

February 5, 2012

Matthew 14:1-14  
Luke 5:17-26

## MIRACLES

Not sure where you are in our worship services, but I know where I am trying to be. As we turned from 2011 to 2012, I have shifted from Paul and his letters – with their focus on the Resurrected Jesus – back to pondering the life of the earthly Jesus. I have wanted to tell you what I see, believe, and love about Jesus the man. This is never as easy as some people think it ought to be. But never mind that.

Buried in this series of sermons on Jesus is a miniseries in the background. I have tried to encourage you to stop being superstitious, so that your real faith can be stronger and clearer than ever. Faith is not the same thing as superstition. Faith is trust in God. Superstition is a wishful hankering after special favors that have no connection with our serving or worshipping God. Rather, superstition hopes that we can turn God into some kind of “genie in a bottle” whose primary purpose is to serve and pamper us: If you really love us, how about some magic tricks? And the more they defy all natural law, the better. Didn’t you create some loaves and fish out of thin air? On second thought, forget the fish; how about some gold? And not to share with five thousand others – just for me. “If I were a rich man, yabba dibba dibba dibba dibba dibba dibba dum ...”

Just as an aside: If you believe Jesus had permission to do magic tricks and He only multiplied loaves and fish twice, what kind of stingy, uncaring, uncompassionate Savior do you believe in? Even these incidents weren’t to feed the poor and hungry. The crowds had come into the countryside to hear Jesus preach. They could easily make it back home without starving. They had all brought food with them, as we all do when we go on an outing. It is a miracle of sharing. We don’t see that very often in very dramatic ways either. But back to miracles: Does Jesus ever do miracles to feed the truly hungry or to help the poor? You will not find a single instance in the New Testament where Jesus is doing what all of His modern followers are absolutely certain we are all supposed to be doing.

Jesus empowers the poor, the captive, the oppressed – empowers them to see themselves in a different light and to change their lives. (Luke 4:18-19) He does *not* give them the material things they think –

and we think – they need. Why are we all so positive that we know, so much better than Jesus does, all about what people really need? There was indeed a major structure and organization for helping the poor in the Israel of Jesus' time: The temple. There was a temple tax, and good-hearted people gave further alms for the poor. Temple priests distributed the benevolence to those they considered needy and worthy. Jesus paid no attention to this welfare program that we know of, except once: Matthew tells us that Jesus paid the temple tax with money from the mouth of a fish. If you like miracles, there you go. Go thou and do likewise. But the truth is, Jesus' ministry was not based on or involved with any of our normal understandings or approaches to helping the poor, the hungry, or the disadvantaged.

Anyway, I have given you a little time to ponder the subject of superstition, and to check your own mind and heart for any traces of superstition you may still be carrying around with you. Now we take up the thread again to talk about "miracles." In a few weeks, we will consider Jesus' ministry of "healing." Healing is an amazing subject, but I didn't want to touch it if some of you were going to instantly put it into the same category with superstition and magic. Along the way, of course, I am hoping that all of us are dusting off and pondering afresh our assumptions and our love-bond with Jesus.

I never revisit the subject of superstition without being reminded of some superstitions that still play around the edges of my own thought-frames and perspective. I know how much damage superstition can do, so I have worked pretty hard to cut it out of my life. But it gets subtle. If I am sincere and good-hearted, people will like me better and that will make me more successful. Am I still stupid enough to believe that? It is sheer superstition. Some people like me for reasons of their own, but not because of some campaign on my part to convince them that I am sincere or good-hearted. And if I try to act sincere or good-hearted because of the benefit I think will come from that, then automatically and by definition I am neither sincere nor good-hearted. I am putting on an act in the hope of gaining some kind of reward. Superstition gets my whole life off course and based on false premises. When I try really hard, I do remember: We cannot earn love. It is a gift from God. I have done this and this and this, and now I can *demand* that you love me? Has it ever worked that way in all my born days? Be done with it! Trust God!

## MIRACLES

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To be sure, some people say that trusting God is the ultimate superstition. And maybe the way they go at it, it is. We can try to trust God for the rewards and benefits we think will come from that. That will turn even the Shema into superstition. *“Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your mind, with all your soul, and with all your strength.”* (Deuteronomy 6:4-5; Luke 10:27) And if we do that, we will be happy, popular, and successful? Most of us have learned long since that trying to love for the rewards it might bring us is not even related to genuine love. God does not love us for the rewards it will bring to God. And we cannot love God back for the rewards it might bring to us.

