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Date: December 6, 2020
Sermon: "Miracles"
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe
Scripture: Scripture Litany

A Timeline of Miracles

Leader: Then Moses stretched out his hand over the Red Sea, and the Lord parted the waters and turned it into dry land, so the Israelites could walk through. (Exodus 14:2)

People: How did they do that? I mean, who? Who parted the Red Sea?

Leader: When the donkey saw the angel of the Lord, she lay down under her master, Balaam. Then the Lord opened the donkey's mouth, and she spoke to Balaam. (Numbers 22:27-28)

People: O.K. That's even stranger. A Biblical Mister Ed? A talking donkey? Seriously?

Leader: As the disciples crossed the lake during a rough storm, they saw Jesus approaching, walking on water. (John 6:16-19)

People: Right. Sure. I don't think so.

Leader: When the crippled man asked Peter and John for money, they looked directly at him and said, "Silver and gold we do not have. But what we have, we give to you. In the name of Jesus, rise up and walk." And the man got up and began leaping and walking and praising God. (Acts 3:7)

People: Nice story, but . . .

Leader: And Jesus spit on the man's eyes, touching him a second time, and he could see . . . and a woman touched the hem of Jesus's garment and was healed . . . and Jesus called into the tomb of the dead man, Lazarus, and yelled, "Lazarus, come out." And Lazarus came out.

People: There's more here than meets the eye. (John 11)

Leader: During the wedding reception, the party ran out of wine. After Mary asked Jesus to help, he called for large cisterns of water. When they poured the water into cups, it was wine, very good wine. John 2

People: Now that's a miracle I like.

Leader: Jesus met a man filled with so many demons he was called Legion. Jesus spoke to the demons and sent them away . . . When Jesus met a man with a withered hand, he restored it to perfection . . . When a Roman Centurion asked for his servant to be healed, the boy was healed . . . When friends brought a paralyzed man to Jesus, he forgave his sins and invited him to stand up and walk.

People: Wow! Miracles come in all shapes and sizes!

Leader: On Easter Sunday morning the women went to the tomb to honor the dead body of Jesus. But an angel told them, "He is not here, He is risen." Then Jesus met some in the garden, and some on the road, and some in the upper room. (Matthew 28)

People: The miracle of all miracles.

We've been studying Jesus's life in our Bible study, and we keep running into miracles. In fact, if you read Mark Chapter 6, you get three very different, very interesting experiences of miracle. He feeds the crowd of 5,000 or more people, starting with only five loaves of bread and two fish. Later that night, his disciples get caught in a tough storm out on a lake, and Jesus rushes to them to save the day, "walking on water." Meanwhile, back in his own hometown, his neighbors make fun of his status as a miracle worker, healing people, turning water into wine, creating followers and skeptics.

The neighbors say, "Who the heck does he think he is, all these miracles and such? Isn't he the carpenter's son? We've known him since he was a snot-nosed kid! Get outta here!" And the Bible adds, "They took offense at him." (Mark 6:1-3)

Miracles do that. People believe them—or mock them. They create a bond, or a bridge too far. You heard several of the big ones in our Scripture Litany: Moses parting the Red Sea; Jesus being raised from the dead; Balaam's donkey talking back at him. They leave people inspired, give people hope, strength, faith. Or, they make us roll our eyes, confirm our worst suspicions about religion, filled with

charlatan leaders and gullible followers with silly beliefs.

One of my first brushes with a miracle was as a boy. In our little New York City Church, a dear lady came down with terminal cancer. It was as clear as day: a doctor's diagnosis, backed up by scientific evidence, x-rays and such. Nothing to be done.

Around that time a TV preacher, Oral Roberts, held a Tent Revival Crusade out on Long Island. He erected a huge tent that held thousands. There'd be Gospel music, testifying, preaching; then, sick people of all kinds would line up one by one to come up to the altar. Oral Roberts would pray over them, often touching the sick part of their body—a paralyzed leg, a deaf ear, a tumor—to send the power of God to that specific place. Our Church lady went to Oral Roberts's Tent Crusade and came back healed. Not on her say-so. The doctors said so. The x-rays said so.

Whether you're a Christian believer or not, we all live in a world of the known and the unknown. There's stuff I know, I grasp, I can explain; it's certain, it's provable, it makes sense. And you're the same. You may well have a different body of knowledge, but you have some. I have some.

Then there's the "some" that defy explanation, that are hard to believe, that are not possible. We call that inexplicable. Impossible. Unbelievable. Which is fine until it happens. In which case we have to reorient our thinking, and if it can be reasonably explained, we fit it into our world of knowledge. Space travel. The end of smallpox and polio. Transplants. Computers. So you might say that we have three bodies of knowledge: stuff we know; stuff we don't know till somebody explains it; and stuff nobody can explain, but there it is. That's the world of miracle.

We are a religion literally born of miracle. That's why I'm preaching this today. Christmas is around the corner. And unless you want the total focus on Santa, Rudolph, and candy canes, our Christmas brings us face to face with miracles: the Virgin Birth, the Incarnation of God becoming one of us, the Star of Bethlehem guiding the Wise Men, the angels explaining it all to shepherds, two elderly people in the Temple in Jerusalem recognizing the infant Baby Jesus as the Messiah, and the Holy Family's escape to Egypt from the murderous madman, King Herod, just in the nick of time. Miracle upon miracle upon miracle. Impossible followed by inexplicable, leading to incredible. That's our birth as a religion, as a Church, as a faith.

