

SUPERSTITION IS NOT THE SAME AS FAITH

To have a sincere and serious conversation about Jesus is more difficult than it would at first seem. Last week I mentioned a desire to talk with you about what I see, believe, and love about Jesus. And that will continue to be my desire and my attempt in these early Sundays of this new year, 2012. Even as I mention the year 2012, it should register that this will not be an “easy” conversation. How much water has gone over the dam or under the bridge since Jesus walked on earth? It is staggering to imagine, once we start to think about it. How many individuals do we know much about who lived that long ago?

We know the names of some people who lived even before Jesus. But the information gets skimpy fast, and the records are harder to track and trust as we go back. How many varying opinions do we have about Cleopatra? How did the prophet Ezekiel get so weird? How many skeletons were in Jonah’s closet, when we cannot find either Jonah *or* his closet?

Have you ever tried to separate the legends from the history concerning Siddhartha Gautama’s life? What is the biography of Lao Tzu, or Zoroaster? And, very important from my perspective, what was the general picture of reality – of what was possible or likely – for the people around Jesus? How many of them knew that earth was a planet, or that it was in orbit around the sun? What did they think about the laws of gravity, or about what was behind a thunderstorm or an earthquake? What did they think was going wrong when somebody got sick? And if somebody got well after being sick, what did they think about how that had happened? Some people get sick and die; others get sick and get well. How did they think about such things, back when diagnosing diseases was so undeveloped?

If Jesus calmed a storm or walked on water, did that mean the same thing in their minds that it means in yours? It might seem strange at first, but the easiest places of contact between us and the people around Jesus are the incidents and stories that go beyond *our* expectations as much as they went beyond theirs. We both are astounded at the stories of the resurrection and at the accounts of those who encountered Jesus after the crucifixion: behind locked doors in Jerusalem; at Pentecost; Paul on the Damascus Road. We get to wrestle with such

incidents as much as they did. Yet there are a number of places in the Bible where people tell about what happened, and I know they are telling it in ways that fit their sense of reality – but it does not fit in mine.

The simple, easy way is to call it all miracle, assume the Bible knows what it's talking about, and let it go at that. Yet “letting it go at that” is also to let go of what we know about reality, and that drops us into the category of superstition. Do we really think the writers of the Bible had no limitations? They all understood the laws of physics and how they work? How the world was created, and how it all operates? I certainly have no full understanding of such things; why would I think they did?

In comparison to today, the biblical writers did not know as much about physics, chemistry, medicine, biology, and many other realities that most of us assume. For them there were few rules, and God did anything God decided to do at the moment, maybe even by whim. But that is not the world I live in. I am persuaded that God plays by the rules and principles that God created, and that God used and still uses these laws and principles through all creation.

So if a person tries to tell me, as many people have, that I should just accept everything the Bible says without question and without trying to understand any of it – well, I may *try* to be kind, depending on their attitude and mine at the moment. But the truth is they are not being more respectful of God or of the Scriptures than I am. Nor are they being more faithful. Rather, they are being superstitious. They are trying to suspend knowledge, information, genuine belief, logic, and reason, even though they have all these gifts and abilities themselves and use them in other areas of their life. I do not admire or applaud their determination to exclude, when it comes to religion, the realities they really believe in.

Why would we want to live in a place without rhyme or reason? Actually, lots of people like miracles and magic, and the more they can find of such things, the better they like it. Even where there are alternate explanations that make far more sense, they will choose the miracle and magic on purpose, at least when it comes to religion and the Bible. I love a good fantasy novel. But even in a made-up world, if the story has little realism, I put it down. It has lost too much reality to be of any interest to me. That is, if the characters have no recognizable pattern or personality; if nothing moves or changes them; if they keep getting bailed out of difficult situations at the last minute by the sudden intrusion of help, in

whatever form, that had nothing to do with the plot or the development of the story – then I lose all interest. Too much magic destroys all meaning. There is no plot left. The characters are not learning or growing; they are not courageous, noble, admirable, or loyal. There is nothing left of life as I know it. Too much magic destroys all meaning.