Anyway, and predictably, after the sermon regarding superstition, a few have tried to claim and quote me as saying you should no longer believe in miracles. You should never expect God to do amazing things for you. I never said that. I never said anything remotely close to that. The truth is that superstition gets in the way of what God is really willing and wanting to do for us. The favors superstition seeks are picayune indeed, in comparison to the true gifts of God.

I hope this doesn't confuse anybody – it is intended to do the opposite: If I understood the full potential and possibilities of natural law – as God created and designed it – I would not believe in miracles. I would instead know how everything works, and I could call on everything for its full potential. In short, I would be able to live a lot more like Jesus did.

But I do not know how everything works, nor have I reached even my own full potential. Therefore God frequently surprises me. In other words, I do believe in miracles; I have witnessed a good many miracles, and I have even been privileged to be an active agent in quite a few miracles. I no longer like to talk about it much because when I do, people instantly want to jump to the categories of superstition and end up with baloney instead of blessings. I believe in miracles, but I do not believe in magic. Abracadabra does not save us, and it never has saved us. A dozen magic wands are not as powerful as a single heartfelt prayer. Jesus is not a magician; He is only our Savior. Magicians do magic tricks, and magic tricks require nothing of us. They are never about relationship. Jesus transforms all life – starting from the heart.

There is a strong anti-intellectual “lobby” within the Christian ranks. Seeing that belief is difficult (especially with all the falsehood the church tries to sell people), some people conclude that intelligence, intellect, information, knowledge, study, and logic are the enemy. Of course, they used their own intellect and logic to arrive at these conclusions, but they don’t seem to notice that. Perhaps it’s just as well, since it was a very poor use of their intellect and logic in the first place.

To be fair, such concerns do have some justification. As we all know, it is dangerous and treacherous to “think.” We do get carried away with our own thought processes at times. However, to conclude that we should fight knowledge and turn a deaf ear to information is also a serious indictment against the God who made us. And it leads us into the swamps of ignorance and superstition.

As any informed and honest person knows, the church did fight Copernicus (1473-1543), Galileo (1564-1642), Kepler (1571-1630), Darwin (1809-1882), and many others who were trying to push back the darkness – many of them faithful converts who loved our Lord. We have burned books *and people* to prove that the earth is flat, that the stars are holes in the canvas of the sky, and that God is much smaller and less creative and less powerful than God really is. Not our finest hours.

Is it really defensible to claim that science itself is against God or faith? Many scientists in our time happen to be, partially at least because of the church’s attitudes and opposition to science. Are we also to imagine that God does not love scientists? And are we using computers, cell phones, and some pretty sophisticated technology even as we debate such things? Be it noted that not all Christians and not all churches have held such ignorant and negative attitudes toward knowledge, intellect, or science. Not all Christians were on the same side during the Scopes Trial. And by the way, reason and experience have always been key factors in sound theological and biblical studies.

At the same time, we must acknowledge that our questions and convictions are made more complicated by the fact that life is more than facts. Logic and reason do not bring us to everything we experience or to everything we need to know. Magic may be a lazy way to account for some of the things we experience that make no sense to us, but “mystery” remains a serious category for thinking people. Some scientists may be as close-minded as some literalist Christians, but we are not yet well-developed enough to be able to explain all that we experience and

encounter here. Furthermore, some things made sense to former ages that make no sense in ours. For instance, it was universally accepted in the ancient world that thunder and lightning storms were a sign of God's anger, or the anger of the gods. Today we have more natural explanations, and some of us even think that such storms are beautiful. (Which is not to say that they are no longer dangerous.)

Did Jesus walk on water? I doubt it. What would be the point? And why would Jesus thus thwart the order of His Father's Creation? If there was a good reason, what was it? Some folk say it was to help people to believe. To believe what? To believe in the Resurrection? To believe in love? We have some really good reasons to believe in some very important things, and walking on water doesn't help us with any of them. If you try to "follow Jesus" by walking on water, you will not further His Kingdom. Nor can you find any evidence that walking on water is a skill or gift that Jesus wanted to give to His followers. You *can* talk about the story of Peter coming to Jesus on the water; if you get metaphorical, you may find some benefits. But that story ends in Peter's failure, and we never again hear about Jesus trying to teach Peter or anybody else how to walk on water. By the way, this story was not told by either Jesus or Peter. The people of that time did not understand the law of gravity, and indeed had never heard of it. Sir Isaac Newton didn't show up until seventeenth-century England. So we have another misunderstanding. Or do you know someplace where we can find the First Congregational Church of the Water-Walkers? Two thousand years and nobody has figured it out or caught on? Doesn't that tell us anything? A person can rant and rave all they like about miracles and faith (misdefined, by the way), but if you try to follow Jesus by walking on water, you will not inspire us. You will merely add, to your ignorance and superstition, the fact that you are all wet.

