

Miracles Big and Small
Sunday July 18, 2010
Winnetka Presbyterian Church
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This summer we're remembering Biblical journeys in the hope that these ancient sojourns will guide us on our own journey to the place God is calling us. We began with the journey of Abraham and Sarah called to a new place where they would be a blessing to the ends of the earth. We then walked with the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt, on a God-led journey through the sea. Next, we experienced the desperate feeling of the Israelites wandering in the wilderness, carried through by the grace of God and the leadership of Moses. We heard the call of Joshua, courageous and faithful, who finally led the people into the Promised Land. Around 1400 BCE, the Twelve Tribes, took several centuries to learn how to follow Yahweh their God. At their request, God granted them a monarchy, which culminated in the great reigns of David and Solomon in the 10th century BCE. These glorious days in the history of Israel, would come to be squandered by lesser rulers in the ensuing centuries. These lesser kings formed alliances with foreign rulers, and relaxed the laws against worshipping foreign gods. Israelites divided their lands into two kingdoms where their power eventually broke down, and the Northern Kingdom of Israel was attacked by the Assyrians in the mid 8th century and the people carried off. Then the Babylonians enter the Southern Kingdom, Judah, in 597 BCE, destroying the Temple in Jerusalem and taking the Israelites into exile in Babylon. Last week we learned about the hope the Prophet Jeremiah spoke about, and the concept of where "home" is, even in exile. This week we look at another prophet, Elijah, who worked during the reign of Ahab before the second destruction of the Temple. Elijah is a miracle worker who we might want to compare to some early Christian Saints. (The Access Bible, NRSV, Oxford Press, pg 414.)

I Kings 17:17-24

After this the son of the woman, the mistress of the house, became ill; his illness was so severe that there was no breath left in him. She then said to Elijah, 'What have you against me, O man of God? You have come to me to bring my sin to remembrance, and to cause the death of my son!' But he said to her, 'Give me your son.' He took him from her bosom, carried him up into the upper chamber where he was lodging, and laid him on his own bed. He cried out to the Lord, 'O Lord my God, have you brought calamity even upon the widow with whom I am staying, by killing her son?' Then he stretched himself upon the child three times, and cried out to the Lord, 'O Lord my God, let this child's life come into him again.' The Lord listened to the voice of Elijah; the life of the child came into him again, and he revived. Elijah took the child, brought him down from the upper chamber into the house, and gave him to his mother; then Elijah said, 'See, your son is alive.' So the woman said to Elijah, 'Now I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the Lord in your mouth is truth.' This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

In our Old Testament or Hebrew Scripture this morning, the Prophet Elijah dramatically appeals to God to "resurrect" a widow's only son. If you remember this amazing story, you'll recall that Elijah, whose name means "Yahweh is (my) God," is employed by God to do some strange and dramatic acts. This story is one of those "miracle" stories,

The widowed woman is in desperate shape. Elijah has been told by God to take up living in her house and has been given a room upstairs. That is odd for a widow to be asked to provide housing for

a strange man. Then suddenly her son becomes ill, so ill that there is no breath left in him. She cries out to Elijah thinking that he has caused the sin of her widowhood to be revealed and the killing her only child is punishment. She probably believed her child's death to be the result of the sin of her widowhood, a typical belief at the time. Quite against custom Elijah blurts out abruptly, "Give me your son." She does, and he carries the boy up into the upper chamber and lays him on his own bed. Crying out to God, and pressing himself on the prostrate limp body, Elijah complains bitterly to the Lord about causing this calamity! Elijah's strange actions suggest that the breath of life went from Elijah's body into the boy's so that he revived.

The point of the story is that this was the Lord's doing, Elijah believed God would respond to his pleas, and the woman trusted Elijah to act on God's behalf. Do you get a sense in this story of the urgent openness to God's intervention? Both Elijah and the widow trusted that God was indeed at hand and would act. God's working through Elijah to bring her son to life caused this unnamed widow to acknowledge that Elijah was indeed a true prophet of God. A main point of the story, Elijah is a true prophet indeed. But strangely, this miracle happened quietly in her home without other witnesses.

In our text, the story clearly states that she is a widow and therefore in great peril by that fact alone. She is in desperate need of food, as no one has come to her aide. Widowhood was an extremely vulnerable state in ancient Israelite society. No provision was made for women whose husbands died before them. Considered inferior to other women, frequently poor, sometimes reduced to servitude, often harshly treated, they had no recourse under the law and were solely dependent on the providence of God and the charity of others. They were allowed to glean the fields at harvest time. But, women had no rights of inheritance, and hard as it is to comprehend, their husbands rarely had a plan to provide for them after their death. Death before old age was a calamity and thought to be a punishment for sin; therefore it was a disgrace to be a widow. Widowhood was used symbolically by the prophets to describe the devastation that would befall Israel and Jerusalem. (WomanWord, Miriam Therese Winter, 1991 pg248-9)

Here in this text we clearly see that God's love includes the down and out. We see a compassionate attitude toward the dead. Death is like being lost and life is like being found. Personal encounters with God can stir the hearts and souls of others down through the centuries. Here we clearly see that common ordinary people, a widow and her only child provided the arena for God to work.

