

Sunday, May 2, 2021

Acts 8:26-40

John 15:1-8

Do You Believe in Miracles?
The Reverend Evans McGowan

One of my favorite films growing up was the Prince of Egypt. The title song, sung by the powerful duo of Whitney Houston and Mariah Carey, asks the question: Do you believe in miracles? The story follows Moses, the Prince of Egypt, through various miracles in his life - from the burning bush to the magical staff, to finally the miraculous crossing of the Red Sea. Last fall, we journeyed through Exodus in search of liberation, and knowing we were in need of a miracle. Those were some dark days, without knowing who would be in the White House this year, or how long the pandemic would last, or if and when there would be an effective vaccine.

Fast-forward several months, and we have experienced several scientific breakthroughs – a miracle, really, to develop several effective vaccines against a virus that has ravaged our economies, brought death to hundreds of thousands, and sickened millions.

When in your life have you experienced a miracle?

Perhaps it was celebrating a graduation or other accomplishment, like the graduates this weekend from University of Michigan. I bet there were times when you didn't think you'd make it, and yet you did.

Or maybe it was a job you always wanted. I remember coming back from Kenya after a year abroad and trying to figure out what I wanted to do. I really wanted a job working in urban planning, and gave myself all of September to find one before I took whatever job was available. On September 29th I had a job interview, and on the 30th, a job offer in the field I desired.

Weather can be a miracle, can't it? With spring blossoming and color returning to the land, I'm reminded of the rainbows and even double rainbows of where I used to live on Kauai – Hanalei, which the Hawaiians call "the birthplace of rainbows." On a particular trip to DC over Thanksgiving, my sisters were with my grandparents when they heard that back in Texas and Louisiana, where we used to live, it was snowing! My grandmother couldn't believe it, and was so amazed she exclaimed, "It's a mir-A-cle!" We've laughed about it ever since.

And then of course there are the miracles we see and hear about in sports... from the immaculate reception to the miracle on ice... As many of you know, I play soccer here in Ann Arbor, which attracts people from all over the world. I'm always learning new names, and there was one guy I met called Marigold. I had heard of women being named after flowers, like Daisy, Rose, Violet, and so thought

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that was really interesting. We soon found out, however, that his name was actually Miracle, and then everyone wanted Miracle on his or her team.

I think of Miracle's parents, and I wonder if every parent hasn't thought of their child as a miracle at some point... perhaps at least once each day!

Every birth is a miracle, perhaps the greatest miracle, yet every birth is also a statistic. What's the difference?

Connection.

Miracles happen in stories. To people and places that are connected.

That's what strikes me about this story – the miraculous event of Philip being swept up... but not that, but two strangers from different cultural backgrounds connecting through the scriptures, and when one asked to be baptized, to be a part of the community, there was no hesitancy. In this act of baptism, two strangers become siblings. That is the miracle. As soon as it happens, Phillip is whisked away. And the Ethiopian is left with awe and wonder.

I really love the way the Ethiopian phrases the question: Why shouldn't I be baptized? The Greek word here is *koluei*, and means to hinder, prevent or forbid. Is there anything hindering me from being baptized? Is there anything preventing me from becoming claimed and sealed by God? Is there anyone forbidding me from becoming a part of the family of God?

Phillip doesn't answer him. But he doesn't need to, because his actions say everything. There is nothing that will keep this former stranger from becoming a sibling in the family of faith.

As it turns out, Ethiopia would be one of the first regions to adopt Christianity and Christianity is still the majority religion there today. There are some incredible churches carved deep into the rock and are truly breathtaking to behold.

Yet as the Ethiopian wanders home, I wonder: how will he stay connected?

Phillip himself is part of the Diaspora of disciples – scattered about after the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. Where do they go now with their fallen lord? How do they stay connected to the loving truth that underpins the universe? (*They share it.*)

And isn't that our question today? How can we stay connected to the divine love? How can we hang onto hope when we are so close to defeating this virus, yet it continues to wreck so much personal death and economic destruction, from Michigan to India and everywhere in between? How can we stay connected when we feel so disconnected?

When Jesus talks about abiding in him, he illustrates this by branches connected to the vine. The Greek here is *meinate*, which means to remain, to stay, to wait. Yet the Spirit is telling Phillip to go up this road or another, and the Ethiopian is traveling home, so this isn't a physical staying or remaining.

This is a connection.

This is where the analogy of a vine and branches really helps. As long as you are sharing resources, sharing the love and connection, there is life and vitality and fruit. Yet if you become disconnected, you are liable to wither and die.

If we try to keep this love, we lose it. By giving it away so others receive it... and the cycle of love continues. Hate does not drive out hate, so much as darkness can drive out darkness... only light can drive out darkness, and love drive out hate.

Occasionally we pastors get inquiries about our church and what we believe. There is so much behind this question that often we try to establish a relationship with the person, to say that they belong here before we get to the belief question, and whatever answer we say is in the context of the relationship, the connection.

But if I were asked to speak on behalf of us all, I would say this: We believe in love. We believe in a love that surpasses any human understanding. A miraculous love. A love as small as a mustard seed yet can move mountains. A love that brings strangers together and makes neighbors and siblings of us all. One family of faith. A love that abides in us when we share it with others, using words if necessary.

I believe the greatest miracle in an uncaring, determinant universe is love.

I believe in love. I believe in a force more powerful than we can see, more powerful than we can prove or feel or

Love covers a multitude of sins. In the end, Love wins.

For those facing death or divorce or division or destruction...

There is still love.

Why do we come to this place? To be connected to the vine.

That is why we come here – to be connected to this love.

Yet many of you know we are connected to this love in other ways – through serving others such as work days at Cass or Alpha House, through coffee hour after this service, where you will be asked to share in the experience you've had with the miraculous.

Love is present in the miraculous and the mundane. It permeates the entire universe.

As we look back to Earth Day, a celebration of love for Mother Earth...

As we look to Mother's Day, a celebration of mother's love and care...

Know that we are forever connected to the divine love that continues to reveal itself in the miraculous and the mundane...via our connections with each other.

How are you connected to this love? How are you experiencing the miraculous? How are you reaching out to those who may wish to understand a little more about this love?

May God fill you with the Spirit like Peter, and like the Ethiopian, may we all be welcomed into the Spirit as siblings in Christ.

Alleluia, Amen.

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