

It's a Miracle!

Given 8/13/23 by Robin Mitchell

If you have heard any of my previous sermons that Livia mentioned, you probably know that I unashamedly believe in God – at least the Paul Tillich version of God that Rich MacDonald talked about last Sunday, where he defined it as the ultimate meaning and depth of our lives. Most of my sermons have been about that depth and how I have experienced religions like Buddhism and Christianity leading and encouraging us towards it and how much I love them for it.

At the same time, I am a child of the Enlightenment just like everyone else here. I have a STEM degree, had a 25-year career as an engineer, and am generally a big fan of the laws of physics. So while I'm fine with the idea of transcendental spirituality, I'm reflexively hostile to the idea of it interfering with the real world in the form of things like Virgin Births or miracles.

And so I've taken what you could call the "Jefferson Bible" approach to religion. As you probably know, Thomas Jefferson was also offended by the supernatural and so he took a pair of scissors to the Gospels and cut out all of the miracle stories, leaving Jesus as a human being and a great moral teacher. I want both the "Bible" part – to see Jesus or the Buddha as people who have had a profound vision of the depths that we call God, giving them real authority behind their teachings – and also the "Jefferson" part, where none of that disturbs the clockwork of the laws of nature.

But I have recently begun to doubt this approach. A few years ago at the beginning of Covid when I was locked in my house like everyone else, I decided that it would be a good time to read a series of books by the historian John Meier called *A Marginal Jew* about the search for the historical Jesus. It's an absolute brick of a series – more like a cinderblock of a series – five dense volumes written from a historian's point of view about what can be known about the Jesus of history as opposed to the Christ of myth, mostly drawn from a careful textual analysis of the Bible but also drawing on the few outside sources we have.

His basic *shtick* in the series is to imagine himself as representing a panel of Middle-East historians, one Catholic, one Protestant, one Jewish, and one agnostic, who have been commissioned to come up with a biography of the historical Jesus, the man who actually lived and taught, that all four of them can agree on. And from what I can see he pulls it off; he is very academic and really comes off as transparent and intellectually honest, at least as far as I could tell. So I happily read 1,000 pages on where Jesus was born, whether he had brothers and sisters, what his father did for a living and what their economic situation would have been, whether he was literate and what languages he would have spoken, how long his ministry lasted, what his relationship with John the Baptist was, and it was all great.

But then, halfway through the second volume, I got to the section on Jesus' miracles and I literally felt my hackles rise – I could feel my muscles tensing, my breath getting shallower, the whole fight-or-flight response. By this time I had invested a lot of time and trust in Meier, and the idea that he was going to shatter that by telling me the miracles were real threatened all that. But fortunately, just a few pages into the section he said that the issue of whether Jesus actually performed miracles wasn't a question a historian could even try to answer 2,000 years later – no one was following Jesus around with a camcorder, posting videos on TikTok, so the evidence just isn't there. Instead, he said, a historian could reasonably tackle questions like whether the miracle stories were contemporary, whether Jesus's followers (and his enemies) believed them at the time or whether the early church invented them as

part of the process of deifying him, and if they were contemporary what they meant to his ministry. And when I read that I could feel the tension wash out of me as the threat receded, and I remember being relieved that I'd be able to keep reading the book after all. And looking back, how remarkable to have my own personal Moms for Liberty chapter living in my head, ready to ban any book that might make me uncomfortable!

So, lured into what turned out to be a false sense of security, I read on. The first thing he did was to define what a miracle was in the context of Jesus' ministry:

First, it's "an unusual, startling, or extraordinary event that is in principle perceivable by any interested and fair-minded observer." So if someone who's legally blind walks into a building and comes out a while later with 20/20 vision, that would count – a Catholic, a Protestant, a Jewish and an agnostic ophthalmologist could all examine him before and after and agree "yeah, that happened." On the other hand, there are some types of Christians who believe it's a miracle that Jesus' blood can wash their souls clean of sin and make them fit for heaven. That may profoundly affect them, and that's not a trivial thing, but according to Meier it wouldn't be a Biblical miracle – a Protestant and an atheist soul-ologist wouldn't be able to agree on what had happened.

Second, it had to be "an event that finds no reasonable explanation in human abilities or in other known forces that operate in our world of time and space." So if the building had a sign on it that said "Cataract Surgery Center" it wouldn't count – it might be a miracle of human ingenuity or compassion, but not a Biblical miracle. But if the sign said "New Life Pentecostal Church" and the only person in it was a snake-handling preacher, then, yeah...

