

Sunday 20th February 2022
2 before Lent (C)

Liverpool Parish Church

OT: Genesis 2.4b-9, 15-end
NT: Revelation 4
G: Luke 8.22-25

When I was five or six years old, I used to play in my back garden by myself for hours. I would play make-believe, looking for interesting rocks or branches, swinging sticks around like they were swords, pretending to ride a horse, Monty-Python style, while running in circles. Believe it or not, I had toys, friends, and siblings, but there were still long stretches where the thing I enjoyed most was spending the day by myself, with nothing except the sticks and the rocks.

To this day, I have an active imagination. But I didn't just pretend to be a cowboy or a knight ... I had other fantasies as well.

One bright, cool day in early Spring, it was rather windy. Not as windy as a few days ago, but still rather windy. And for some reason, I got it into my head that God was listening, and that the wind would do what I asked. So little six year old me asked God to make the wind stop. And believe it or not, it stopped, as if by magic. And then I asked God to make it start again. It started again, more fiercely than before. So I asked God to make it stop. And it did. And then to start, and it did.

This went on for several minutes, until I stopped asking. I can't remember why I stopped. Perhaps I was bored, or scared, or distracted. But I stopped. And I haven't attempted to change the weather since.

In our Gospel reading for today, Jesus stops a storm, as if by magic. And in response to the disciples' fear, he asks, "where is your faith?"

It's an interesting question. In various places in the Gospel, Jesus invokes faith as the key ingredient to miracles. Often, those who are healed are made well by their faith. Also, Jesus says that if the disciples had faith like a mustard seed, they could command trees to move.

I believe we should not to divorce these stories from the physical actions they describe. I believe we, as Christians, attest to something pretty bold, and we shouldn't shy away from it. We believe that Christ breaks the laws of physics by performing miracles. And better yet, we believe Christ's disciples do too – from healings, to exorcisms, to earthquakes on command.

In our Gospel reading for today, Jesus stops a storm, as if by magic. It's a moment in the physical world where things stop working as they usually do.

With this in mind, I believe that I saw a miracle that day in my back garden. We know what makes wind start and stop – high and low pressure pockets and atmosphere, various temperature differences – and we know that the prayerful whims of a child don't affect them.

As a child, I had faith like a child, and I participated in a real-life miracle.

Now sure, my six-year old self, recollected years later, is not exactly an unbiased source. But I don't think that should matter. Without a doubt, an attitude of skepticism is important to maintain as we navigate our contemporary day-to-day. We should be critical thinkers, evaluating news, events, and ideas as they arise.

But maybe, just maybe, miracles require a slightly different approach...

In Matthew's gospel, Jesus declares that only those who have become like children will enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Perhaps this is sort of what he means...that we should become fools for God, that we should have child-like faith.

Now that's not to say all children are without doubt. I can tell you from my own experiences with St. Nick's Sunday School that children are clever, full of interesting questions and powerful challenges. But overall, that open-minded, trusting faith we often associate with children does seem to be helpful in terms of encountering miracles.

However, we must be careful with this line of thinking, for it is easy to get a bit stuck.

We could, for example, mistakenly believe that our faith makes the miracles happen. That's not exactly right; it is not our faith in God that makes miracles, but God herself that makes them.

Thus, God does not reward the faithful with miracles and deny miracles to the doubting. If that were true, we'd be divided into God's trusting elect, and those doubters God denies.

No, God does not deny anyone, for God loves everyone unconditionally.

And so, importantly, everyone has access to miracles.

That's not to say faith doesn't matter. In fact, it matters very much...because while faith doesn't power miracles, it does help us to see them.

Let me explain.

A few months ago I was leading a bible study with another congregation, and we were discussing miracles in the gospel, specifically the miracle where Jesus asks the Disciples to fish on the other side of the boat, and as a result they catch tons of fish.

I asked the group if any of them had ever experienced a miracle. Nobody said anything... they couldn't think of any... for a minute or two.

And then, one-by-one, stories of miracles came pouring out. A child, given no chance to live by doctors, making a full recovery; a parent who ran out of gas in a dangerous, rural area running into a man with a jerry can in minutes. Some people described encounters with what they believed were angels, others reported hearing God's voice. Still others remembered moments where someone forgave them, or a community changed its mind, in a totally surprising way.

Every single person had a story. Most had two or three. And together we confirmed that miracles have indeed happened to all of us.

But we forget about them. We put them aside. We don't think about them. We get distracted or stressed by our day-to-day activities. Our memories of miracles – like most spiritual things – fall by the wayside.

It doesn't help that usually these miracles had perfectly good scientific explanations.

And that leaves us, today, with a choice. We could continue to live without seeing the miracles around us, attributing them to coincidence or good fortune. We could adopt a theology which says "God never intervenes in our lives." We could be very mature, very modern, very adult. But if we did, our inner lives would suffer.

Because we would be forgetting something quite important, something that forms the title of a classic children's hymn, something that is at once juvenile and essential:

Our God is a Great Big God.

When we say there's no such thing as miracles anymore, we put God in a box. And we tell God what God can and cannot do. That's never going to work.

How and when and why God does out-of-the-ordinary things in our lives is a mystery. And importantly, even when things are normal, God is with us.

Even still, I'm convinced that God is big enough for miracles to be real. And so I encourage you to keep your eyes and ears of faith open. Let's keep watch for the miracles around us. We don't want to miss the next one.

And so today, in order to better embrace a child-like faith, I'm giving all of us, including myself, some homework.

Today, before you go to sleep, think back to a moment in your life where something miraculous happened, where you felt God's hand move in your life. If at first nothing comes to mind, don't worry. Be patient. I'm sure you've got one.

Once you find it, your homework today, is to tell someone about it, to share the story of your miracle.

Good luck, and Amen.

Ian Grant-Funck