

**Sermon for 2-23-20**  
**Scriptures -- Matthew 17:1-9, Exodus 24:12-18**  
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Do you believe in miracles?

For some of us, the answer is simple: yes, of course. Of course I believe in miracles. God can do anything!

But for the rest of us, it's more complicated...

For starters, what exactly is a miracle? Who gets to define it? We humans are selfish, we have our allegiances, we're limited in our worldviews. I might call a particular military victory or an election result a miracle, while another person calls it a nightmare.

Many Christians love to talk about miracles of healing -- miracles that recall the healing deeds of Jesus during his earthly ministry (terminally ill patients being cured, blind persons suddenly able to see, paralyzed people standing up and walking away from their wheelchairs) -- and those images, the possibility of God doing these things, fills us with hope and excitement. It's exhilarating!

But if we claim that God heals some folks, restores senses and abilities to some, does that mean that God could do it for everyone and chooses not to? And if so, then what does that say about God?

Some folks say, well, it may not seem good to us, but everything that happens is part of God's plan, and God's plan is good, so the only reason it doesn't seem good to us is our lack of understanding. It's all good in God's view.

I don't know about you, but I have trouble with this idea. Somehow, I cannot believe that our loving God chooses to allow pandemics and school shootings and genocides because in the grand scheme of things they are "good."

If I were God -- ***and I know I am not*** -- if I were God, and I had the power to make anything happen, to do any miracle I desired, I'd wipe away all the violence in this world, I'd snap my fingers and make every sick person healed, every hungry person fed, every homeless person housed, and I'd make us all stop being so afraid of anyone or anything different from ourselves.

I wonder what miracles Peter and James and John hoped for when they climbed up to that mountaintop with their rabbi, their teacher, two thousand years ago. I wonder what they thought would happen. Were they whispering to each other on the way up: "Why's he bringing us here? What's he going to do?" They had already seen him cure the sick, and walk on water, and feed crowds of thousands... so what were they expecting on that mountaintop?

Maybe they were hoping Jesus would snap his fingers and wipe out the Roman armies that were marching toward Jerusalem. Maybe they were hoping Jesus would make all the Pharisees and the high priests acknowledge himself as the Messiah. Maybe they were hoping for an easier road in the days to come.

What they got was the Transfiguration.

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Our reading from Exodus this morning reminds us that the Transfiguration wasn't the first time someone met God on a mountaintop, or in a cloud. In fact, our Scriptures are full of these

surprise encounters with God; moments when human beings come face to face with a presence so amazing, so overwhelming, so all-encompassing, that it can only be the Divine. Angels bearing messages, chariots of fire, waters parting and manna in the desert, voices calling in the night, rainbows after storms, a figure in the fiery furnace, a midnight wrestling match with a stranger, a bright star leading travelers on a journey...

These stories, memories of so many ways human beings have encountered their Creator over time, collected and preserved for us in our Holy Scriptures, are gifts -- precious gifts, that give us hope and remind us that we are not, nor have we ever been, alone in this world. All our fears and anxieties, all our burdens, our isolation and our sadness and our existential emptiness... God inhabits all of it, God is present with us through all of it. God has not abandoned us. We are not alone!

When it comes to miracles, have we been asking for the wrong things?

Listen to how the late Dutch author, professor, and pastor Henri Nouwen described the Transfiguration:

*"At some moments we experience complete unity within us and around us. This may happen when we stand on a mountaintop and are captivated by the view. It may happen when we witness the birth of a child or the death of a friend... It may happen in church during a service or in a quiet room during prayer. But whenever and however it happens we say to ourselves: 'This is it ... everything fits ... all I ever hoped for is here.'*

*This is the experience that Peter, James, and John had [in the Transfiguration]... This is the experience of the fullness of time. These moments are given to us so that we can remember them when God seems far away and everything appears empty and useless."<sup>i</sup>*

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The Transfiguration may not have been the miracle Peter and James and John asked for, on that day two thousand years ago, but it's the one they got. And it's no coincidence that Moses and Elijah -- the great Hebrew leader and the great Hebrew prophet, both long dead -- are there on the mountaintop with Jesus.

Rabbinic tradition placed a strong emphasis on the relationship between Moses and Elijah: "... two prophets rose up for Israel out of the tribe of Levi; one the first of all the prophets, and the other the last of all the prophets: Moses first and Elijah last, and both with a commission to redeem Israel."<sup>iii</sup> You and I might not have known the significance of these two figures together, but observant Jews like Peter, John, James certainly did.

It's not just any two Old Testament figures standing on that mountain with Jesus; it's Moses and Elijah. Moses, the great liberator and law-giver, and Elijah, the great prophet and miracle worker, and both redeemers of Israel! Their presence with Jesus makes it clear that he is no mere teacher or holy man; he is their rightful heir, the continuation of God's promise, the new Redeemer.

Peter, James, and John may have *suspected* that Jesus was the Christ before this moment on the mountain. They may have *believed* that Jesus was the Christ after watching him cast out demons and feed hungry crowds and heal sick people. But now, standing on the mountain and watching Jesus talk with Moses and Elijah... now they *know*. They *know* that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, the promised Savior.

The miracle of the Transfiguration is Jesus -- who he is, what he represents, what he can do in and through us. The miracle is the One who teaches us everything we need to know for doing God's will during our brief time on this earth. The miracle is the fullness of God, in human form, standing on that mountaintop and saying to his disciples, "[D]o not be afraid."<sup>iii</sup>

Jesus Christ himself -- God in and with humankind -- is the miracle.

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An encounter with God is a miracle. Intimacy with God is a miracle. True knowledge of God is a miracle -- because it wipes away our illusions and preconceived notions about reality and shows us the true essence of things, the abiding, eternal holiness that breaks through the veil between heaven and earth, over and over again. That's a miracle.

So listen! Can we hear Jesus speaking to us? Can we hear his quiet voice? Can we feel his gentle hand reaching out, lifting us up from our knees? Can we see him looking into our anxious eyes, seeing everything behind them, and silencing all our worries and doubts with four simple words: "Do not be afraid"?

Thanks be to God for the miracle of Jesus Christ. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://henrinouwen.org/meditation/the-mountaintop-experience/>

<sup>ii</sup> *Pesiq. R.4.2* in Craig A. Evans, "Mark" (Eerdmans 1085)

<sup>iii</sup> Matthew 17:7 *NRSV*