The more miracle and magic there is in our lives, the less responsibility falls on us. If there is miracle and magic, there is no significant part for us to play. We cannot help anything, and nothing is our fault. Life is completely unpredictable, and therefore we cannot be expected to learn or grow or make sane or sensible choices. Magic, after all, supersedes sanity and operates beyond our notions of logic and good sense. It is, after all, when we don't like what's happening in the real world that we pray and wait for miracles. We think there is nothing else to be done. Yes, well, I think we have all been in situations where that was the case. But I think we have also been in many situations where that was not the case but we were calling it that way anyway. That means we were not looking for how we might be faithful or obedient to what the Holy Spirit was really asking of us. We had, instead, abdicated our responsibility, and now we were waiting for God to fix it for us – to get us out of whatever situation we had gotten ourselves into – without any effort or intention of cooperating or helping on our part.

Jesus is, of course, a remarkable person. Many strange things were happening around Him. Wanting to be faithful followers means that we must be alert to His guidance and His instructions within the realms of our best understanding of reality, even though we know that our understanding is flawed and imperfect. Otherwise there is little possibility of our being faithful. We can only be superstitious. And superstition is not the same thing as faith.

Sometimes the dictionary can be helpful. *Superstition: a belief or practice resulting from ignorance, fear of the unknown, or trust in magic or chance.* In a few weeks, when we consider some of the healing incidents around Jesus, we will talk further about the difference between miracles and magic. But we have already bitten off enough for today. I have huge regard for faith. I do not have a huge regard for superstition. I suspect that each of us still carries areas of superstitious belief around with us. I further suspect that in whatever ways we are still superstitious, it dilutes and distracts us from genuine faith.

Okay, let's go to faith for a moment. There is no story in the New Testament that is more clear or more instructive about what faith really is than this story of the centurion (in the seventh chapter of Luke). The centurion understands earthly authority because he has it. His authority comes from Rome, and ultimately from the Roman Emperor himself. To be absolutely clear: This centurion has been appointed to his position by true and genuine authority that traces back to the Emperor. Therefore when this centurion gives a command to anybody under his authority, he expects it to be obeyed. It is highly unlikely that anybody who receives a command from him will fail to obey it. But if they did, the authority of this centurion would quickly reveal itself, and, if necessary, the entire might and authority of the Roman Empire would descend upon this disobedient individual. Ultimately they will obey or be crushed. This is not theoretical or misty or confusing to the centurion. But then he makes a jump: The centurion has heard about Jesus. He has heard stories from people he trusts about what Jesus can do. He has concluded that Jesus has spiritual authority, as he himself has physical authority. The centurion assumes, as did everybody in his time, that if his servant is sick, the cause is demons. It's not our language, but the meaning is not as obscure as we sometimes think. When was the last time you were irritable or impatient? What put you in such a bad mood? Sometimes "demons" are still a pretty good explanation.

In any case, this centurion knew that if Jesus had authority that outranked the demons, he could order the demons to leave his servant and the servant would be well again. The demons would have no choice. However strange or silly that might sound to us, "*when those who had been sent returned to the house, they found the servant well.*" That may not count for very much to some of us because we were not there to see it. But it counted for them, because they were.

Far more important to me: Here is a very clear statement from Jesus about what Jesus meant by "faith." This centurion had faith, Jesus said, more and better than anyone else He had run across so far. Faith = recognizing true authority, and then trusting it. Faith does not mean having a positive attitude, being optimistic, keeping a stiff upper lip, or any of the other vague notions about good or right belief that circulate in our culture. Faith means recognizing true authority, and then trusting it. By the way, recognizing Jesus' authority does not mean the centurion can now order Jesus around. The centurion is making a humble and sincere request. If Jesus has true authority, He can also decide when and where to use it. He can also decide not to use it. Jesus decides to

