

January 20, 2012 The Second Sunday after the Epiphany  
John 2:1-11 (the wedding at Cana)  
Sermon Series: Questioning Faith

In our continuing quest to examine some of the more confusing or controversial aspects of the Christian faith, two weeks ago we talked about whether Christianity is the only true religion, and last week Father West looked at what we might answer if somebody came up to us and asked if we are “saved.”

Today, with the Wedding at Cana, and the demonstration of Jesus’ power when he transforms water into wine, we have another fundamental question, one that has gotten various responses from the very earliest theologians and Biblical interpreters. And this question is, “Can we really believe that miracles occurred in the Bible – and perhaps, even, today – or are these not so much historical events as symbolic legends that are meant to demonstrate a point without being literal.”

First, I guess, we want to define the word ‘miracle.’ Our modern Western worldview is derived from the Enlightenment, which sees reality as completely in material terms – it’s all matter, energy, the

space-time continuum that can be defined and measured and studied. Of course, we all acknowledge, there are processes that we don’t yet understand, but the key word is “yet.” Everything, according to this worldview, can be explained by science, even if we don’t yet have all the tools.

So a miracle, in our Christian context, is usually seen as some extraordinary action by God in the physical world that works contrary to, or beyond, the normal order of natural processes. In other words, because of gravity, water flows downhill; but a miracle might produce water flowing **uphill** instead – something contrary to the laws of nature. Oh . . . and these events are not just surprising, but they are always **good** – healing, rather than destructive.

Do you agree that that’s how we usually think of miracles? I was surprised to hear that some of the more ancient theologians had a slightly more nuanced view of this: both Tertullian, who lived from around the year 160 to the year 225, and St. Augustine, a little over a hundred years later, didn’t believe that God ever did anything contrary to what we’d now call “natural laws.” So does

that mean they didn't believe in miracles? No, but Augustine would say, "God doesn't work contrary to nature, but **contrary to what is known of nature.**" (Placher, 88). So whatever the explanation of a miracle is, the issue is that *we can't figure out* how it happened, and so it causes wonder and, maybe, faith.

By that reasoning, let's take today's miracle – turning water into wine.

The complete skeptic says, "This didn't really happen at all." They might say that Jesus mixed some wine with the water, to make it look like he turned water into wine. Or that Jesus' disciples snuck the wine in. One suggestion is that Jesus just snuck a glass of really good wine to the banquet organizer guy, so that the banquet organizer guy got all excited and claimed that the new wine was better than what they started with. If that skeptic is feeling generous, they might concede that it wasn't just some huge lie made up to trick us all, but that something **else** happened: They inadvertently forgot the barrels of really good wine, and thus believed a miracle had occurred, for instance.

This kind of thinking goes on all the time with other miracles: how about the feeding of the 5,000? What might have really happened there?

- Somebody might say that this story was written later for its symbolic significance – in other words, they weren't trying to trick us, but had an entirely different worldview, and adding a story like this for its symbolic value isn't "trickery," but a valid way of demonstrating a deeper truth.
- Commonly, we hear that Jesus' faith that there would be enough inspired people to share the food that they might otherwise have hoarded for themselves.
- Some people suggest that there were truly only crumbs to eat, but that these crumbs of food were sufficient in the presence of Jesus.
- Or maybe it was a miracle, like turning water into wine.

I think I can fairly state that all of these viewpoints can be found among faithful Episcopalians – even in our congregation, probably, but certainly in the Episcopal church at large. We're going to have all the points of view about miracles. Some of us who say, "Yes,

Jesus was capable of going beyond natural laws – he demonstrated his remarkable power and authority through the manipulation of natural processes – he indeed multiplied food, walked on water, stilled storms, raised the dead. Other faithful Episcopalians would say, “These stories are symbolic – Jesus probably didn’t literally do any of these things, but the stories have spiritual significance and show us that Jesus had some remarkable power and authority. We know that Jesus’ followers “experienced a presence around him that was palpable and contagious” (Borg, Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time, 36), and so these stories are not lies, but literary ways of expressing the inexpressible. I say this to reassure you that if you believe in miracles without any doubt whatsoever, or if you don’t believe in actual miracles but believe that the scripture is demonstrating some deeper truth through symbolic stories, you are in very good company in the Episcopal church, and you can undoubtedly find a Christian Biblical scholar who agrees with you.

