

Hillcrest Congregational Church, UCC  
Rev. Dr. Loletta M. Barrett  
What Kind of Miracle?  
February 7, 2010

Ah miracles. Do we believe in them? What are they? Are they things that happen outside of or contrary to laws of nature? Or as St. Augustine said, “only contrary to what we know about nature?” or the known laws of nature.

Are they acts by God or other supernatural beings? Are they "a new regime of physical experience" as stated by some scientist-theologians? Are they dreams, perhaps those that occur after a pepperoni pizza? Are they simply mysteries that were not understood by a superstitious people, but now that we have science, can be explained and replicated?

Or perhaps, as Thomas Paine said, “All the tales of miracles, with which the Old and New Testament are filled, are fit only for impostors to preach and fools to believe.”

We heard examples of miracles from both the Old or Hebrew and New or Greek Testaments. We have one that could be a dream. The second one could be a mystery not understood by the people of the time, but completely explainable and replicable by science.

The call of Isaiah, in the year that King Uzziah died came as a vision. He saw and had a miraculous experience of God on a high throne, with God

so large his robe filled the temple. Seraphs, angels above God with six wings, flying and covering their faces and feet, sang to one another praise of God. The temple shook and was filled with smoke. Pretty vivid and interesting miracle- or was it a dream?

Jesus does a more urbane miracle for the fishermen who were listening to him. We can imagine them sitting mending their nets, discouraged after having been out to sea after a very poor catch. Jesus preaches to them and then realizes that a visual example of what he has been teaching- the abundance of God's love would be more convincing. He tells them to "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch." Simon tells him, "we worked all night with no result, but if you say so..."

The result was so many fish their nets were beginning to break. They had to call in their partners to help and even their boats were so filled with fish they began to sink. An overwhelming treasure of fish where there had been no fish- a miracle! Or was it just that Jesus, the carpenter, somehow knew where the fish would be when the expert fishermen did not?

What is interesting in both cases is reaction of main characters to the miracle they saw: Isaiah, rightfully awed and amazed, knew his inadequacy in the presence of the Holy One. He cries out, "Woe is me! I am lost!" "I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my

eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!” Simon Peter is awed and amazed as well by his miraculous vision. He fell down at Jesus’ knees, saying, “Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!”

Yet the response in both cases is one of welcome and encouragement. Isaiah’s mouth is touched and his whole being is made whole and worthy. Jesus tells Simon, “Do not be afraid.”

Unlike the reluctant prophets we have heard about, when God calls, “Whom shall I send?” Isaiah joyfully responds to his miraculous experience, “Here am I; send me!” When Jesus tells the disciples, “from now on you will be catching people,” they brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him.

So were what Isaiah and the disciples experienced; acts of God, contrary to the laws of nature, amazing, extraordinary or unexpected events, or marvelous examples to be admired?

Ethan Allen said, “In those parts of the world where learning and science has prevailed, miracles have ceased; but in those parts of it as are barbarous and ignorant, miracles are still in vogue.” I think he meant to be derogatory about miracles- only barbarous ignoramuses believe in them. But what if it is actually true in some places that so called “learning” and “science” prevent miracles from being experienced?

What kind of miracle would it take for us to believe in miracles here? Would a vivid vision and call to a prophet in our midst do it? Would a plan for fishing that could result in an abundant catch of people by one of our members do it? We have had both here. Two miracles. Have you heard about them yet?

Ah but most people don't believe in miracles, do we? We have to see it before we can believe it. We need to see results before we can take a risk. Just like the fishermen had to have a miraculous catch before they responded.

Yet when God called Isaiah, Isaiah was not promised immediate results. In fact, God told Isaiah to, "Go and say to the people: 'Keep listening, but do not comprehend; keep looking, but do not understand.'" Isaiah was not called to a big crowd. He was called to a holy seed, a small beginning, that only over time would become a people again.

And those fishermen who became disciples- well yes, they saw the catch, but do you remember what they did with the catch? When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him. They did not take care of the miraculous riches they found in their nets or their boats or their families. They left everything and followed Jesus.

Isaiah and the disciples saw something so awesome, so amazing to them, it transformed their lives. A miracle. Then they responded to their miracle, to their experience of God and God's abundance, and their lives were changed forever.

So what kind of miracle would it take for us? One quote I found said that "Miracles occur naturally as expressions of love. The real miracle is the love that inspires them. In this sense everything that comes from love is a miracle."

So I tell you, a prophet among us had a dream, a vision, of an Easter Sunday service using the best of the gifts, skills and talents skills we have here. The vision was amazing and so reflected who you all are here- artistic, loving, open to new things, and welcoming of people. In the dream you opened your selves up to new things, and a holy seed was planted. People came and enjoyed the experience of God here at Hillcrest.

And the plan for fishing that could result in an abundant catch of people? One of you asked the question: What would happen if Hillcrest began mission work, real mission work, getting up and going to places where people need the love of God, and our love? And what if we invited young people from the community to go with us, young people who are drawn by the opportunity to serve and make a difference in the world?

Could it, would it, result in a miracle catch of new people, of a new vision for the people of Hillcrest?

So are there such a things as miracles? Another quote I found may answer that question. “True miracles are created by people when they use the courage and intelligence that God gave them.”

Perhaps the more important question for us is what kind of miracle would it take? What kind of miracle would make us, afraid, amazed, attracted--to step out, beyond the sturdy walls of our long-held assumptions, the protective walls of our familiar and comfortable sanctuary and traditions?” What kind of miracle would it take for us to be willing to be transformed and to respond to God's call?

Hmmm, I wonder. Let's go create a miracle! Amen.