Can miracles, do miracles, happen in our lives? After hearing this story we may very well ask, "But, what about me?" What about my life? Will God be at work in my situation? Let me share with you one story of a modern day quiet miracle. Years ago author, teacher and now United Methodist Bishop of the Alabama Region, William Willimon recalled a Sunday School episode from his childhood. He wrote, "I remember the Sunday, when, as Miss Lewis told us the story about Joseph and his brothers, I finally gave Stanley Starnes what he deserved and pushed him into the radiator at the back of the Sunday School room. Stanley had to be rushed to the ER, and Miss Lewis had the occasion to teach some theology of her own. When the dust had cleared and Stanley had been carried away screaming and bleeding, and I had started to feel deep remorse, Miss Lewis opened her Bible and looked at me and said, "Now, William, you know what Joseph's brothers felt like. They had a little brother like Stanley, and they did to him what you would like to do to Stanley. But God loved them. And God loves you, even if you did push Stanley into the radiator."

Willimon explained that throughout his life, when he finds himself in the midst of his now more subtle adult ways of pushing folks into the radiator, he hears a voice in the darkness..."Now, William, remember, God loves you."

Willimon's Sunday School religion pulls him through those difficult adult times over and over again. That's a miracle, one that quietly happened in a Sunday School class. The teacher took a golden opportunity to guide and instruct Willimon who was, at that moment, open to learning. That miracle would shape and reshape one man's life and no doubt those of the other kids in the room that day that all became open to God's instruction! They would remember that miracle of forgiveness, love and compassion shown by one ordinary woman working for God.

When I think back to my Sunday School days, even though my family went to church every week, I remember very few specific Bible lessons that I was no doubt taught as a child. That is why we teach the children here at WPC using a different method! But I do remember more about my experience as an Assistant Teacher during my high school years, and I now know that the act of teaching helps you, the teacher, to learn. I don't remember the bulletin boards I helped create but I do remember the friendliness and warmth I got from the adult teachers.

I am impressed by all that the Sunday School does accomplish here at Winnetka Pres, for the ways it shows God's love and compassion for everyone so that all the joyful voices and wiggly bodies can incorporate deeply God's love for them and God's plan for their lives as they learn through the cooking surprises that come out of the Garden of "Eaten classroom, or the Thou Art creativity, the Upper Room Storytelling, or Cyberstation computer games. All these workshops are part of our church's attempt to make these children into Christians. We certainly aren't perfect in every attempt. But like the widow in our scripture today, God can and does work miracles through us, when we are open and trust God's encounters. But if we aren't open to God's work, we won't see the small and big miracles that happen all the time.

In the AWARE program, The Adapted Worship And Religious Education Program this church sponsors for children with moderate to severe special needs, miracles happen. One boy, who had never greeted family members he saw daily, said "hi" in the church parking lot as his grandmother brought him to a Saturday class. This boy just said "hi" to another AWARE participant getting out of a car. Neither child was very verbal, yet somehow they had formed a friendship in the classroom, and he was greeting her just like he was greeted at the start of each class. He later went on to touch and say Jesus as his adult mentor guided his hand over a simple cross. He began to interact with other adults and children in the class and then outside of the class. God was at work in this setting, and through this child. That's a small miracle. AWARE Parents have reported that for the first time they are able to pray as a family at the dinner table, after their child has attended the class for a time. At each class, everyone, adult and child quiets down for a brief prayer that I say during the worship time. It seems the children miraculously are able to take that quieting skill home. It is life changing for families. Just like the widow's life was changed in our Biblical story.

But, you ask, what about me and my life? How does God work miracles in my life today? Does God even work miracles any more? How can I see them if they are happening? The miracle accounts diminish at the close of the *New Testament Book of Acts*. Less dramatic accounts have been recorded across the centuries. Less dramatic accounts have been recorded across the centuries. So now you and I need to be really open to God's work in our lives because the miracles are usually less dramatic. But we do have miracles. The Women's book group here at church this spring, read the book *Same kind of different as me*. It's a true account as the book jacket says, of: "A modern -day slave, an international art dealer, and the unlikely woman who bound them together", Ron Hall and Denver