use His authority for the benefit of this centurion and his servant, and that is pure gift. “Grace and mercy,” we sometimes say. As we have noted from time to time in the past, a lot of Jesus’ followers, when they discover His caring nature, try to order Jesus around. Our prayers are often demanding and disrespectful. We often give God or Jesus instructions about how to feel, how to think, what to do. “Bring this. Do that. Heal so-and-so.” Without wisdom or discernment or any understanding of what’s really going on behind the scenes, we assume that God doesn’t care enough. So, in our prayers, we are going to slap him around until he does what we tell him to. Does that work for you, beyond an occasional coincidence? It certainly does not work for me. It is important to return to humble, sincere requests, and leave the rest in more capable hands than ours.

Christian faith means we trust Jesus because we have concluded that His authority comes from God. That is what “faith” means, and if we try to get it to mean other things, it will only confuse and mislead us. When Jesus says to someone, “Your faith has made you well,” He is not saying that this person has the power within themselves to heal themselves. That may in some cases be true, but that is not what Jesus is saying. Jesus is saying: “Because you put your trust in me (because you believe in my authority), therefore my authority can work for your benefit without my betraying my Father or breaking your free will.” How do we know this is what Jesus means? Because the story of the centurion has revealed Jesus’ definition of faith to us.

If you can heal yourself, by all means do so. But then there is no reason to bother Jesus with it. With some of our ailments, this is perfectly legitimate. But if we want Jesus’ help, then we should pay attention to this story – and begin all things by trusting Him.

Faith is a huge power in our world because it aligns us with true authority – it recognizes and trusts the AUTHOR of life and truth. Superstition knows nothing about the Author, and puts its trust in fear, ignorance, or chance. Faith and superstition are not allies. They are never friends. So if we are going to be sincere and serious about wanting to know Jesus, and if we want to have meaningful conversations with each other about Jesus, we need to know the difference between faith and superstition. Increasingly, we must turn away from our superstitions and toward genuine faith. This is so important that I have taken a whole sermon to talk about it before we get deeper into our conversations about Jesus.

I need now to reminisce with you about some of the ways the issue of superstition confronts us on our faith journey, and how we have to turn away from the superstition journey if we want genuine faith. First, a blatant illustration: *“At that time Joshua spoke to the Lord in the day when the Lord gave the Amorites over to the sons of Israel, and he said in the sight of Israel, ‘Sun, stand still at Gibeon, and moon, in the Valley of Aijalon.’ And the sun stood still, and the moon stopped, until the nation took vengeance on their enemies. Is this not written in the book of Jashar? The sun stopped in the midst of heaven and did not hurry to set for about a whole day.”* (Joshua 10:12-13)

This story would not have “troubled” most people very much until the fifteenth century A.D. Their expectations about what God would or wouldn’t do were not at all like ours. Making the sun or the moon stand still did not mean to them that the earth had stopped spinning or had ceased moving in its orbit around the sun. So it didn’t bother them that, according to the way they were telling the story, a nanosecond later all life on earth would cease – would be utterly destroyed. They didn’t know how the solar system worked, so telling a story that broke the laws and rules of how things worked did not bother them.

Do you like the story in the fifth chapter of First Samuel? The Philistines win a battle and capture the Ark of the Covenant. They take it to one Philistine city after another. They place it in the temple beside their God, Dagon. But the next morning, Dagon has fallen flat on his face. The Philistines are increasingly cursed and Dagon is humiliated – until in desperation the Philistines return the Ark of the Covenant to Israel (along with expensive gifts in reparation). That is the short form of the story, of course. Nevertheless, do you believe it? “It’s in the Book,” as we say. So we should suspend all rational thought and just accept it? To what end? So we can pretend that life is the way we think it ought to be. Will that help us to live better?