Did Jesus calm the storm? I mean an outer, physical storm? I doubt it. Why would He and His Father suspend universe laws to pull a cheap trick like that? What would be the point or purpose? Does this story help the disciples (or you) to believe something important? Like what? That Jesus had special powers and could do things that you cannot do? (You can do lots of things Jesus and His disciples could not do: turn on lights, drive cars, ride in airplanes, send email. Does that help Jesus to believe in you?)

The truth is, nobody believed very much of real significance about Jesus until after the Resurrection and Pentecost. Before that it was mostly introduction, and sometimes the rooster's cry. The evidence is strong that Jesus was not trying to "get everybody to believe" in Him by means of magic or tricks. Rather, He was telling people to keep quiet about what they were seeing and experiencing (even at Caesarea Philippi).

But, some would say, Jesus was special. If He asked God to calm the storm for Him, God would have done it because Jesus was the true Son. Perhaps, but would Jesus ask for a cheap trick, if He was the true Son? And in fact we know how it really worked, because once Jesus *did* ask: "*If it be possible, let this cup pass from me.*" Here endeth all our words, and our hearts break for both of them. They absolutely would not play the game that way!

The universe is perhaps more chaotic than we would wish. Yet for the moment, where we live, many things are solid, dependable, and certain; we count on the realities around us to stay steady, in the sense of continuing according to the rules and principles in which and on which they were created. If this were not so – if our lives were surrounded with magic and miracle – then we could not learn or plan or count on anything. Like the old bumper sticker said: "Due to circumstances beyond my control, tomorrow will be canceled." Signed, God.

We can be irresponsible, and only we and those close to us suffer. If God is irresponsible, it is the end for all of us. Therefore God cannot play fast and loose with magic or miracle in the way our superstitious natures might want to pretend. Miracle is only a word we use when things happen according to the rules and principles of universe-law but in ways that surprise us. That is, we didn't know it could work that way. Back to an obvious illustration: When a Boeing 747 takes off from the runway, no laws of physics are being broken. However, these laws are being used in ways that would have seemed like flat-out magic and miracle to any of the twelve disciples.

But if God were handing out miracles in the way superstitious folk hoped and prayed God would, it would be a total disaster. We should no doubt be praying for *fewer* miracles, and praying instead that we return to responsible choices and patient ways of discipline and obedience, that we might grow in Spirit and become better and more dependable servants of our Master.

Does God do special favors for the special few? If there are three gold stars by your name, will God grant some of your requests that God would not grant to somebody with only two gold stars by their name? It's not easy to let go of all our superstitions, is it? Only, they are not helping us. And they have nothing to do with genuine faith. The truth is, no matter how many stars there are or are not next to your name, God wants to grant you all the favors you are willing and able to receive. You think I'm making this up? I have a Leader that I trust. And He said: "*Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the Kingdom.*" (Luke 12:32) I wouldn't dare make up such a thing. Do you think I'm just some dumb-ass people-pleasing preacher?

Faith is trusting true authority, and Jesus has true authority – straight from the Author. Jesus tells us that God wants to bless us. And God doesn't have to break the rules and principles of God's own creation in order to do that. We only have to stop warding-off God; stop fighting God's influence; stop being rebellious, negative, and angry children. Get in tune, get aligned, and let God's energy flow.

There are three levels of "miracle," as humans speak of such things:

1.) A miracle that suspends natural law – that is, natural rules and principles. (What I call "magic.") I suspect that when we get this level of miracle, what we really have is either a charlatan or a misunderstanding.

2.) A miracle that uses natural rules and principles in ways beyond or different from what we were expecting. That is, the possibility and potential were always there, but we didn't realize it.

