

# "Why Pay Attention to the Bible? Because of idle tales that come true"

Sermon Preached at Foundry United Methodist Church

by Rev. Dean Snyder  
on Sunday, November 17, 2002

Genesis 18:1-15

Luke 24:1-12

Let us pray: Open our hearts Lord that we might receive Christ. Open our eyes that we might see Christ in your word and in the world around us. Open our hands so that we might serve the Christ in all we do. Amen

One of the reasons I pay attention to the Bible is because it is a book of miracles, signs and wonders. From the parting of the Red Sea so that the Israelites might cross from slavery into freedom on dry land, to Jesus walking on water and Jesus turning water into wine, to the resurrection itself, the Bible is riddled with stories of miracles, signs and wonders.

Now, let me confess (this may be a failing of my faith) that I don't take all of the stories of miracles in the Bible literally. I think that they have meaning and significance, but I don't take all of the stories of miracles in the Bible literally. There is a story in the book of Joshua where God stops the sun at its noonday height for 24 hours so that the Israelite armies can vanquish their enemies. Now, I'm not saying that God couldn't have done that - it's just that I doubt it that God chose to do it. What I think probably happened is that the Israelites won a battle they didn't think they'd win and when the soldiers, after the battle, were celebrating, they said it was as though the sun stood still - and we ended up with the miracle story recounted in the book of Joshua.

I think that the story about David and his slingshot is probably a myth. I think, like the story of George Washington and the cherry tree, it expresses a core truth, a core value, but I think it is a legend that developed about David once he became king, just as the story of the cherry tree developed after George became President.

Stories like Jonah and Job, which I love, were written as short literary art forms - morality tales never meant to be taken as literal happenings but instead as wonderful sermons, as wonderful fictions meant to portray a deep and profound truth.

Many of the stories about the nativity of Jesus were written after the cross and resurrection. They are stories that emerged within the life of the church to try to explain how wonderful and special Jesus was rather than a literal, factual, retelling of history.

I don't take (maybe this is a failing of my faith) but I don't take all of the miraculous stories in the Bible literally.

Yet, one of the reasons I pay attention to the Bible is because it is a collection of writings that are riddled with miracles and signs and wonders.

Miracles in the Bible aren't just about God showing off. Miracles in the Bible are signs of God's presence in the world and, if you read the Bible you will see they are signs of God's presence in the world especially with the poor and the weak, the dispossessed, the hungry, the diseased and the underdog.

It was for slaves that God parted the Red Sea so that they could cross onto dry land. Miracles happened for people who are poor and diseased who have no other resources to draw upon. When Jesus healed people, it was almost always the outcast, the poor, the isolated and the hopeless - the least, the last and the lost.

Luke's account of the resurrection is particularly interesting. The male disciples -- did you notice? - refused to believe it. I mean the male disciples were trying to deal with the fallout of Jesus' crucifixion. They were worried about their failed movement and their safety.

When the women followers of Jesus returned from the empty tomb with a report of having had conversations with angels who told them Jesus was risen, these fine men of the world reacted by saying: That's just an idle tale told by *those women*. From the very beginning, the men of the world reacted in a sort of patriarchal, sexist, superior way, doubting that a miracle could have happened.

In the Bible, miracles, signs and wonders belong to the poor and to the weak and those who seem to have no hope. Miracles and signs and wonders in the Bible again and again are for slaves, and for women and children.

Actually, in the Bible, kings and generals don't like to hear about miracles a whole lot. If you've got all of the chariots, if you've got all of the troops, if you've got all of the spears, if you've got all of the bows and arrows, you don't want to hear about someone who can make the walls of Jericho come tumbling down just by playing trumpets!

Miracles, signs and wonders in the Bible are evidence of God's presence with those who particularly need the presence of God.

In the neighborhood meetings that Jane and I have been doing (we've had 35 of them and they've been great) one of the questions I've asked is: If there were one thing about Foundry that you could change, what would it be? In a number of the meetings - in quite a few of the meetings, actually - one of the things people have said - and they tried to say it ever so gently to me, and ever so politely - they said, well maybe sometimes, occasionally, once in a while, some of our services may run a little too long. And ever so carefully, people said to me that occasionally some of my sermons may be a little long. One person told me that he has often attended entire masses that are shorter than my sermons!

Well, you all have no idea, really, how sympathetic I am. I spent the last seven years, when I was on the conference staff, sitting in a pew. When a service would get too long, I'd say to Jane, "I'm leaving; I'm going to go get a cup of tea," and she'd say, "You will not! You will not leave til it's over."

There were Sunday's when I'd say to Jane, "I'm going to tell the preacher that we come back most Sundays. He doesn't have to try to tell us everything he knows in one sermon!" So, you have no idea how sympathetic I really am.