Telling it like we wish it were does not make it so. How we do wish God would act this way – making it really clear and obvious all the time who is right, and punishing all the wrongdoers and wrong-thinkers right on the spot – so there would be no confusion anywhere on earth. Nowhere that I look is God acting in this manner. Rather, as Jesus told us, God is letting the weeds grow with the wheat, and only time will tell which is which. Very disappointing, but back to reality.

Of course, most of us still say that God can do anything he wants to do. That is, we are not confused about God's power or authority. But do we also have some respect for God's purposes? One of God's purposes, apparently – that is, from all evidence surrounding us – is to put us in an orderly universe where certain laws and principles operate. To be sure, it is not always as orderly or predictable as we would like to think. Nevertheless, the more we understand the rules and principles by which God has designed creation, the more orderly and predictable things become. We are able to learn because some things keep happening with consistency and order. Two plus two makes four every day; we don't wake up one morning to discover that God has passed another miracle and suddenly things don't add up. Some people think it would be wonderful to have more and more miracles in their life. But what they mean by "miracle" is God interrupting the systems, rules, and principles of the universe all along the way and every day, and just for their benefit. A miracle that is good for me will obviously be bad for millions of others. Otherwise God has not chosen good rules and principles on which to found Creation in the first place. A miracle that suspends good rules and principles will be no favor to most of us. Of course, in theory, God could do millions of other miracles to keep everybody else safe and on even footing while God does this one little favor for me. Maybe that makes some people feel even better, but it is not my concept of reality. It is my concept of us being silly, or superstitious – in short, absurd.

Usually people who like miracles also want the miracles to be at their behest, their beck and call. They are not trying to put the miracles they want into the hands of individuals in Africa, India, North Korea, or even Iraq, now that we have left. And most certainly they are not hoping to put miracles into the hands of their enemies or people they don't like. If God were working miracles, then every few minutes (or at least once a month) life on earth would be utter chaos. Things would work one way today, and tomorrow it would all change to a different basis. And we would never be able to figure out when or why, or if there is some part for us to play. Words like "learning, purpose, goals, reason, planning, strategy" would not even be in our vocabulary. They would have no meaning or possibility. Our God would be a god of whim and anarchy. Even Jesus could have no meaning or purpose among us. After all, if God sends Jesus today, who knows who God will send tomorrow? Miracles are not our friends. We have too many of them already. Why would anyone want to live in a place without rhyme or reason?

Every morning the weather is what it is according to fixed principles of meteorology. However many people claim that they have the power to control or change the weather, they are talking nonsense. God does not leave such choices to the whims of any of us or there would be total chaos. Nothing would or could proceed according to God's design. Whims of the moment are not a good basis for life on earth. We might think it would be nice for God to put us in charge of such things, but what about the millions of people on earth who might want a different kind of day from the one I want? We have jokes about how weather forecasts are sometimes mistaken. Can you imagine being a weatherman if God were to allow individuals to control the weather at random? "Oh, you've been a good boy (or girl), so as a reward, today you get to change the weather to whatever you want."

So when people from the first century A.D. tell me that Jesus calmed a storm, I know that is how it seemed to them. That would not trouble their cosmology. Just as it seemed to Joshua's followers that God made the sun stand still for him. But in both instances, I know that is not the case. That is not how God manages Creation. Lightning is not the wrath of God, whatever Luther may have thought. Species of birds and animals do not go extinct because God got angry at them or doesn't like them anymore. It is because we are destroying their habitat.

What is it that you expect Jesus to do for you? Is it coming from faith, or from superstition? Do you set yourself up for disappointment by asking Jesus to do things for you that would actually require Him to break faith with God? Do you really think He will do things for you that would be harmful to you, or to others?

Jesus really does love us. And His Holy Spirit is eager and willing to do many things for us – things wondrous and wonderful beyond our imagining – just as soon as we are willing and able to receive them. But we should stop praying for Him to be the great "enabler" in the sky, or to do things for us that would be damaging to us or to others. As fast and as completely as we can, we need to move from superstition to faith – and from being superstitious to being faithful.

