

Miracle? Schmiracle!

By David Fu, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD December 29, 2024

Introduction

According to Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary, which I received as a Christmas gift 40 years ago, the first definition of the word "miracle" is: "an extraordinary event manifesting divine intervention in human affairs".

I don't think that I have *ever* used a dictionary definition as a starting point for a sermon. While I believe it is a reasonable way to begin, in my experience many sermons that start this way end up being largely semantic discussions, which personally, are neither memorable nor inspiring. And implicitly appealing to Webster (or some other dictionary editor) as a Spiritual Authority – seems a bit off to me. And if I may continue with my judginess, I also think it is a bit lazy and prone to overuse. And yet here I am, doing it. What is my excuse?

Well, I will admit that I procrastinated somewhat in preparing this sermon; and I will admit that this sermon is going to be on the short side. But in my defense, I will also say that the dictionary was not the starting point for my thoughts, however brief they may be, about miracles that I want to share with you this morning. Rather, I needed an "in", a way to start things. So yes, I was a little lazy. But it turns out that it's a pretty good definition for my purposes: "an extraordinary event manifesting divine intervention in human affairs". I think it meshes with this morning's prayer in an interesting way: to see the miracle in the mundane is to see the extraordinary in the mundane, and also to see the hand of God in the mundane. I'll leave you to think about this more on your own; my main topics today will be a few thoughts about two miracles that are considered – less mundane, beginning with

The Miracle of the Hanukkah Oil

I don't remember when I first learned about the olive oil that burned for eight days, when it should have only lasted one. Perhaps sometime in my early adult life. Whenever it was, I was skeptical, and it didn't seem that impressive to me. The all powerful Hebrew God, the one that

Created and then Flooded the Earth, the one that Rained Down Plagues on the Egyptians, the one that helped Moses Part The Red Sea – Makes Some Olive Oil Burn Longer Than It Should Have? That seemed, well, a bit paltry to me. And explainable, too. I mean, maybe someone just snuck into the temple at night and refilled the oil, perhaps from a private stash, or even from the defiled oil that was still in the temple. Admittedly, such an explanation doesn't really seem "on brand" for the Maccabees, but it just seems so – doable, so *not* requiring of divine intervention.

The story of Hanukkah is not in the Old Testament, but rather, in the Talmud, and also in the two books of Maccabees in the Apocrypha. In my hurried preparations for this sermon, I browsed these books and from what I can tell, much of it is the grisly stuff of the war between Antiochus and the Maccabees, who were severely outnumbered and out-armed; and so the victory of the Maccabees is also considered to be a miracle of Hanukkah. But the military victory is usually a brief sentence or two in most retellings of the story, and, symbolically it is basically absent from most Hanukkah rituals and celebrations. Why?

Part of the reason may be that historically, the Jewish people fighting for their survival was an ongoing thing. We have a family friend that once referred to Hanukkah as belonging to that class of Jewish holidays that follows the script of "They tried to kill us. Again. They didn't. We won. Let's eat!"

Relatedly, I think another part of the reason is that the Maccabees knew that the right way forward after a military victory was **not** to glorify the war. A victory may sometimes be a miracle, but a war is always a tragedy. In preparing this sermon I learned why it took eight days to make the new oil. I mean, come on, all you gotta do is squeeze some olives, why does it take so long? There are actually two commonly given answers. The first is that the town, Tekoa, that produced the olive oil, was four days' journey from the Temple. All right [shrug]. The second, which is where I want to go this morning, is that the Jews were all ritually impure and therefore not allowed to make the sacred oil: they had not been in their temple during the war, and they had the blood of their enemies on their hands. The ritual of purification takes seven days. And so 7 days to purify and 1 day to make the oil.

By choosing to honor the purification process, the Maccabees took ritual time to lay down their swords and shields, acknowledging the horrors of the war. They chose to honor their sacred beliefs and traditions over expediency, and that is definitely “on brand” for the Maccabees.

And Reverend Gretchen Haley reminds us that the act of lighting the lamp was an act of supreme hope and faith, a miracle in its own right, arguably the real miracle of Hanukkah. God just pitched in with a little parlor trick so that the Jews and the rest of us would not forget.

All right, let’s move on to...

The Miracle of the Loaves and Fishes

As a child, I attended a Unitarian Universalist Church for a few years when I was in elementary school back in the 1970s. I never really thought of it as formative, and yet looking back, the few memories that I do have from that church are actually quite interesting. For instance, it was at this church that my Mother pointed to a high school student playing the cello and asked me “would you like to play the cello?”. The student, whose name was Indra Neeper, was my first cello teacher. I also heard, and, it is surprising to me now that I remember them, a fair number of bible stories, including that of the miracle of the loaves and the fishes.

And I don’t remember being that impressed by it. It just didn’t seem very believable – and, frankly, not that cool – not like Parting the Red Sea, or Walking on Water. And just how long is it going to take to pass that basket around to thousands of people? But “the loaves and the fishes” is a big one – it is the only miracle, aside from the resurrection, that appears in all four of the gospels. As usual, the differences between the versions are interesting. For instance, in the version told in Matthew, the multitude is “five thousand men beside women and children”, i.e., five thousand families – so maybe 20-30 thousand people in total. That’s a lot of people to manage! Shades of Woodstock, anyone?

The reason I chose the version of the story from John is the mention of “the lad” who has the initial five loaves and two fishes. It jibes with an “explanatory version” of this miracle, not

generally approved of by the faithful, that goes something like this: many among the multitude actually had packed a bunch of food and had hidden it in their robes, and Jesus somehow knew this. By accepting the meager offerings of the lad and passing the basket, Jesus shamed those who had brought food into sharing it, refilling the basket as it made its way through the multitude. The explanation concludes that the real miracle was that Jesus got those who had more to share with those who had less. I like it! As the young people say, “rizz”.

To be honest, I actually agree with those that believe that this explanation is neither scripturally nor theologically consistent, but this is Channing Memorial Church, Unitarian Universalist, and so I am glad to share it with you this morning. And I also have no shame in offering up a slightly different, but still theologically hinky, take on it. Which is this. What if we viewed the loaves and fishes not as material food for our bodies, but rather as the spiritual food of faith for our souls. The child offers up their meager faith, and because faith is not like material things, Jesus knows it will be enough, and so it is passed around for and shared by all. The souls of the thousands are fed on the faith of a child, and there are even leftovers! It is – a miracle!

Wrapup

There are of course other miracles, both within our holy texts and all around us that are worth considering, worth pondering, worth reframing, and I encourage you to do so as you go about your lives, because to do so, to look for the hand of God in both the ordinary and the extraordinary, is to live well.

But for today, that’s all I got. [Pause] Told you it was going to be short!

Amen.