Moore encounter one another at the Union Gospel Mission, a homeless outreach center in the heart of Fort Worth, Texas. Ron Hall and his wife Deborah are led mostly by Deborah, who hopes that doing this work together will restore their failing marriage. The Holy Spirit was a powerful force in this relationship at this point in time, and is at work at the Mission. Deborah, moved by God, boldly signs them up not just to do charity drop off work, but to actually cook and serve the homeless in a bad part of town, at a Homeless Mission. Ron secretly hopes that Deborah will be frightened into doing more mundane charity work. At this point, these two people are more open to God's work through the Holy Spirit than at any other point in their lives. Then, in walks Denver Moore, literally, a man who was born into a sharecropper's life in the south on what he called the Plantation which was owned by The Man. After 10 years in Angola prison for attempting to rob a bus, he ends up on the streets of Fort Worth. After some years, he starts sleeping inside the mission and cleaning up around the site to earn his keep. Now Ron and Denver with the help and prayer of Deborah strike up a partnership. What drives them each is a sense of Call from God, each one interpreted differently, but a call none the less. As their friendship begins, all that Denver asks of Ron is that he promise not to "Catch and Release," meaning "don't start a relationship with me and then release me you are done with this mission charity work." The friendship is meant to go deeper than that, and Denver knows what that commitment means, and requires it of Ron if he is going to 'invest' in him at all. Denver promises the same. How each keeps that promise of trust is unique. Denver, a man who could not read or write had no formal identification, not even a birth certificate. Eventually Ron, who drove a silver-green Infinity Q45, decided to help Denver get a driver's license. But, Denver couldn't study for the written exam so he opted for tutoring. A couple of fellows at the mission worked with him for weeks until he knew all the questions and most of the answers. When he declared himself ready, (Ron) took him down to the DPS (Department of Public Safety). After the oral exam, Denver emerged from the DPS office laughing, raising his hand for a big high five. Next came the driving test. He had driven a tractor and even a couple of cars but had never parallel-parked. (Ron) drove (his) new car, (the Infinity Q45)...out to the big parking lot next to the ...football stadium, and let him slide into the driver's seat. Then for a couple of hours, Denver practiced parallel parking between the phone booth and the concession stand..."Finally, Denver got his license. ..Ron said: "He thanked me again and again, until I finally had to tell him to quit. He took nothing for granted and declared the license one of a great many blessings God had lately sent his way, Deborah and I among them". "In practical terms, Denver's getting his license was a validation: Without one, so many things are out of reach-not only driving, but other things that make a person feel like a person, like just being able to prove who you are." (p 146-7) In a very tangible way, God was working in Denver, Ron and Deborah to transform what needed transforming in their personal and corporate lives.

Three people thrown together by God, like Elijah and the widow and her son, all open to God's working in their midst, not knowing what that would mean. The widow had no status in her community, Denver had no status in any community, and Ron and Deborah were re-establishing their status as a loving couple. Each person had to claim that they were God's person; that God had a claim on their lives, and then the miracles began to happen. Some big miracles like Elijah's, others small in comparison, a driver's license, a saved marriage, a prayer said at the family table. God's actions don't mean we sail through the following days and years untouched by sorrow and travail. Always though, God is with us as we journey.

At WPC, the Sunday School is only one avenue through which God is working. Here we believe that Christians are made, not born; who believe that someone has to get with children for at least 40 minutes on Sunday morning to share the faith. We take the formation of the faith community very seriously. Adults and children learn to care for one another. Faith is given and

received, relationships can be formed and personal experiences of God are told. Faith here is a way of life together, the place where an average Christian can tell another average Christian how to find God. It's the only place where two adults believe that those crazy beings in the 3rd grade class are in reality the children of God!

Quiet miracles happen when the Deacons and friends of the church visit the ill and home-bound bring the light of Christ, tangibly into the room with them. The Finance Committee enables the daily work and ministry of the church to take place. They enable everyone to see the larger mission of this church so that together we share the costs and joys of being the body of Christ in this place. Small and big miracles quietly take place through that committee work and similar dedication.

Unremarkable except for her trust in God, who had sent a strange prophet to her house, the widow is the main figure in the Biblical story, a person who trusted God with her son. The AWARE class has been a tangible place where I truly see God working miracles among the participants. God compassionately worked through Miss Lewis to touch the life of William Willimon. True stories like that of Denver Moore and Ron Hall allow us to glimpse how a personal faith is strengthened to cope with day to day reality. Miracles do happen in our lives today when we acknowledge that God is at work in our lives, we open our eyes of faith, find strength by our Biblical story and join arms with the Christians on the journey with us. Then we are enabled to see and be open to God's working through us and others. Remember Elijah's name means "I belong to God." We belong to God. What a great starting point to see miracles big and small in all the stages of our lives! Thanks be to God.

Let us pray. For all your miracles seen and unseen, in all the stages of our lives, we give you thanks, O God. Amen.