

Sermon: “Do you believe in miracles?”
The Ven. Doug Edwards
St. Barnabas Parish, Arroyo Grande
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“The eyes of all wait upon thee, O Lord.
And though givest them their meat in due season.
Thou openest thy hand,
And fill all things living with plenteousness.” Ps 145 v16-17

These verses from this morning’s psalm are etched in the hearts of every person who was ever part of the community at the Episcopal Church’s oldest seminary, The General Theological Seminary in New York City. They are chanted as grace at every dinner, our prayer of thanksgiving. It is so valuable for a person’s soul to have scriptural touchstones to form and support your identity in Christ. What words of Scripture are touchstones for you?

Good morning, I am the Venerable Doug Edwards, honorary archdeacon of the Diocese of Sunyani in the rainforest of Ghana, West Africa. Lynn and I moved to Arroyo Grande in February to be near family and are delighted to have found St. Barnabas.

I love to engage Holy Writ, helping the ecclesia, the people of God, wrestle with and find guidance and hope in the Bible. We are all theologians, my vocation is to help us be better theologians. Or as St. Augustine says, we are called to be “smart sheep.”

Today’s Gospel, a double miracle story, provides ample fodder. So, let’s talk miracles. Which of the following statements best describes your belief?

- A) I’ve experienced a miracle.
- B) I believe in the miracles of the Bible, and that miracles happen every day.
- C) I believe that miracles were a part of God’s plan for biblical times, but they don’t happen today.
- D) I believe that miracles happen in individual lives, mostly healing miracles.
- E) Miracles don’t happen. They are part of “folk religion for the fearful and ignorant.”

Is there a right or wrong answer? Well, yes. Either miracles do or don’t happen today, or previously in history. We just can’t have it both ways. Does one have to believe in A,B,C,D or E to be a Christian? I suppose that depends if you desire to be an orthodox Christian, meaning affirming and adhering to the Church’s doctrinal teachings, or if you are comfortable living as a heterodox, one who lives within the community of faith and accepts its authority even though you are at odds with the Church’s teachings and doctrine. The third option is that you are a heretic, willfully refusing to accept or obey the Church’s teaching and its authority. Thirty plus years of priesthood convinces me that few Episcopalians are orthodox, the vast majority are heterodox, and a large number of us are heretics. That is another sermon.

So let me stake my ground. When it comes to miracles, I am deeply conflicted, an incurable romantic and trained sceptic. I have experienced many paranormal activities. I was once a spiritual counselor for a stigmatic. A stigmatic is a person who bears the physical manifestations of Jesus’ wounds from the cross on his or body. My testimony is that on Good Friday, 1988, a young woman bore the physical signs of the resurrection on her hands and feet. At my instruction, she held a piece of paper between her hands. Not only did blood transfer from her palms to the paper, but the paper literally charred from the heat generated from her palms. The stigmata is a powerful sign, a miraculous sign if you will, and no circus act. I have received visions and messages in my dreams, waking in the middle of the night with a deep need to pray for a parishioner only to learn of her unexpected passing at the same time. My rather skeptical brother broadened his views when I called him one morning to say that I had a dream and he would be fired that very day from work. Lo and behold, it thus came to pass that he was fired. I think that he wanted to buy me a coat with many colors following that epiphany. I really could go on for a bit, but the odd thing is that none of those experiences mean much to me other to affirm a great truth that we are profoundly connected one to another, and by my understanding, that the Holy Spirit indeed imparts knowledge and yes, foreknowledge, intended to build the Body of Christ and draw us into the love of God. I haven’t a clue how this works with human agency, a principal I also hold dear.

And yet, despite my personal experiences, profound and mundane, I adamantly embrace St. Augustine's teaching of first principles: Never ascribe as a miracle that which can be described otherwise.

Take today's Gospel. The romantic in me wants to affirm that Jesus took a boy's five barley loaves and two fishes and spontaneously multiplied them to feed 5000 people. It certainly answers the question, "What would Jesus do?" when addressing public policy questions about people in need. Some theologians try an end run, by redefining the "miracle" as Jesus's ability to inspire those who had food secretly stashed to share it with their neighbors. The miracle was opening the hearts of those in attendance. I'm sorry, but that just isn't a miracle by any classic definition. A miracle requires the suspension of natural law by the Divine for a beneficial effect. Lots of charismatic leaders appeal to either our greater or lesser angels and can modify our behavior for a brief period of time--nothing remotely miraculous here.

The biblical scholar in me notes that today's Gospel reading is what is known as an archetypal story. Jesus' feeding of the 5000 is a redo of the same miracle performed by Elisha during a time of famine. Jesus is shown to be the archetype of the Prophets, with authority from God to command nature itself. The story has a second redo element. Jesus says, "Make the people sit down." This retells what Moses had the people do for the reading of the Ten Commandments. Throughout the Gospels, stories of Jesus and others replay the great stories of the Hebrew Scripture, written in such a way as to show the listener that Jesus is the fulfillment of all the Law, represented by Moses, and the Prophets, represented by Elisha. For the writer of John, the point of the miracle of feeding 5000 people with left overs is to reveal to the faithful that Jesus is the Logos, embodying the full Authority of God on earth to reveal the Almighty's plan for salvation. But for many, these New Testament redo's lead them to question the stories' historicity.

So, which is the truth about miracles? Thomas Jefferson edition of the Bible gives the answer for the Deists. When creating his devotional Bible, Jefferson took scissors to each and every miracle story as violating his understanding of how God works in the world. Our founding fathers (and mothers) typically embraced the image of God as the Great Watchmaker. The whole of creation is a watch created, wound and then let loose by God. It operates on immutable principals built into the watch's design, what we call the laws of nature. Jefferson, the theologian, had no need of, nor room for miracles. Notably, Jefferson's Bible is rather thin.

Plenty of evangelical rationalists over the last 150 years have developed their own way of reconciling biblical miracles and the absence of the same today. Miracles, they say, were part of God's plan to show God's authority until that authority was ultimately revealed in Jesus, the Son of God. So, evangelical rationalists accept every biblical miracle (because, after all, it's in the Bible so it must be true-ugh) and reject every current miracle because they are unnecessary to achieving salvation which is revealed in Jesus. I don't know about you, but this doesn't work for me because I firmly believe that the Spirit continues to reveal and lead the Church to new understanding.

Admittedly, they do have a point. Except for tired golfing jokes, there hasn't been a reported replication of walking on water for 2000 years. But then I met Vihn Tran. We were coworkers at an immigrant and refugee center in Orange County following the fall of Saigon. Vihn, himself a Vietnamese refugee, swears that his escape-ship crowded with human cargo, sunk while at sea. He says a Christian was among them and prayed that God would raise the ship and save these political asylum seekers from death. He tells me through the tears that the boat miraculous rose from the water and all were saved. That is the day he and his family became Christians. Did it happen that way? I can't testify to the event, only the man.

Miracles and the Bible are really a mess. Our foundational event as the Church is the death and resurrection of Jesus from the dead. If there is no resurrection, then the Church is built on fraud. But the four Gospels have very different and seemingly irreconcilable differences in their description of the post-resurrection Jesus. It is incumbent on us to approach the resurrection with great humility, a mystery to be embraced rather than a hammer to beat over the head of our neighbor.

I don't know about you, but as to miracles, I remain a skeptic, but one who cannot deny my personal experiences and those of other credible witnesses which affirm the presence of God's Spirit in our midst, sometimes manifested in ways to which we attribute the word "miracle." I hope that this sermon will encourage you to share your stories of God's manifestation in your life. Don't be afraid to find your voice.