Ah, there's that key word: *faith*. Whenever we're told to believe something that doesn't seem likely, we are told to "take it on faith." When it comes to faith, the

Bible is blunt, telling us, "Faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain, certain of what we cannot see." (Hebrews 11:1)

Faith bridges the gap between the possible and the impossible, the knowable and the unknowable, from "It can't be" to "Holy cow, how'd that happen?"

In a recent email Bible Study, I said that I had only met two honest-to-goodness, 100 percent, thoroughly committed atheists. Most who say they're atheists are either just plain mad at religion, church, clergy; or they mix up the words "agnostic" and "atheist." An agnostic is without knowledge. They're *not* sure. An atheist is without belief in God. Atheists are very sure.

I've had hundreds, if not thousands, of conversations with people who are skeptical about God and faith and all that goes with it. Their skepticism ranges from mild amusement to outright rejection to throwing up their hands and saying, "Who knows?"

In most of those conversations, they soon get around to the miracle stories: Noah and the flood, the Virgin Birth, Jesus raising the dead. And, with a kind but condescending smile, they say, "You can't really believe that stuff, can you? Seriously?" Then, depending on how strongly I defend miracle, they dismiss me . . . or pat me on the head, as if I'll grow up some day.

Believe me, I have no trouble with that. I am completely humble about matters of faith. There's so much I don't understand. I'm like St. Paul, who was about to explain the inexplicability of the Resurrection, and he starts off with, "Behold, it is a mystery." (1 Corinthians 15:51). Prayer is a mystery. Healing is a mystery. Miracles are a mystery. Paul was right.

Without giving it a moment's thought, I could list for you 100 miracles in our Church, prayers answered, impossibilities suddenly possible, including right up to now. Absolute, 100 percent miracles. In this Church. Now.

And without a moment's thought, I could list 100 prayers that weren't answered, that broke my heart, that broke your heart, things you and I both wanted but didn't happen. No miracle. No impossible dream come true. No divine intervention. Zero, zip, nada. So I enter the world of faith with humility . . . and wonder. "Behold, it is a mystery." But still, "behold." "Behold" is an old-fashioned word for "Hey, look at this. This is amazing!"

The most amazing thing I've ever seen is the "Northern Lights" the Aurora Borealis, an explosion in the heavens of color beyond my ability to describe. Now, there is a perfectly rational explanation for the Northern Lights. I looked it up for this sermon. I even understand it. And I quote from my Google sources: "These

bright dancing lights of the aurora are actually collisions between electrically charged particles from the sun that enter the earth's atmosphere . . . a natural light show, a result of disturbances in the magnetosphere, caused by solar wind." Got it. It's still a miracle.

I'm hardly the first to point out that life is full of choices. To be good or not good. To try or not try. Eat healthy, don't eat healthy. Forgive, or not forgive. Is also a choice to live life with wonder, willing to "behold a mystery"; or to skip wonder.

Are you old enough to remember Sgt. Joe Friday of the old TV cop show, "Dragnet"? Whenever he investigated a crime, he'd interrupt a witness, saying, "Just the facts, ma'am, just the facts."

Me? I prefer wonder, and I welcome facts. I don't see them in competition or as a contradiction. Wonder doesn't deny facts, and facts don't ruin wonder.

I've been a pastor here so long, I've prayed over most of you for one thing or another. For most of my life I've prayed for two distinct helps. I prayed for medicine. Then separately, I prayed for miracle. If Mrs. Rumpelstiltskin were in the hospital for surgery, my prayer would go like this: "Holy and loving God, we know that you are a God who works through medicine and miracle. We pray that both will be put to good use for dear Mrs. Rumpelstiltskin." Then I'd itemize: under medicine, I'd pray for the surgeons' skill, the nurses' care, and the technicians' wisdom. Under miracle, I'd pray for God's intervention, a divine touch, a holy blessing.

About three years ago I changed; now I pray for the "miracle of medicine," believing full well that God is at work in the chemo, in the surgery, in the rehab, in the pill, just as surely as God is reaching down and plucking the sickness right out of our body. Miracles and medicines. Wonder and fact. "Behold, a mystery."

We are on verge of living that right now. After nine months of horrific Covid devastation, pharmaceutical companies are this close to giving us life-saving vaccines. To me, that's a wonder! A fact-based triumph of science, a miracle, a mystery we can "behold." A Christmas gift to the world.

When I was a kid, our public school took an annual trip to the Museum of Natural History, which included the Hayden Planetarium. In the winter the Planetarium had a special holiday show. You'd sit back in those big chairs that tilted all the way back so you could stare at the heavens above displayed on the ceiling. A scientist would show us the planets and the Big Dipper, Pisces, and Taurus the Bull, made of stars.

And then, he would tell us the Christmas story. He explained how, around the time of Jesus's birth, four planets came together, so close that it appeared to be one star, superbly brilliant, catching the eye of ancient astronomers, drawn to follow the stars' journey to their destination. To a 10-year-old, that was super cool! To have the Museum of Natural History's Hayden Planetarium's lead scientist tell us that our Star of Bethlehem Christmas story was based on fact—not a myth to be laughed at, not a miracle to be dismissed. A "wonder," to "behold."

That's our Christmas—a world of wonder made true by our faith. Don't shy away from it. Enjoy the mystery, enjoy the miracle!