And finally, it had to be "an event that is the result of a special act of God, doing what no human power can do." I think he's partly talking about how Jesus attributed his miracles, but also differentiating it from things like Harry-Potter-style magic or ancient aliens, both of which are basically just technology folded through some alternative dimension.

So armed with those criteria he spends 500 pages going through the Gospels line by line looking for miracles and finding lots of them. He groups them into four categories:

- Exorcisms – apparently demons were a major public-health issue in first-century Palestine, so there are lots of stories of Jesus casting them out of people.
- Conventional healings – curing blind people, lepers, paralytics, etc.
- Raising the dead – kind of extreme healings, of which there are three separate stories
- A lumpy category he calls "nature miracles" – manipulating the physical world by calming storms, walking on water, or feeding a crowd by multiplying loaves and fishes.

He claims that there is good evidence that many of the stories in the first three categories are contemporary; that the people of Jesus' time believed he was doing them and that this was an important part of how they saw him and his ministry. The nature miracles, on the other hand, he thinks were mostly made up by the Gospel writers or their sources; the only one he thinks was based on an actual event in Jesus' career was the feeding of the crowd.

So that all seemed pretty non-threatening; I'm not too invested in the gullibility of a bunch of provincial first-century Jewish peasants and so my decision to keep reading seemed okay. But then Meier got to

the question of what these stories meant for Jesus' ministry and things started getting more troublesome.

Jesus' ministry, like John the Baptist's shortly before him, talked a lot about the Kingdom of God, but it meant slightly different things to the two of them. For John, it was coming soon and coming in wrath – God would cleanse the land with fire, and only those who had repented and been baptized would be able to enter into the Kingdom. For Jesus, holiness and repentance mattered, but the Kingdom of God was a place of joy, fullness, and love. And it was both coming soon but also already here, manifested in his ministry – his teaching, his table fellowship, including sinners, tax collectors and women – and in his miracles.

The miracles were signs of the Kingdom breaking through – in the Kingdom of God everyone will be fed, everyone will be made whole, and both Jesus and his followers seemed to see the miracles as proof of that Kingdom. In the Gospel of Luke, John the Baptist sends a messenger to ask Jesus if he is the one who will bring the Kingdom of God, and Jesus tells him "Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor."

But if Jesus himself believed in the miracles, if they were an integral part of his message, this is a problem for "Jefferson Bible" Christians like me who want his religious authority without the conjuring tricks. If the miracles were a real part of Jesus' ministry, you can't do that - you can have the "Jefferson" part, dismissing the miracles and letting the teachings stand on their own authority, or you can have the "Bible" part, where the teachings have a deeper authority that makes them more compelling, but you can't have both.

And it isn't just Christianity that has this problem; most of the world's great religions are ultimately grounded in the supernatural. Everyone loves the Dalai Lama; he talks about joy and happiness, he teaches mindfulness, he works for world peace; he can sound very modern and secular. But he also believes he has lived countless lifetimes, that he's the 14th incarnation of the Buddhist deity Avalokiteśvara who was recognized as a child when he magically identified objects that belonged to his previous incarnation after the searchers were guided to him by divine visions. And this supernatural worldview is the source of his teachings; you can't have his authority on world peace without the reincarnations and the divine visions.

Across all the religions that we count as our Sources, the holy ones – the messiahs, the prophets, the rinpoches – come to show us that the Divine is startling and wild and unbounded, not just an intellectualized Good Idea. They really believed (and experienced) that something wild and untamed is breaking through into our world, something our world is floating on like froth on the surface of deep waters, and that's what sources their teachings. To take Jesus's or the Dalai Lama's moral teachings without their supernatural backing is a form of cultural appropriation; taking the superficial trappings without acknowledging the roots from which they spring. If anyone is going to talk about Jesus from this pulpit, all the "love your neighbor" stuff – the miracles is where that came from.

So if you want to really respect our sources, you have to ask yourself how committed you are to living in a disenchanted world, a world where miracles can never happen. And if that's a bridge too far (which it may be for me too), there are other ways of looking at miracles.

