

“Should I Believe in Miracles?”

Ephesians 5:8-14, John 9:1-12

“Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind.” John 9:32

By the Reverend. Joanna Adams
Morningside Presbyterian Church
Atlanta, Georgia
March 6, 2005

From cover to cover, the Bible is filled with stories of miracles and healings of one kind or another. Choose a book. Exodus? Moses stretches out his hand, the waters of the Red Sea part, and the children of Israel cross in safety. Ezekiel? Bones that lie dry and lifeless in the middle of a valley are knit back together again. The Psalms? “O Lord my God, I cried out to you, and you have healed me.”

The gospels of the New Testament overflow with miracles of every kind. Water is turned into wine. A handful of fish becomes a feast for four thousand. A lame person walks. A deaf person hears. A dead man is brought back to life. In Luke’s gospel, even on the night that Jesus is betrayed, he performs a healing miracle. One of Jesus’ followers struck the slave of the High Priest and cut off his right ear, and Jesus responded immediately, “No more of that!” and he touched the man’s ear and healed him.

The entire contents of the ninth chapter of John are devoted to the account of a man born blind who receives sight for the first time in his life through an encounter with Jesus. This morning, as we continue our Lenten series, I want you to allow this miracle story to challenge your current perceptions, whatever they are, about the nature of miracles so that you can see the world and your own life from a deeper theological perspective. Harry Emerson Fosdick, the famously intelligent and enlightened preacher, once put it this way, “The common impression is that it is the unintelligent who believe in miracles, but the fact is that it is the great minds who believe most fervently in unforeseen possibilities.” Here is a suggestion for all skeptics present. Take Dr. Fosdick’s definition of a miracle as “an unforeseen possibility” with you as we explore the ninth chapter of John.

The story begins simply enough. As Jesus and his disciples are walking, they see a man who, the narrator tells us, has been blind from birth. The disciples, echoing the conventional wisdom of the day, make the assumption that his affliction is the result of someone’s sin, either his own or his parents. A lot of people still love to think about it that way. If someone has an affliction, it must be because either he or someone else did something wrong and punishment must be paid. The disciples are interested in having a philosophical discussion about why bad things happen to people and to whom and who is to blame. But Jesus is entirely uninterested in conducting that kind of seminar while he is walking down the street. He straightaway dismisses any connection between sin and illness in the sense of cause and effect. Then he offers the real explanation for the man’s blindness. He said, “The man was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him.”

What a puzzling thing for him to say, but it soon becomes clear why he said it. Without as much as a How- do- you –do? or Do- you- believe- in- me? or Would- you-like- to- be- healed? Jesus spits on the ground, makes mud, spreads the mud he has made on the man's eyes, and says to him, "Go and wash." The man went and washed, and when he came back, he was able to see.

You would think that everyone who had witnessed this extraordinary occurrence would be filled with awe and wonder, but that is the opposite of what happened. Immediately, the neighbors got into a disagreement about the identity of the man who had been healed. "Isn't this the fellow who use to sit and beg?" they asked. Some said it was, and others said "No, he's not the fellow but he looks like the man." Even though the man himself said, "Look, I am the one who use to sit and beg from you," confusion reigned.

After the disagreement among the neighbors, an investigation by the Pharisees, the religious authorities, is undertaken. The man is brought in and interrogated. He tells them about the mud and about the miracle, but the Pharisees will have none of it. The alleged event took place on the Sabbath day and everybody knows that no one but a sinner would break the Sabbath law against doing any work on the Sabbath. Everyone knows that a sinner cannot heal anybody, but the man insists that he once was blind now he can see and it is all because an itinerant rabbi named Jesus spat on the ground and made mud and put it on his eyes on the Sabbath.

The Pharisees are outraged. They call the man's parents in. "Is this your son?" they demand. "Well, yes he is our son, but we don't understand what has happened to him. We don't know who opened his eyes. Ask him about it. Don't ask us." The parents were afraid of Jesus' power. They were afraid that the Pharisees would kick them out of the faith community. They would lose their place, their tradition, and then where would they be?

The story goes on. The authorities call the man back in and question him the second time. Like hard-boiled detectives on a television show, they get in the man's face and try to force him to sign a statement saying that Jesus is a sinner claiming for himself the glory that belongs only to God. But the man won't do it. He said, "I don't know whether he is a sinner or not. All I know is that I once was blind and now I see, and it was this man who made it happen." A fierce argument ensues. They drive the man away. Now, Jesus appears for the first time since the mud. He says directly to the man, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?"

He answers, "Who is the Son of Man?"

Jesus says, "The Son of Man is the one who is speaking to you." The man replies, "Lord, I believe." And he fell down and worshipped him. In traditional Jewish usage, the coming of the Son of Man signals the beginning of God's final judgment.

Jesus goes on to speak about judgment and the fact that his coming creates a situation in which those who can not see begin to see and those who think they see, come to lose their sight. Indeed, some of the Pharisees overhear his exchange with the man who was blind, and they ask, "Surely, we're not blind, are we?"

By the end of the story, the one who was born unable to see is given sight, both physically and spiritually, while those who thought they knew everything have become blind and plunge further and further into darkness. You know how the story goes. They will throw stones at Jesus. They will plot to kill him. Finally, they will kill him. After his death, the miracle of all miracles will take place, but of that we will speak on Easter Sunday.

