

Sermon , September 17, 2023

Exodus 14:10-25

“What is a Miracle?”

After a long struggle with Pharaoh, Moses led his people out of Egypt after they had suffered many years of slavery. The quickest route to the promised land would have been through the land of the Philistines, but, as the story goes, the Lord feared that if the Israelites engaged in war with the Philistines they might be tempted to return to Egypt, so he led them in a roundabout way, which would be through the wilderness, and he led them by day with a pillar of cloud, and by night with a pillar of fire. This would be the start of a journey that would take forty years, a time of great struggle and a testing of their faith.

But first they would find themselves trapped on the shores of the Red Sea, with Pharaoh's army close behind. Apparently, Pharaoh had changed his mind about letting them get away. This would begin to shake the faith of the Israelites, and they began to lay blame on Moses. “Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness! What have you done to us, bringing us out of Egypt, they shouted at Moses. And they began to wonder if it would have been better to have stayed and continued to serve in Egypt, than to die in the wilderness. But Moses replies, “ Do not be afraid”. The phrase, “ Do not be afraid”, appears in the Bible 365 times. Perhaps an important reminder for each day of the year.

At this point in the story, you may very well have an image in your head of Charlton Heston standing on a great rock, raising his staff, shouting to his people to behold the power of their God. The waters of the sea begin to split revealing dry land for the Israelites to pass to the other side. After they had reached safety the Egyptian army followed, but the sea closed over them and they were drowned.

Okay, what does this story have to say to us today?

Well, we may not be held captive as the Israelites were by the Egyptians, but we may have problems, struggles, challenges to which we may feel captive to. These circumstances may, in fact, make us feel that we are trapped, much as the Israelites were with their backs to the sea. They may be such that we begin to feel hopeless, we fail to see a way out , or forward, and, as a result, we may begin to lose faith. It is at this point that we need to heed the words of Moses, “ Do not be afraid!” Which I know may be easier said than done, but that is precisely when we must turn to the Lord, to cry out, to pray for help, to pray for the restoration of our faith.

When Mose's people were trapped by the sea, how quickly they forgot the things that God had already done to get them out of Egypt in the first place. Likewise, we may find that when we find ourselves in what appears to be a hopeless situation, we may have forgotten times in the past when we thought all was lost, but then we found, or there appeared, a way out.

We may not have a great staff to raise up as Moses did, but if we can regain the faith that was shaken, that can become our staff, and in that faith see the Lord reveal a new pathway that we can take - a possible solution to our situation. But also keep in mind that crossing over the Red Sea was just the beginning of a long hard journey, and the solution to one problem does not necessarily mean that all of our trials are behind us - but the memory of ways in which God has revealed his grace in the midst of turmoil can help us to continue to move forward. This is why the story of Exodus has always been central to the Jewish faith - the memory of what God did in the past helps to aid in both the present and the future.

Now , you may have noticed that the title of this sermon asks the question, " What is a Miracle?" And, certainly, the story of Exodus, and much of scripture, is filled with miraculous stories. But the meaning of miracles in the time of Moses, and in the time of Jesus, was different than it is now. We, in the modern age, tend to see a miracle as an event that defies Natural Law, but keep in mind that an understanding of Natural Law is a product of the modern age. There was no such understanding back then. For the people of that age a miracle was an event that revealed the presence of God. We need to keep that in mind, that when circumstances change in unexpected ways, we may want to stop and reflect on the possibility that God is in the midst of it, is quite real.

For us, we may think of a miracle as something that goes contrary to the laws of nature. But what we may lose sight of is that the laws of nature are truly a miracle. Emerson put it this way - "All our life is a miracle. We are the greatest wonder of all. I can believe in miracles because I can raise my own arm. I can believe in miracles because I can remember. I can believe in miracles because I can speak and be understood by you. I can believe in a manifestation of power beyond my own because I am such a manifestation. There is not a minute in the twenty-four hours that is not filled with miracles".

In other words, the gift of life and the simple fact that we exist is the greatest miracle of all!  
Amen.

**Let us pray:** Eternal One, we rejoice in this day that you have given us , along with the opportunity to gather, to give thanks for the gift of your Son Jesus, and to form the Body of Christ in the world. We ask for your continued blessing upon our congregation, and for the Church Universal. May your Holy Spirit inspire and guide us so that we may be faithful people ready to bear witness to your love. Throughout the scriptures we find stories of miraculous events that reveal your divine presence and are grateful that the miraculous is not part of a distant past but are possible and present in every minute of every day.

We are also especially thankful for the greatest miracle of all - the gift of life. May we commit to conducting our lives in ways that are pleasing to you and are of benefit for all people and the whole of your Creation. Amen.