

## “ORDINARY MIRACLES”

**Scripture Readings: 2 Kings 5:1-17, John 9:1-11**

A woman told me that one night her mother appeared to her in a shining, silvery form to tell her that everything was going to be all right. It was a powerful experience that only revealed its real power the following morning when she got a call informing her that her mother had died that night. When she asked about the time of death, she found out that her mother had passed away within minutes of the time the ghostly form appeared.

I believe what this woman told me. She considered it a miracle that her mother would appear in this way. I also know that the relationship between this woman and her mother had not been good for many, many years. And I wonder if the greater miracle might have been for her and her mother to have reconciled while her mother was still living.

I wonder if we spend so much time, especially in these troubled times, looking for unearthly, slam-bang miracles – ghostly apparitions, thunder-clap pronouncements, cloud-parting transformations - that we miss hundreds of miracles that happen right under our noses, right here on earth.

Each night an astronomer went out to observe the stars. One evening, as he wandered on the edge of a city looking up at the stars, the astronomer fell into a well. The next day a neighbor discovered the astronomer bruised and sore.

*“Why do such terrible things happen to me?”* the astronomer asked.

*“Good friend,”* the neighbor replied, *“rather than placing all your attention on the mysteries of heaven, perhaps you ought to pay a little attention to things here on earth.”*

Aesop’s fable might be thousands of years old, but his wisdom is well applied to us. We look for miracles to come from heaven, but most miracles are decidedly earthly occurrences.

Consider poor Naman from our Old Testament Reading this morning. He was like that astronomer; he was looking for something incredible, impressive, unearthly, supernatural, and so was completely disappointed by Elisha's straightforward advice - *“Got a problem with your skin? Take a bath!”* Isn't that what Elisha's cure boils down to? It's a kind of folk medicine cure of dipping himself in a river seven times, but Naman's disappointed. This miracle just isn't miraculous enough for him.

I love the observation that Naman's servants make to him: *“Father, if the prophet had commanded you to do something difficult, would you not have done it?”* Naman was looking for something more difficult, more arduous, more baroque, more MIRACULOUS. He wanted one of the twelve Labors of Hercules or something. Something sufficiently magical and mythical and that would have seemed miraculous to Naman.

It wasn't just the cure itself that disappointed Naman, it was also the way it came to him. He was looking forward to a mighty prophet entering through clouds of doom, his dark cape swirling around him like the shroud of Hades itself. Naman says, *“I thought that he would surely come out to me and stand and call on the name of the Lord his God, wave his hand over the spot and cure me of my leprosy.”* This handwaving business that Naman wanted, that's the stock-in-trade of a magician. That's what Naman wanted, someone impressive, someone magical, miraculous!

Instead, what he got was a note, just a note from Elisha. Can you imagine the behind-the-back reaction of Naman's soldiers? *"Oh, did Naman get a note from his Mommy? 'Please excuse little Naman from the war today. He isn't feeling very well...'"*

Naman was sick, embarrassed, confused, angry, and disappointed, but a note was all that was necessary. What was extraordinary was not the personage of Elisha. What was extraordinary was not the magic of the miracle. What was extraordinary was how the power of God comes to us ordinary people even in ordinary ways.

One woman tells this story:

*"During my second month of nursing school, our professor gave us a pop quiz. I was a conscientious student and had breezed through the questions, until I read the last one: "What is the first name of the woman who cleans the school?" Surely this was some kind of joke. I had seen the cleaning woman a few times. She was tall, dark-haired and in her 50s, but how would I know her name?"*

*"I handed in my paper, leaving the last question blank. Just before class ended, one student asked if the last question would count toward our quiz grade. "Absolutely," said the professor. "In your careers, you will meet many people. All are significant. They deserve your attention and care, even if all you do is smile and say 'hello'." I've never forgotten that lesson. I also learned her name was Dorothy."*

What do you think? Do you think in the healing business, even the healing business of a big hospital, the power of healing could come even through a cleaning woman? Can God choose the ordinary to do extraordinary things?

Or are you always looking around for someone better, more important, more powerful, for something more significant, more supernatural, more spectacular? And do you realize that by doing so you will more than likely miss God working in the world, because God more often than not chooses to work through ordinary people and in ordinary ways?

These last few months have been a time for me to think back, even to the first times I encountered this church.

- I remember Dad sending me a newsletter column from this church that was written by John McFadden and recommended by my father. You know what my reaction was: *How come you like stupid John McFadden's stupid article and never talk about MY newsletter articles?* But then I cooled down and read it and agreed with Dad.
- The next year, when Annual Meeting had moved to the Holidome in Stevens Point, I was late for plenary because I was in the middle of a pinball game. I mean, the business of the church is important but you don't want to waste a good quarter. As I played, I noticed that two machines over, there was John McFadden, also late for plenary and also playing pinball. That's how I happened to discover a kindred spirit and that's what started a blessed friendship.
- I remember sharing a beer with Rev. Kevin Gregory at the University of Chicago as our doctoral programs overlapped. Kevin told me that John was retiring. *"Are you going to apply for Senior Pastor?"* I asked. *"Nah, I don't think so,"* Kevin replied. And then he asked, *"Are you?"* *"Nah,"* I said.