But I was at a WIN (Washington Interfaith Network) clergy meeting. One of the clergy was doing a Bible Study for us, and during the course of the Bible Study, he began to talk about this very issue. He happens to be Hispanic and he was talking about the difference between the first church that he served and the church that he serves now. He said that the first church that he served was in a poor Hispanic, working class neighborhood. He said that he had a problem getting those folk to go home on Sundays. They would have a time in their service when they shared joys and concerns, and they would talk about how they saw God at work in people's lives. They shared prayer concerns. They would just go on and on. And then, after the service, they would hang around and drink coffee and just talk and talk and talk. He said he wanted to lock up the church and go home and watch football, but he couldn't get rid of them.

Now, he says he is serving an affluent and powerful congregation. He says he can't get his parishioners now

to stay longer than 50 minutes in church on Sunday morning. They just want a quick homily, communion and then to get out of there, he said.

In his old church of poor people they received the Gospel as wonderful news, he said. They wanted to stay and celebrate it all day. "I think my folk now come to church and they are willing to put in 45 minutes or so just in case God is right, but the Gospel isn't really good news to them," he said. What is good news to them is their bank account and their retirement policies and their health insurance - because that's really what we seem to trust in, he said.

I believe in miracles and signs and wonders because I believe that it is not always the biggest army that wins. It's not always the experts that are right. It's not always the powerful who, in the final analysis, get our way.

I believe in miracles, signs and wonders because I believe that disease is not always stronger than life. Greed is not stronger always than right. Deceit does not always beat integrity. Armies aren't more powerful than truth.

I believe in miracles, signs and wonders because they belong to slaves and to women, and, I believe that at the end of the history it will have been the slaves and the women who will have been most often right.

I usually don't use analogies in sermons, but I want to use one this morning. On Friday night, I was standing outside of the church waiting for Jane to pick me up to go to a meeting. I was standing outside at the corner waiting for her when I saw a man dressed a bit shabbily walk very quickly onto our lawn and walk back and forth across the lawn. I watched him closely. He seemed to be hyperactive and I was a little concerned about what he was doing. He finally emerged from the bushes on the lawn with his hands full of trash.

I don't think he recognized me or knew who I was, but he noticed - I think - that I had been watching him closely, so as he dumped the trash in the trash bin outside, he said to me, "It's trash." I said to him, "That's a very nice thing for you to have done that."

He said to me, "You see this shirt? I got this shirt in this church this morning - a clean shirt."

"And I got these pants in that church this morning," he said. And then he said, "They take care of us, so we take care of them."

He was talking about our Friday walk-in mission. But, what I particularly noticed was that he didn't say, *I take care of them*. He said, "We take care of them." I think that there is a whole army of people in this city who have been touched by the missions of this church. They may not be here, always, on Sunday morning, but they take care of us. And, occasionally - only very occasionally because they are so invisible - only very occasionally like on Friday night - do we get a glimpse of them.

I think that's what miracles and signs and wonders are like. God and God's armies take care of us especially when we are weak and powerless and diseased and in need. But only very rarely do we catch a glimpse of that.

So, do you believe in miracles? From time to time people have asked me if I believe in miracles and, were it not flippant, I would answer the way Mark Twain answered when someone asked him if he believed in infant baptism. He said, "Believe in it? Heck, I've seen it!"

Do I believe in miracles? Well, you know, so far at least, every time I've cut myself, I've healed. And every time I've got a flu or a cold, my body has healed. And I go to bed at night full of germs and toxins, and

wake up in the morning purified. And isn't that a miracle?

I've sat with people as they've prepared to go into surgery and five hours later they come out with heart bypass surgery and a new lease on life. Isn't that a miracle?

My brother Nevin, who is 74, is going into the hospital this week to have heart bypass surgery. He's already had an angioplasty, and a balloon angioplasty, and stenting. Now he's going to have bypass surgery. He often talks about the fact that in 1968 our father died at 64 years of age from the same condition that he's being treated for now. He comments that had it not been for the advances in cardiology and heart surgery over these years he would probably be dead today. Isn't that a miracle?

I've had parishioners who have had their cancers go into remission. Isn't that a miracle?

I've had parishioners with conditions and diseases that have seemed to cure themselves in a way that doctors don't understand - and, isn't that a miracle?

And I have had parishioners who have shown great faith and determination and a will to live and a lust for life in the midst of disease who didn't get better - and, isn't that a miracle?

And, I have stood by hospital beds where people have offered their spirit to God and breathed their last breath, in the faith, and, isn't that a miracle?

I believe the Bible not because I believe every story of miracles and signs and wonders that it tells. But I believe the Bible because it is impossible for me to conceive of a world without miracles and signs and wonders. I want to be with the women who came back from the tomb with stories about angels and resurrections - the women whom the men of the world laughed at because of their idle tales. I want to be with an old woman who laughs.