It’s interesting to me that most modern Biblical scholars “generally accept that there is a historical core to the healing and exorcism stories, even [if they are not] confident that any particular

story is a detailed report of a specific incident.” (Borg, 36). The Gospels are too consistent and detailed on the subject of healing and exorcisms to just dismiss them as legends. How did Jesus become so popular? His extraordinary appeal came from his words and presence, the scriptures agree, but also from his incredible authority. Here’s a nobody from Nazareth in Galilee, but he can command the very cells of human bodies and the unseen but powerful mental and emotional processes that enslaved people – those mental and emotional processes that were called “demons” before there was even a language about mental illness. And Jesus himself claims that these signs and wonders are evidence that he is the one through whom God’s kingdom has been brought to us. In his very first sermon, Jesus reads from Isaiah, saying, “The eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy” (Isaiah 35:5-6). He claims that the scripture has been fulfilled, and he goes out and does these things. Whether you believe the stories are literal or not, they are “clearly essential to the picture of Jesus painted by the Gospel writers” (Roberts).

One important aspect of miracles is that they are **signs** that point to a greater reality. You hear me say that even the best religion is not, in and of itself, important: religion is the finger that points at the moon – the finger isn't the moon. Religion is the finger pointing at God. In the same way, miracles always have a deeper symbolic meaning. They aren't just magic tricks. The blind see – our eyes are opened to see the wonder of God and to see the suffering of others so that we want to do something about it – the deaf hear – our ears are opened to hear the Gospel and then we want to proclaim its power in word and example – water is turned into wine so that when the spirit of celebration and community is threatened by any lack of anything, we see that God provides whatever we need to keep a spirit of praise, worship, celebration and community going. Miracles are the finger pointing at the moon. They point to the kingdom of God – a kingdom of “kindness and compassion rather than force and aggression,” a kingdom where “sick people get well suddenly and inexplicably,” a kingdom where “storms are calmed, insane people become sane, hungry people are fed and dead people rise from their graves” – the kingdom of God.

St. Augustine said that the greatest miracle of all was and is creation, and that's something none of us should forget. In fact, I believe we'd all be more joyful, faithful, hopeful and loving if, every single day, we could look at the miracles of creation and allow wonder and joy to creep into our hearts and minds and souls. When a baby is born, we know a miracle has occurred. When I see an incredible sunset or a redwood tree or a field full of wild flowers I want to stop whatever I'm doing and thank God for the miracle of beauties that I could never come up with in my wildest imagination.

Life itself is an incredible miracle, isn't it? I believe in evolution as a process that God put into order, but even evolution is a miracle of the highest magnitude. But evolution tells us that “for more than 80 percent of life's 3.5-billion-year history, the earth's biota consisted entirely of single celled organisms such as bacteria and algae, so not even the simplest multicellular organisms were inevitable. The evolutionary biologist Stephen Jay Gould has estimated that if the great experiment of life were rerun a million times over, chances are that it would never again give rise to

mammals, let alone mammals intelligent enough to invent ...  
theology and television! “ (Rational Mysticism, 220).

Miracles – everything from healing, exorcism, nature miracles and the everyday miracles surrounding us in creation – it’s such a complicated topic that C.S. Lewis wrote an entire book entitled, “Miracles,” and he wasn’t able to cover every aspect by any means.

And so, in case you’re wondering, I’ll tell you what I believe.

I believe that Jesus messed with all the categories of what’s possible and what’s impossible. I believe that was a huge part of his attraction – he showed limitless authority and power. I believe that, as scripture says, “What is impossible for people is possible with God.” I believe that God is engaged and alive, that God participates and interacts with our world and with history, in ways we can’t always understand. And I believe that people experience miracles – those touches of grace and wonder and improbability that can’t otherwise be explained. I believe that humans are too quick to proclaim miracles, out of a sense of hopefulness and the need to create patterns where maybe no patterns exist, but I also believe that there are **real** signs and wonders that we can’t explain. I don’t

believe that Jonah was coughed up on a beach by a whale – at least not today, I don’t – and I don’t believe God made the sun stop in the sky at Jericho to aid the Israelites in their slaughter of an entire town – but that’s another question I’ll get to when we talk about violence in the Bible. But I do believe that Jesus did things that most people have never been able to do. Perhaps Jesus meant for us all to have the faith and power to do the same things. I don’t know.

As one author put it, “I believe that signs and wonders actually, factually clustered around Jesus and his secret message of the kingdom of God (McLaren, The Secret Message of Jesus, 59).

But I also believe that those who question the miracles as literal events can be equally faithful, equally loving, and equally loved by God for now and eternity.