Though some of you do, I do not expect Jesus to go against the Father's Ways – the rules and principles by which God designed and built Creation. What could persuade Jesus to be thus rebellious? A need to prove Himself? He knows who He is and has no need to prove Himself to anybody. He merely waits for us to notice and catch on. Satan would

of course be happy to disrupt things – to do miracles all over the place. But Satan doesn't have enough authority to pull it off. He can only corrupt what is already created.

I am not surprised that people of long ago had a different conception of Creation and how it worked. They tell their stories and explain what was happening according to their notions of reality. Our understandings will soon be outdated as well. But we already know many things that nobody knew in the first century A.D.: 747s, cataract surgery, elevators, Interstate 5, heart transplants, the Internet ... to name just a few.

So stop being superstitious – at least when you can notice it enough to cease and desist. “Oh dear! What if I don't believe something I'm supposed to believe, and then get left out when God distributes the goodies to the really good believers?” That is not faith; that is superstition. And that is not the kind of God Jesus reveals to us. Our God is a God of love and grace and mercy, not a God of whim and chaos who plays a few personal favorites at the expense of the rest of us. The secret is not in how much or how well we believe a lot of man-made constructs or old wives' tales. The secret is in how much we trust Jesus – and in how much we trust the God that Jesus reveals, and the reconciliation that Jesus makes possible between us and God.

Christianity is not about a lot of magic tricks. If you want your life surrounded by magic tricks, you don't need a Savior – you need a Magician. If what we have is a Savior, then that means we get back to authentic growth and learning and development. Who we really are and what we are becoming *matter*. Magic and miracles do not develop character, spiritual growth, or authentic relationship with God.

If you want to believe that Jesus walked on water, go ahead. See how much good it does you. See how much benefit you receive from following Him. It won't make you any wiser or more loving, but you will be “all wet.” Hope and faith and love are far better than magic tricks, but of course at times they all *seem* like magic – when we are being careless with our language.

To be fair, in the beginning the disciples did want a Magician. They wanted a Magic Messiah who could pull rabbits out of hats, make them all rich and famous, restore Israel to the Number One Nation on earth, and solve all their problems without changing them or calling them to do very much about it. Therefore they told stories about the wonders

Jesus performed. That's what they were looking for. "*Seek and you will find.*" Often, as we have said, they probably couldn't tell the difference between the wonders they were seeing and the miracles they were looking for.

Jesus was constantly amazing them. But Jesus was also constantly disappointing them. How many have turned away from Jesus – then as now – because He is not the Magician they dream of finding? He does not solve our problems in the way we wish He would: instantly, and without any effort, growth, learning, or development on our part. Jesus did not save John the Baptist, or dethrone Herod, or convert the High Priest or the Roman Emperor. He did not make anybody rich, nor did He heal everybody in Israel. And everybody He *did* heal, soon died. We must constantly remember: Jesus Himself died a cruel and unjust death at our hands.

I love Harry Potter. But the Christian church is not Hogwarts, and we are not in training to learn to use broomsticks or magic wands. If that is what you want, *The New Church* will not please you. And by the way, neither will Jesus.

The disciples began to get over their disappointment, especially after the resurrection. More time on the Path, walking in the Way Jesus had shown them, discovering the demands and frustrations and joys of being apostles – more and more they settled down to the realities of real faith, obedience, and devotion. But it was a difficult world, then as now. All but one of them was martyred. They died in and for their faith – in and for their love of Jesus.

The world does not know, trust, love, or obey God. Not in general. Not for the most part. So all of us are at risk, if we truly believe in Jesus. But if we do not have faith – if we are merely superstitious – we will be of no use to Jesus, and of no use to the Kingdom of God. The superstitious are not looking for training or discipline, for loyalty or allegiance, for patient endurance or a genuine love that will lead to vocatio and service and devotion. The superstitious are looking for a fast fix and an easy way out. If Jesus would give it to them, it would serve them right. But He is not that unloving.