The first is to realize that you don't have to unconditionally accept supernatural claims to follow teachings that pull on your heart – if you find yourself drawn to Jesus' teachings on love or the Dalai Lama's on compassion, you can hold the teachings strongly and the miracles and reincarnations lightly. When I went to India to receive Buddhist teachings from Thrangu Rinpoche, Christie Turner's teacher, he talked a lot about the importance of faith and devotion in your practice. When we had a chance to ask him questions, I said that a lot of the things he was talking about – guru emanations and four-armed deities – sounded unlikely and, frankly, kind of outlandish, and I asked how I could have faith and devotion in them. He gave a wonderful answer: "You have seen something in the Buddhist teachings that has touched your heart, so much so that you were moved to take a difficult trip to India to learn more. Have faith and devotion in that, in what brought you here, and let the rest settle in your heart at its own pace." So have faith in your own heart and the things it's drawn to and let the supernatural parts land where they will.

And getting back to Jesus, I am struck by the fact that the miracle stories that Meier thinks are contemporary all involve him in relation with people. The exorcisms, the healings, even feeding the multitudes; they're all about people having a response to him. I find it telling that of all the nature miracles, the only one that Meier thinks wasn't made up is the story of the loaves and the fishes, the one that doesn't involve him using superpowers to bend nature but instead involves people. We had a guest preacher at my Methodist church a while ago who talked about this story in a way that sounded very much like my "stone soup" story earlier, that Jesus's gathering the people into small groups and then extravagantly sharing the food he and his disciples had brought encouraged others to do the same, and when they shared their hoarded food there was enough for everyone.

And the exorcisms and healings – I remember someone here, ten or twenty years ago, giving a sermon about the mind/body connection in healing and saying "another word for 'placebo effect' is 'miracle'." If you think you're being cared for, your body responds. And whoever Jesus was, he connected deeply with people, like the woman at the well who went away from meeting him telling her friends "he told me everything I had ever done" with its unspoken coda "and he loved me anyway" – or better, "he loved me precisely because of them."

So maybe what the miracle stories are telling us is that the right kind of connection between people, a connection born in radical, unconditional love, can do things that seem like miracles. Maybe we can loosen Meier's criteria a little – a miracle could be

- Something that makes a real, lasting, and startling change in the world or in someone's heart
- Something that doesn't arise from common sense, from Robert's Rules of Order or Maslow's hierarchy of needs or any of Freud's theories
- Instead, something that seems to come from some wild, unexpected instance of Love breaking through into our world and doing what no mundane power can do

And even I can agree that these miracles happen. Years ago Christie Turner and I went to a presentation by two women who had started an Israeli-Palestinian peace organization. One of them was an Israeli woman whose soldier son had been killed by Palestinian militants; the other was a Palestinian woman whose son had been shot to death by an Israeli army sniper. Instead of hating each other as the enemy who had killed their son, they recognized their pain in each other's eyes and came together to try to stop other people from having that same pain inflicted on them. This is a true miracle – it has made a

difference in the world, it defies common sense - Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's five stages of grief end with acceptance, not this kind of compassion and purpose – instead, it's an example of love breaking through in an unexpected, unlikely, and unbelievably painful place.

If you look around in your families, in your communities, in the world beyond the screaming headlines, you'll probably see many smaller miracles happening. Every time someone chooses love when hate would be easier, generosity when clinging would be easier, openness when closing would be easier, you're seeing love breaking through into a little miracle of the human spirit.

And this is profoundly good news. I dare you to look at our country today, at our world today, and tell me we don't need a miracle. And I don't mean that as a figure of speech; I mean it literally. We have massive, heartbreaking problems that no amount of bipartisan Congressional committees or IPCC climate reports, as important as those things are, are going to solve. Until we – not just the people in this amphitheater, but people in power, marginalized people lashing out from fear and want, people who right now don't want to be more open and loving than they are – until we all start reaching out in love to people who aren't us, I don't see how the world doesn't end up drowning in a mess of carbon and greed and hatred.

It's going to take a miracle. And what the stories about Jesus tell me is that miracles can happen when human beings dare to reach out in love. God may not reach down and scrub the carbon from our atmosphere, but we can. God may not reach in and heal the deep divisions among us, but we can. It's kind of a miracle that we can even imagine it – I'm reminded of the words from the Bodhisattva vow – “Just as with a blind man finding a jewel in a heap of dust, thus, somehow, Bodhicitta – enlightened heart; the desire to help others – has been born in me.” There's a miracle in that ‘somehow’ – a miracle that somehow, we have all come here this morning to be inspired to be of use in the world; a miracle that somehow, we're not the only ones who feel that call; a miracle that somehow, people have arisen through the ages to inspire and guide us. Somehow I can hope, in spite of all the evidence, that we're going to make it. And it will be a miracle. Let it begin with us going out into the world as agents of love and grace, leaving little miracles in the hearts of everyone we touch. Because that's what it's going to take.