3.) A miracle as God's influence (the influence of the Holy Spirit, we often say, rather than a direct physical act of interference). God uses people, or sometimes other creatures or sheer timing, in such a way that the results are beyond what we thought was possible.

Sometimes God sends someone into the picture that we didn't see coming, and the results change everything we were expecting. We even call it "a Godsend" – as when we thought it was all over and everything pointed to another wasted life, but then "she" came along and he fell in love, and it changed everything. Now that's a miracle!

I suspect there really are spirit-beings in or from realms beyond our own. But most of the angels I know about come in the form of pets,

friends, colleagues, bosses, neighbors, or teachers, or sometimes strangers who just show up and do or say something that gets us back on track or back in the flow, and often we never see them again.

Now, some of you might say to me: “Okay, so you’re saying that if we believe God works within natural rules and principles, that’s fine – but if we go outside of that, we are superstitious and it will dilute or ruin faith. What about the Resurrection?” Did you hear me say that there are no mysteries left? Not hardly!

So let’s talk about the Resurrection. I mean let’s talk about it without any pretense or assumptions that we can understand all we need or want to know about it.

Is the Resurrection a miracle in the way most people define miracles? That is, is the Resurrection a one-time suspension of God’s natural rules and principles? If something happens over and over – if it is something we can count on, something we expect, something that happens predictably and for everybody – then according to human categories, it is not a miracle. Turning on the light switch is clearly a miracle; at least it is when the light comes on. Most people wouldn’t be able to explain what is really happening, but they do it many times a day. It becomes familiar and predictable and anybody can do it, so few of us consider it a miracle any longer.

Unless I have badly misread the New Testament, we are promised that we also will participate in the Resurrection. We are supposed to count on it, are we not? We are supposed to trust Jesus and God and their promises, or we are missing the truth and the realities of our Faith that could be blessing us and changing our lives if we trusted them. Only, it is not because the promise is unavailable to us. It is because we have rejected it, turned away from it, refused to pay serious attention to it.

Back to the point: The Resurrection is not just for Jesus. It is for all of us. It is still true that Jesus is the forerunner. The announcement comes early in Him. The promise is still to be fulfilled in and for us, though surely the process has already begun for us too.

So how does this all work? I mean, how do things work between the physical realm and the spiritual realm? Maybe you know. I certainly do not! I know that both realms are real and that they intersect all the time, or are perhaps superimposed on each other in some way. From

time to time I have doubted the reality of the spiritual realm, but at this point there is too much evidence to allow me to do that any longer. At times I have doubted the physical realm too, but I try to do that less and less as well. Therefore there is “mystery” for me in how these two realms intersect and interact. The rules and principles of one do not seem identical to the rules and principles of the other, though I am convinced that many of the principles are in some way true in both realms. (For example, lying does not help relationships in either realm; trusting God applies in either realm; and on and on.)

In any case, these two realms (and perhaps many more) seem to be part of God’s basic design for us. Sometimes I feel like the places of intersection are familiar (love seems to operate with power and mystery in both realms), and sometimes it is a sudden shock when the two realms coincide (like at Pentecost, or on the Damascus Road). Even so, it does not give me the impression of chaos – that is, neither realm is operating on the anarchy principles of magic or superstitious whims. God seems to be inviting us to wake up, participate more intentionally, and trust the Holy Spirit more and more – as we come awake and are able to do that. So we encounter the Resurrected Jesus in mysterious but powerful ways. And that is happening to many people, not just to one or two. In other words, it is not just a magic spell that happens in isolated moments or for a tiny handful of people here or there.

A Spirit-Being (the Resurrected Jesus) is able to communicate and impact our lives rather dramatically. Is that breaking the rules or principles of God or God’s Creation? How would I know? I do not understand all the rules and principles well enough – on these levels – to know whether rules are being set aside, or whether they have more dimensions to them than most of us see or understand from our vantage point. Maybe we will look back from the next realm and say, “Hey, somebody needs to turn on the light switch for those people.”

But behind all the dramatic stories of encounters between humans and the Resurrected Jesus, it does not feel like chaos or whim or special favors for the special few. The variations may be endless, but it happens over and over again. And the results have an amazing consistency and similarity: TRANSFORMATION. NEW LIFE. NEW PURPOSE. An almost unbelievable focus, and gratitude, and devotion, and service. Nobody walking on water; just the ho-hum, everyday miracle of people living and dying for their Lord.