not heal every sick person. For miracles to be possible, there is the need for the kind of **intense holiness of Jesus. THE HOLINESS OF JESUS**. There is a self-destructiveness and violence at the core of our world that ebbs and flows, but never ceases and it all works to multiply human suffering and

sickness. One of the primary metaphors for sin in the Bible is that of a burden. And I'm saying that lifting this corporate, ongoing pile of waste, hurt, pain, suffering, sickness, evil, and sin from the back of even one human being is incredibly difficult and complex.

Now, I want you to make a theological move with me. God **created** the universe. The energy of God was the "first event," and maker of the "Big Bang." It makes like sense then to separate the question of miracles from that of creation. Thomas Aquinas said in the 13th century that creation is not an event with a before and after. Creation is an action of God that sets up a relationship between God and what is not God. Miracles are part of God, part and parcel with creation. The physicist tells us that at the heart of every apparently solid thing is the dance of the subatomic particles. Well, at the heart of the subatomic particles is an energy, beyond measure and sight – the outpouring of life from God. Once creation is accepted, miracles are a given.

The final move is one of intellectual humility. In other words we accept the possibilities the potential for miracles. Science, once giddy with its certainties, has turned out to be a briar patch of rhetorical contradictions and is less sure these days. We just don't know enough to say for sure that miracles don't happen. Are we ready for the embracing of this mystery and the healing ministry it entails? Not the in-your-face, slap on the forehead, "BE HEEEEEALED" kind of ministry, but the quiet, faithful ministry that makes a space for the presence of God, offers God faith and worship, and our prayerful consent to what God wants. When we plant the seeds, things may happen that were otherwise unexpected or unpredictable or even considered impossible.

Our story has such a wonderful ending. "The entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing." Isn't that what we really want? To be part of all the wonderful things Jesus was doing? Well, we have to make our hearts and our minds available to those actions and practices. You don't have to make any miracles; just provide the backdrop: intense holiness, trust, prayer, and acceptance of the mystery of life. That's not too much to ask. Is it?