Let me say a thing or two I have learned by living inside today's miracle story this week as well as by being a pastor and a human being for more than a year or two. One is that the presence and power of God are real and active in this world. I have also observed that people do not necessarily rejoice over it. In actuality, there is usually opposition to new life. The outbreak of unforeseen possibilities scares the daylight out of a lot of people who are invested in the way things currently stand.

I have learned that just as Jesus bent over and mixed spit and dirt and used that to transform a pair of eyes, that God is never too proud to use whatever is at hand to enable those who are blind to see. Sometimes, God uses nothing more exotic than the passing of years. I have subscribed to a journal for some time that several years ago ran a series of articles entitled, "How my Mind has Changed." Here were great theologians and thinkers and church leaders who wrote about what they thought when they began their vocational life and how they had come to see differently over the course of time.

I once thought that women couldn't be leaders in the church, but now I see that God calls women and men to all the ministries of the church. I once thought that divorce was a sin, but now I see that sometimes it is the only way to human wholeness. I once saw it this way, but now I see it another way.

I have seen miracles, my friends.

I have seen one night of volunteering at a homeless shelter open a person's eyes to see the sufferings of the world.

I had an eye-opening experience myself as I read the newspaper on Tuesday morning. I was drinking my coffee, turning the pages, and all of a sudden I was staring at the photograph of a little boy who was staring back at me. He was lying on a cot in a hospital in the Congo. Someone, one of the militia, had cut the little boy's ear off with a machete. His little tiny arm was reaching out to me, and his eyes were saying, "Do you see me? Aren't I and all the children of the world your children too? Can you help me? And even if you can't help me, are there children that you can reach with the healing touch of Christ?"

Sometimes the Bible itself is the mud in your eye. I know of a father of three who spent some time really wrestling with this whole ninth chapter of the gospel of John from the first verse to the last verse. The more he did his Bible study, the more he began to see his own blindness about his own life and how he was neglecting his wife and his three kids because all he cared about was how he was doing at the office and whether he was getting the attention and the money and the promotions he was after. He prayed to God, "Please heal my blindness and show me how to live a more balanced life." And that is exactly what happened.

I do not know whether you brought any blindness with you to church today. Blindness to others, blindness to your own needs, but I do know that no living soul has to end up like the Pharisees, blind and alienated from the source of life. You decide whether you believe in miracles. I have come to believe that you can make two serious intellectual errors if you end up on either extreme of the spectrum about miracles. The first is to decide there is no such thing. Period. This choice eliminates the possibility that there is a power at work in the universe that is greater than you and I can imagine. The other extreme, of course, is to assume that God will deliver whatever we ask for, on time and under budget. This does a terrible disservice to the freedom of God, because it puts us rather than the Almighty in the driver's seat. Notice in the story of the healing of the blind man that he neither asked for nor expected the healing. It is grace alone that did it.

Of course, there are a lot of people who need a miracle and never receive one. I think of a woman who was besieged by her friends. They were full of stories about miraculous healings during the final weeks of her struggle with a terminal illness. Finally one day she sat up in her bed in the hospital and said, "Be quiet. I am tired of hearing about miracles. It's not working that way for me." After her death, her husband related that story, but he went on to say that her final days were filled with miracles: the miracle of strong faith in the face of loss, the miracle of human love, the unfailing care of doctors and nurses. These are miracles too.

Alana Shepherd, who founded the Shepherd Spinal Center, once said to me, "Joanna, if prayer alone could heal, then every one of our patients would be walking. That is not to say that we do not see miracles. We see them every day. The miracle comes when people are able to adjust to whatever their disability is. For that we always say, 'Thanks be to God.'"

I have seen miracles in my ministry. I have seen God make a strong new person out of a weak, self-centered one. I have seen deep old wounds in families finally, fully healed. The more I see, the more I believe in the reality of the power and presence of God for whom nothing is impossible.

The more I see, however, the more I believe that it is a waste of time to sit around waiting for divine intervention. More and more, I believe that Christ heals through people. He is the power but we are the medium. We are the mud, if you will. If the hungry are to be fed, it won't be manna from heaven that fills their stomachs. It will be because those who have much share with those who have little.

If the lonely are to have friends, it will not be by means of visits from heavenly angels, but because someone took time out of a busy day to make a call or pay a visit.

If our society, which is becoming absolutely blinded to the existence and needs of the most vulnerable among us, ever recovers its capacity to have compassion, it will be because you and I open our mouths and advocate for those who do not have a voice. I heard on the radio this morning about the President's budget and among the hundreds of millions of dollars being cut from health care and community block grants. An entire program that tests the hearing of new born babies is being eliminated. We have to open eyes and minds and hearts, and they will not be opened if we don't shout, "Look here! Don't forget the needs of the least and the loss and the neglected and the invisible." Let's don't spend our time waiting for a miracle. Let us offer

ourselves as a miracle, to be Christ's hands to heal, his arms to embrace, his voice to tell the glad tidings those who follow him will not walk in darkness but have the light of life.

I close with this personal word for you. If you are seeking a miracle yourself, if there is a broken place in you or in your marriage that needs to be made whole, a weak spine that needs some starch, a nagging wound from guilt you carry around with you everyday over something you did that you can't do anything about now, then remember the one who thought he was blind forever. Jesus found him and gave him sight. Jesus didn't love him anymore than he loves you. Trust that he will come to where you are and give you what you need.

We pray for strength and sight, O God, and praise you that your power is at work in our broken lives. We might have not received everything we've asked for, but you bless us with everything we truly need. How amazing is your grace. We give you thanks through Christ our Lord. Amen.