- I remember the weekend I came to meet for the second time with this church's Search Committee and, on the way, met with Evie Bocher, Joan Riester's mother, who was my parishioner in Watertown and had just moved to Appleton. She was the perfect person with whom to share the secret joy and anxiety of my possible move. Poor Evie – she moved away but ended up still having me as her pastor.

These are miraculous moments for me. From the outside they may seem ordinary, fragmentary, and forgettable except that God somehow knit them together to form a whole; something wonderful, something miraculous. And that's continued to happen for me in my 15 years here.

I had the opportunity to share with you the many significant accomplishments of our 15-year partnership in ministry. But it's really the ordinary miracles that I will remember:

- Like when 9-year-old Henry and 11-year-old Will stopped after a church musical rehearsal to show me a dance that Will had just choreographed.
- When Kara Woodford, our supremely dedicated Director for Children's ministry, selected purple and lavender as the colors for our children's bathrooms and then reported back to me that her four-year-old niece Hadley pronounced that the bathrooms looked "*fablious!*"
- The taste of a Hoft-March chocolate torte purchased from the Alternative Christmas Market.
- The taste of pistachio nut bread prepared for me and Dee by Arlene Beyer a few weeks before her death and delivered to us one week after I officiated at her memorial service.
- The Christmas Eve service that ended with the entrance of Mary and Joseph played by Beth and Andy Detienne, and Jesus played by their godson Walter.
- John Davis speaking at a Congregational Budget meeting. His criticism of the \$1.2 million proposed budget was that he knew a guy whose brother-in-law could save us up to \$50 a year in cleaning supplies. And then we spent 20 minutes debating THAT. The miracle was not so much John speaking up – he was good at that; God rest his soul. The miracle was the patience of everyone else in hearing him out.
- Ruth Douglass, in her 90's and playing piano in the Peabody chapel for the nursing home worship services.
- The Big Three Clergy meetings that started as the Big Two with me and Jane, and then Jane and Nick, Jeannie Douglas and Nick, Kathryn Kuhn and Nick, and Laurie and Nick, all of which often dissolved into tears and prayers for the burdens facing members of the congregation and often broke up in laughter over the giddy joy of serving together.
- The people who cared enough to come to me after they had been triggered or disturbed or just plain disagreed with something I wrote or said; what a miracle of trust that was for them to give me a second chance.
- Sitting in a traffic jam on Lawe Street while a family of geese took their time to safely cross the street.
- And one Sunday the Peter and Helen Thiel's five-year-old grand-daughter waited patiently in the Pastor-Steve-after-service line in her white dress and matching purse. When she finally reached me, she opened her purse and took out a one-dollar bill and handed it to me. "*Thank you so much, honey,*" I said. "*I'll make sure it gets in the*

offering.” “No,” she said, frowning. “*This is for YOU!*” I was speechless. And here it is, all these years later.

I hope you’ve had those kinds of moments here, moments of truly being seen and lovingly accepted. Maybe it happened when you were first welcomed here by Bill Platt, Wanda and Maynard Beemer, Joyce Hansted, Georgia Berceau, Dianne Droster, Mark and Joanne Shropshire, Dee Savides or so many others.

You may not recognize all the names I’ve mentioned or really understand why those and so many other ordinary moments were miraculous for me. I do know, however, that you have your own moments of blessings, ordinary miracles for everyday people.

And, listen - it’s always been like that.

- Because for every time Moses parted the sea or struck water from the rock, there were hundreds and hundreds of hours spent going over plans for the new tabernacle or thinking together once again of all the complex implications for a seemingly simple instruction like “*Thou shalt not kill.*”
- For every public confrontation Elijah had with the political Powers That Be there was a moment of quiet, loving concern shown for a widow’s poverty, a person’s grief.
- For every Damascus Road conversion for Paul and the other early Christian leaders, there were countless days spent pounding the dusty road between newborn house churches, and thousands upon thousands of hours spent settling disputes, writing letters, worshiping and praying together about what it meant to be a follower on the newfound Way of Jesus.
- And for every time Jesus walked on the water or multiplied loaves and fishes, there were dozens of simple stories and plain parables about God’s love, numerous home visits and shared meals, countless smiles, tears, and embraces. Jesus’ life and ministry was less about angels and clouds and heavenly voices than it was about sparrows and lilies, dirt and blood, spit and mud, healing the everyday hurts of ordinary people, letting the love of God shine here on earth. That’s why we most often remind ourselves about Jesus through such common things as bread and wine.

Ordinary miracles for everyday people. That’s the heart of our faith and our experience as Christians. At least it is for those with eyes to see. God comes again, not in the earthquake, wind, or fire, but in ways we often overlook, in people we wouldn’t have predicted, on days we sometimes discount. In a note from a prophet. In dips in a river. In spit and mud. In bread and wine. In you. In me. In us.

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Sermon preached by Reverend Dr. Stephen Savides at First Congregational United Church of Christ, Appleton, Wisconsin on Sunday, June 12, 2022 at 9:30 AM