

## **“Christianity, 21”**

### **15. Do you believe in miracles?**

Text: Exodus 14:21-29; Luke 1: 37

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**“Mr. Campbell, do you believe in miracles?”** It was an earnest question, a question of *fides quaerens intellectum*, (faith seeking understanding), as Saint Anselm coined the phrase a thousand years ago. It bubbled up right here in our midst from a 13 year-old in our confirmation class; an emerging adolescent who is never shy and curious as can be.

Still, I was cautious as I mulled over my response. As a pastor, a physician of the soul, if you will, I abide by the vow in the Hippocratic Oath to do no harm. I knew that an unqualified *öyesö* could communicate that I believe in a God who supernaturally suspends the laws of nature. I also knew that an equally unqualified *önoö* could betray my belief that nothing is impossible for God.

So, I did the next best thing. I turned it around and sent it back her way. *öThat’s a pretty big question. What makes you wonder about that?ö* She was ready: *öIt just seems to me that if God really wants our lives to be different or the world to be better, then, well, couldn’t God just kind of ‘presto’ things and fix everything?ö*

She had me, hook, line and sinker! I took a deep breath and said: *öWell now, let’s just sit down and wonder that through.ö* And, for a little while, we did just that.

Her question is well worthy of our reflection today. I want to add it to the growing list of questions we’ve been asking for quite a while now, a series that seeks to articulate a credible Christian faith for these post-modern, post-religious times. And, just as I did with her, I want us to take these moments to wonder it through.

**Let’s turn straight-away to the Bible.** After all, if we want to delve deeper into miracles and faith as people of the Way, that’s our prime resource. Surely the Bible can offer a clear, vivid and unambiguous word about such things!

But a look to scripture only opens her question wider and makes it larger.<sup>1</sup> It turns out that there’s a vocabulary of considerable array and complexity, reflective of an amalgam of beliefs over hundreds of years. Remember: scripture holds the strands of many cultural traditions and, among other things, talk of soothsayers, magicians and miracle workers are all a part of it.

Still, among the tangle of words, two have consistently been there, and I find them helpful. The first is *signum* or sign . . . as in the Christmas story: *öthis will be a sign for you.ö* So, in this light a miracle is *a sign* that points our way to the mystery we call God.

The second word is *portentum*. A portentum is an event of wonder that transcends rational explanation, and hence points beyond the edges of our understanding. Jesus

turning water into wine is an example of this, or his walking on water, or his feeding of thousands on a single crust, or the most startling of all, his resurrection.

**Okay then . . . signum and portentum, that's a good start.** But, at the same time, it was no start at all. I became acutely aware that my young friend wasn't the least bit interested in a vocabulary lesson at all. Her *fides quaerens intellectum* ó *faith seeking understanding* - was after something more personal from me. So, let me delay no further!

õYes, I absolutely believe in miracles!õ I believe in miracles because I believe that God is alive and active and present in the world every moment of life, wanting and willing the best for all of us. And, because nothing is impossible for God, some pretty amazing and astonishing things do take place!

I believe that miracles occur all the time, but that they are especially visible to those who look at the world with hearts of faith. One of my favorite authors once wrote: õFaith in God is less apt to proceed from miracles than miracles from faith in God.ö<sup>2</sup> Which means, among other things: those of us who have eyes and ears of faith are far more likely to perceive elements of the miraculous than those who don't.

More: I believe that human beings actually participate in the process of making miracles with God; and that, although God can act alone in such things, most often people are a part of it. Like when the early Hebrew community wandered toward freedom and saw the Red Sea parting: it was not an event outside of their sustaining belief that God would lead them. Remember: it took Moses raising his hand toward the water for the sea to respond. And, though I wasn't there, I bet dollars to donuts that the waters parted more vividly as the people standing next to Moses on the front line took the first steps.

An aside. Have you seen the movie *Lincoln*? Now there's a miracle for you! Abraham Lincoln had a long look forward though his earthly life would not bear him longevity. Still, he doggedly, stubbornly, unrelentingly, strategically advocated for a wide vision that became the *Emancipation Proclamation*. It was a dream that no one of reasonable mind believed to be attainable. And it was a bloody, angry, brutal, war-torn and weary time. And yet he did it! Two weeks ago, I thought of his miraculous vision as I rang our steeple bell 150 times marking the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of that proclamation.

But then, quieter, too. I believe in miracles that move in silent currents through families and homes and marriages as long-lost alienation finds a fresh start. I believe in miracles because of moments I've known or seen when vulnerability leads its way to a greater strength; when what seemed as the worst became the step to a new path; and when seeds planted quietly or left hidden deeply transform and make new all sorts and conditions of life.

One more: Here's a real living miracle, present and close, and we may not even have been aware. JoAnne Taylor just wrote a poignant book called *Knit Together: An Orphan's Spiritual Journey*.<sup>3</sup> It reveals the very unlikely journey of JoAnne finding her sister after long years of thinking it impossible. By various sequence of circumstances,

she and her sister, Geanne, were in an orphanage in the early 1930s, and then were separated by adoption to places unknown. Each one thought a great deal about the other, neither knowing. Each had a yearning for the other, but there seemed no bridge to connect them. But then, through unexpected chains of people and providence and conversations, with the active encouragement of some of the pastors in our collective past, they found each other again. Her story is beautiful, thick with layers of discovery and rapt by the power of miracle, right here!

**Let me turn the question to all of us now: “Do you believe in miracles?” - with this rather curious ending.** And this, incidentally, is from the *NY Times Book Review*.

According to Littlewood’s Law of Miracles (Littlewood was a famous mathematician), in the ordinary course of a person’s life a person should expect to have a miracle happen once a month, assuming that miracles happen in about one out of 1 million events. In any given day, an individual experiences about 30,000 difference events, or roughly a million a month. Thus, we can expect a miracle to happen on a monthly basis. This, of course, begs the question: What exactly is a miracle? Do they happen merely by chance? Do we even notice them.<sup>4</sup>

In the name of the One to whom nothing is impossible! Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Alan Richardson. *A Theological Word Book of the Bible*. Collier, 1950, pp. 152-155.

<sup>2</sup> Frederick Buechner. *Beyond Words*. Harper San Francisco, 2004, p. 260.

<sup>3</sup> JoAnne Taylor. *Knit Together: An Orphan’s Spiritual Journey*. Antrim House Books, 2012.

<sup>4</sup> “Chances Are” in Century Marks, *Christian Century*, April 6, 2004, p. 7.

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