

## EXPECTING MIRACLES

A sermon written and preached by the Reverend John Nichols

A mountain is not a miracle. At least we would not call it a miracle today. A mountain is a pile of rock that has been thrust into the air by a series of geological movements that we think we understand. Eventually soil forms. Plants and trees grow from it. So a mountain is like a large biology project: beautiful, complex, intricate, but understandable. That's what we believe.

But Native Americans and folks in other parts of the world used to endow some of their mountains with qualities of the Sacred. Some mountains – Mt Washington for instance --- were once considered off limits to human beings, because they were thought to be holy places. Rivers, lakes, mountains, the sea, sacred groves of trees in Britain, Scotland and Wales were thought to be the miraculous dwelling places of the Great Spirits.

A chance encounter between friends is not a miracle. If two old friends suddenly meet unexpectedly, or if two strangers find each other and a sustaining friendship deepens over the years we would say that is one of those fortunate, random events that make up many lives. "Random" we say as in haphazard events. These are accidental events – we tell each other. Nothing governs them but statistical probability. And yet when in such a random meeting one or both persons finds a missing piece of her life, something she had been looking for and desperately needing to find, a reassurance perhaps or an insight, then the experience does seem close to miraculous.

A long term sustaining relationship is not a miracle. It is not a violation of the laws of nature. Anthropologists can tell us why human beings seem to bond with one another and psychologists have written libraries full of books telling us how to do it. Anyone who chooses may be well schooled in the science of relationships. And yet when a long term relationship continues to work well for both people – despite the occasional frictions, misunderstandings, dark moods and retreats into privacy; despite all of the changes in the lives of two people, the inevitable temptations and the equally inevitable fatigue

on both people – when such a relationship continues to work, well, then such a bond seems almost miraculous.

A work of music is not a miracle. A talented musician can put notes together in ways that form a tune or a complex of tunes that may even become a symphony. I can't do it but some people can, and what they do is not something we would normally call miraculous. But the tune or the words that catch and hold and express some vital non-verbal part of our lives, or of our lives together, that seems almost miraculous, because of the power of this gift has to help us become better or at least more honest than we often are. When Mozart said some of his music and William Blake said some of his poems seem to have come from somewhere beyond their conscious creating they were not claiming their work to be superior to that of other musicians or writers. They were saying they could not locate the source of that skill within themselves. It seemed almost miraculous.

But why talk about miracles now. For many people the world in which miracles were thought possible began to quiver and shake when Darwin's theories of evolution were gaining favor in intellectual circles. If God did not create the world and everything in it; If, instead all living things evolved through a process of trial and error, a series of random fortunate or unfortunate encounters, then many people thought there was no place for the miraculous. Life, including human life was a biology project and nothing more. By the turn of the century faith in the miraculous goodness of life had begun to fade like the Cheshire cat in Lewis Carroll's story of Alice. Once it was there, then it was only vaguely there, then there was only the hint of a smile and then nothing at all.

Many people then asked, "What will we do? What is there to hope for if the old religious stories and the assurance they gave is no longer true? And they decided, "We're going to figure it out for ourselves. We're going to put our shoulders to the wheel. We're going to learn the laws of the universe and make them work for us. We no longer have a miraculous God of miracles but we have human intelligence, and we will make our own miracles in science, technology, medicine, art, law and world diplomacy. We will wed

religion to science and philosophy so that religion will no longer need that old tottering, creaky God of miracles anymore. Religion, science and philosophy will be the engines of human progress. That's what they said.

Why talk about miracles now? Well, we are beginning to discover that when all things have been properly explained, and we have been adequately instructed, there are quite a few areas of our spiritual experience that are left uncovered, unexplained, undiagnosed and mysterious. While we do understand many things what remains mysterious is what gives us the hopefulness to live well.

Here are some of the questions we still can't answer. From whence comes the power of goodness and caring when it passes from person to person. Why is it this power has the ability to heal – and upon occasion even physically heal – another person? We understand evil all right. We have all kinds of ways to explain human cruelty. Nothing really explains why the sacrificial care and concern of one person for others can be transforming.

We do not understand community. We have all kinds of theories about why groups work or don't work. We have filled rooms with texts on group psychology and motivation. We don't understand what lies behind the cohesion of a group, which accomplishes something far beyond what they would have dreamed.

We do not understand courage. We can understand cowardice well enough. And we can understand the adrenaline that enables people to run into burning buildings to rescue trapped victims. What we do not understand is the prompting of conscience, that moment when an individual is confronted with a burning bush and a prompting to do something very hard and even dangerous. And no one else knows this has happened. And no one would fault that individual for remaining on the safe side of things. We do not understand what prompts people to risk physical or psychological safety in order to do what they feel is right.

