

Sermon for January 10, 20210
Ginter Park Presbyterian Church
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I want a miracle.

I mean, John the Baptizer baptizes Jesus and the voice of God rings down from above and says "I am well pleased."

I want one of those. A miracle. Right before my eyes. I want to see it and have no doubt about it.

A miracle.

I'm pretty sure I'm not the only one who feels this way. Pretty sure I'm not the only one who experiences envy, one of the Seven Deadly Sins, when reading the Bible. Just pick a spot in the Bible and you're likely to be right in the middle of a miracle.

A bush burns without being consumed.

- The Red Sea parts.
- Someone is healed.
- Someone else is brought back from the dead.
- A few loaves and fishes feed a vast crowd.
- Water is turned to wine.

Miracles. Everywhere.

Ever since I was a kid, I've wished that I could experience a miracle -- just like the folks in the Bible. That would wipe out all my doubt, wouldn't it. That would wipe out my considerable and persistent doubt. That would overcome my skeptical-journalist approach to life and to faith -- wouldn't it.

But the flow of miracles seems to have dried up. Maybe we don't need them. Maybe we don't deserve them.

Or maybe we're just rejecting them.

We want something more spectacular than the ever-more-dazzling special effects served up in the movies. We want something we can't even imagine.

As for the things we can imagine, we set the bar ever higher. After all, science continues to advance. There's so much more that we can explain. I've seen a celestial display of light that fills a great swath of the night sky. Big deal, it's a comet. We knew it was coming and we know when it will be back. That's no miracle. We're too smart.

I've stood in the dark longing for a miracle and at that very moment seen a shooting star streak across half the dome of heaven. A meteor. Space debris. That's no miracle. We're too smart.

In the Bible, God Almighty sends a flood across the land. But now we know -- tectonic plates shift and unleash a tsunami. No miracle. We're too smart.

In the Bible, Joshua fit the battle of Jericho. Trumpets sound and the walls come tumbling down. Maybe good timing and an earthquake? We're way too smart.

In the Bible, Ezekiel saw the wheel, way up in the middle of the air, a wheel in a wheel, way in the middle of the air. (You may have noticed that I get a fair amount of my understanding of the Bible from spirituals.)

Ezekiel's mysterious vision prompted me to recall my days as a sports writer. I'm covering the 1988 Daytona 500, so let me tell this story the way race drivers always do, with their hands. Richard Petty's car makes contact with another car as he comes down the frontstretch, and as the crash unfolds Petty's car turns sideways at 200 miles per hour. It catches the air all wrong. The back of the car lifts and it begins to pirouette madly. The whole car is its own wheel. and its tires are still spinning. A wheel in a wheel. And yes, it is way in the middle of the air. The car disintegrates, but Petty survives. He is bruised and battered, but he doesn't miss even one race.

We're too smart to call that a miracle. It's just a race car's good roll cage, the physics of energy dissipation during the crash -- and a little Petty luck.

We're too smart.

Maybe we need to back away from the scientific and consider something more subtle?
Something more artful than scientific?

When I was in college I joined my family in Florida during Spring Break. The hotel's floor show that week was a self-professed hypnotist with a little three-man band. He had a thick Eastern European accent that made him sound mysterious and brilliant, at least to my country-boy ears. When he called for volunteers during a dinner show, my family urged me to take him up on it. I was one of about 20 who joined him on stage.

He told us we were all slipping into a trance, and then he gave us commands. For instance, he told us to hold one hand aloft -- and that we couldn't pull it down, no matter how hard we tried. I held my hand high and kept it there. I noticed some around me lowering their hands. The hypnotist sent them back to their seats. Aha! I thought. If you cooperate, you got to be part of the show. I cooperated.

Sure enough, I was one of the two he kept on stage. He had us do goofy things that had the crowd laughing. He had me say "I'm Smokey the Bear" every time he said a certain word.

Finally came the big finale, the post-hypnotic suggestion. He put me into one more "deep sleep" and, in his thick accent, told me that when he snapped me out of the trance I would go sit with my family, but when the band played a certain tune, I would come back on stage and sing.

This is where it got tricky. The tune, he said, was Hundok.

What? Hundok? I didn't know any tune called Hundok.

Maybe he saw me furrow my brow. He said it again. And again a third time. I was sweating this. Was I going to ruin his show? At last, the fourth time he named that tune, it sank in. I was to sing "Hound Dog." As in "You Ain't Nothin' But A..."

He woke me up and sent me back to my family's table. They were all looking at me for a sign, but I just smiled blandly. After a few minutes, the band swung into that unforgettable Elvis tune. I trotted up on stage, looked at the band and snapped my fingers a few times, then spun around and belted it out.

"You ain't nothin' but a hound dog, cryin' all the time." And so on.

It was a great performance. At least that's the way I choose to remember it. And the crowd went wild. (Again, my choice of memory.) For the rest of the week I was known in the hotel as the guy who got hypnotized and sang Hound Dog. I didn't tell anybody that I just wasn't really hypnotized, that I just went along with the act. I was too smart to really be hypnotized, right?

But later, much later, I pondered that assumption. Maybe I wasn't all that smart. Maybe the hypnotist wanted me to think I was in control all the time. Maybe he knew I would be afraid if I thought otherwise.

I'm not saying that a miracle took place at that hotel that night. Even though I still feel a special affinity for Elvis, I'm not saying there's anything miraculous involved.

But I am saying that sometimes you don't know what you think you know.

It could be that we're surrounded by miracles, carried along on a tide of miracles. It could be that our stubborn rejection of the very idea of a miracle is little more than a defense mechanism -- to keep us from being afraid.

Maybe, if you're open to the possibility, you can find miracles in a place like Ginter Park Presbyterian Church.

You can listen to the music that Doug Brown and the choir bring to us -- stunning, eclectic, transcendent, spirit-changing. A miracle? It's worth contemplating.

I know we have quite a few visitors today. I welcome you and thank you -- and I urge you to come back and listen to our real preacher, Carla Pratt Keyes. She is really good. She will read a child's Christmas story and reveal its profound complexity. She will confront the thorniest theological question -- and lead on toward clarity. Sooner or later she will draw something from you that you didn't know was there. A miracle? It's worth contemplating.

One Sunday before our worship service I sat alone in this sanctuary. The lights hadn't been turned on yet, and the light from outside was softer than usual. Ruth Ensign's beautiful tapestry -

- the last she made for the church before she died -- had recently been hung at the front. The tapestry had been inspired by Carla's sermon about reflecting God's light. After that sermon we were all given tiny mirrors as reminders.

So Ruth spangled that last tapestry with mirrors to reflect the light. As I looked at it that morning, the tapestry moved, ever so slightly. And in the dim sanctuary what little light there was caught those mirrors in a wave of reflections -- every mirror, it seemed, shone brightly for a moment.

That's no miracle, right? Just happenstance of ventilation. But maybe that's worth contemplating, too.

And what about baptism? We're too smart to consider that a miracle, aren't we? I mean, if we don't get The Big Voice From on High.

And yet... and yet, when you see Carla Pratt Keyes carry a newly baptized baby down the center aisle, as she always does; and when you hear Carla ask God to bless that baby and ask us to embrace the child -- when you experience that, I submit, something changes. You can call it God's presence, an awakening of spirit, love, truth. Something changes.

It's not The Big Voice, but maybe it's a different way for God to convey being "well pleased."

A miracle? It is very much worth contemplating.