We do not understand chance encounters that seem just what

we needed at that time. We do not understand what is happening to us when we feel as if we have been spoken to but there was no voice to be heard and no other person present to be speaking. We do not understand what speaks to us out of our favorite music, art or poetry. We do not understand what pulls us to the mountains or to the sea or to the garden or to the lakeshore. To be sure there is a desire for peace and quiet or recreation, but often there seems something ineffable, something elusively more.

Many summers ago Nancy and I had the good fortune to be at the base camp of Mount Rannier near Seattle on one of the few indisputably sunny days they had that summer. The trails that go up into Rannier rise from that base across beautiful, open meadows. So, it was easy to watch what seemed like an endless procession of pilgrims heading into the high country. Some were out for the exercise, but many were there to experience something like what the Northwest Native Americans experienced from that mountain, a sense of the miraculous. An encounter with ... what? A presence? No. Not so much a presence as a calming, healing mystery.

There are a number of things we don't understand and probably never will. Much of what we don't understand after years of rigorous investigation is what encourages, supports and sustains us in this life. The real source of Nature's strength as well as our own is still shrouded in mystery, a mystery that even the most rigorous science can't yet unfold. And because we have a tendency to dismiss what we do not easily understand we fail to see the miraculous happening all around us. We have been taught that there are no miracles, and yet miracles of chance, miracles of serendipity, miracles of love and unseen strength are all that keep us going sometimes.

Those who wrote the early scriptures were well aware of the mysteries that sustain all life. The mysteries of life were not something that galled them or frustrated them. Not having to resolve or explain seemingly chance events of goodness or strength in their lives they simply loved the mystery and wrote of it in the most extravagant terms.

When Moses was pleading with Pharaoh did he actually throw down a stick and turn it into a snake? What actually did happen was

that the leader of a group of slaves confronted the ruler of a mighty nation. That sort of courage was miraculous enough. Why not explain it in miraculous language.

Did the Red Sea part to let the fleeing slaves escape through and then the sea closed over their pursuers? Perhaps what actually did happen was that a group of people who had become too comfortable in groveling captivity willingly accepted the risks and burdens of freedom in order to gain a new dignity. That was a miracle. Why not tell the whole story in miraculous language?

Did Jesus actually feed 5000 people with five loaves of bread and two fish? Every time they hear the story many have the impression that Jesus waved his hand over the five loaves and two fish and created a veritable Super Stop and Shop of bread and fish. We think there must have been fish flopping around everywhere. But what the text actually says is that there were never more than five loaves of bread and two fish. Jesus broke them and distributed them to the crowd and the text reports, "All ate and were filled." Interesting.

What we assume from this story is that you have to have a heck of a lot of bread and fish to fill up 5000 people. The actual point of the story may be that the quality of Jesus being present in some way to each of those people, distributing small bits of food to each of them, was enough to make them feel full.

Did Jesus turn water into wine at that wedding? How could he have done that? Or was the experience of being in his presence such that it made the water taste like wine. Looking at the scriptures in the no-nonsense way we often do we tend to seek scientific certainties. Did the Red Sea part for the fleeing Hebrews or didn't it. Volumes of articles have been written to test the literal truthfulness of this story, demonstrating that properly translated it wasn't the Red Sea but the "Reed Sea. In other words it was a swamp that stood in the way. But is that really the point?

The authors of scripture attempted to describe a world, which they saw as surrounded by a loving mystery. This is a mystery that encourages people to risk everything for freedom. This is a mystery that empowers some people to embody or nearly embody the best

that's possible in human nature, a mystery that knits people together sometimes despite their own selfish or fearful designs.

Probably the skeptical attitude that most of us have been trained with is necessary in some ways, but it is not the only possible lens through which we can understand our lives nor is it by any stretch of the imagination the best lens we have for understanding what makes life worth it. When we view life with a little more poetic imagination we can begin to expect that sometimes miracles will happen and then be happy when they do.

I know that many have prayed for a miracle cure, and it did not happen. I am not talking about big miracles like a spontaneous cure of a dread disease. I'm talking about the little mysteries of connection between people, inspiration from unexpected sources, courage in those from we least expect it, new and unexpected possibilities that open for us just when we have quit looking. I am talking about a sense of acceptance from somewhere that comes to us when we have lost all conscious self-confidence. If we don't expect that these little miracles can happen we will never notice when they do happen. Living entirely in the skeptical mode is like turning off your internet and then wondering why you are not receiving email.

Recently I saw an article in the Boston Globe, which related that Stephen Hawking's ashes have been interred in Westminster Abbey between those of Sr. Isaac Newton and Charles Darwin. This was followed by a service of thanksgiving for Hawking's life that was attended by over 1000 people. Apparently someone had asked the dean at Westminster Abby who decides such things why one of the world's most famous atheists – as Hawking was\_\_ was buried in the Church of England's home parish. The response of the Rev John R Hall was, "Whether a person believes in God or not if someone is achieving extraordinary things then I believe God is in that process." I believe that too.

