

Sermon: Sunday, February 4th, 2018
'Living Miracles'

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'Miracle': (Definition #1 in Webster's Dictionary)

An extremely outstanding or unusual event, thing, or accomplishment. i.e. "The bridge is a miracle of engineering."

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When I was a child, one of our extra special Saturday treats was to go to (what was then) the Edmonton Space and Science Centre, now the Telus World of Science. They had a piece of the moon. Literally, a chunk of the moon, mounted in a fancy glass case which— I'm sure — was alarmed to the hilt. I remember being in total awe of this specimen, amazed that this piece of rough, grey rock came from the surface of another planet.

Another thing I loved at the Space and Science Centre were the science demonstrations. I would watch in awe as the demonstrators did amazing things with electricity, chemistry and — my favourite — liquid nitrogen. Nitrogen is a clear, colourless liquid at -196C. When the demonstrator put an air-filled balloon into liquid nitrogen, it came out all shrivelled up, as if it had been popped. But if the demonstrator blew on it, the balloon would miraculously re-inflate, seemingly unscathed.

As a kid, I was in total awe. It seemed like magic. As I got older, I came to understand that this actually wasn't magic. It was science. For example, the balloon deflates in liquid nitrogen because the air molecules effectively stop moving. When the balloon warmed up, the air molecules started moving again, bouncing around and filling up the vacant space inside the balloon.

Learning this however, wasn't like someone giving away how a card trick or a magic trick worked. On the contrary, it made it all the more awesome (in both senses of the word). The

childlike wonder that leads to exploration and then to thrill of discovery is at the heart of my own love of science. It is how I better understand the world in all of its wondrous complexity.

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'Miracle': (Definition #2 in Webster's Dictionary)

An extraordinary event manifesting divine intervention in human affairs. i.e. "The healing miracles described in the Gospels."

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In the reading from the Gospel of Mark today, we hear about Jesus healing Simon Peter's mother-in-law. Jesus performs many miracles during his ministry on Earth, including walking on water, controlling the weather, turning water into wine, performing exorcisms and causing food to miraculously multiply. However, the most common type of miracle in all four of the Gospels is healing, including resuscitation from the dead. Perhaps the most well-known of these stories are when Jesus restores sight to blind men, heals lepers, heals a deaf mute by touching his tongue and ears, and heals a woman with a bleeding disease who had touched his cloak. Jesus also famously raised Lazarus, as well as three others, from the dead.

One of the things that is perhaps lost in the two thousand years since these stories were written is the appreciation of the impact these healing events would have had. Jesus did not just restore these people to health so that they could be comfortable. He literally gave them back their lives. In Jesus' day, before the advent of social security nets, a disability like blindness or deafness meant a person could not work. If they didn't have a family to care for them, they were often left to beg and starve on the streets. Back then, leprosy, a bacterial disease, was rampant. Because of its contagious nature, it carried strong social stigmas. Without a known cure, lepers too were denigrated to the forgotten fringes of society. A Jewish woman with a bleeding disease would be ostracized because of the strict ritual rites of purification. And, as far as we know, Lazarus of Bethany was the only man in his family. Without him, his two unmarried sisters, Mary and Martha, would likely have been left destitute.

Jesus didn't just heal these people in body. He healed them in spirit and in mind, and he gave them back their lives.

Miracles indeed.

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Where do the first and the second definition of 'miracle' meet?

In our post-modern society, we are conditioned to be sceptical. "Don't believe everything you see on the Internet." "Is this 'fake news?'" "Just because Gwyneth Paltrow says it will make you lose weight, don't mean it will...". Before we invest in an idea - academically, intellectually or emotionally - we need to know that it is based on truth. We need evidence. We need data, stats, testimonials and references.

Can we shoehorn the idea of miracles, like those Jesus performed, into our modern world?

In December 2016, National Geographic magazine ran an article entitled 'The Healing Power of Faith'. The title is slightly misleading, as the piece actually deals with the placebo effect, although there were many links to faith and prayer. One story in the article is of a man named Mike Pauletich, who made a miraculous recovery from Parkinson's disease after taking part in an experimental trial surgery. After his recovery, it was discovered that Pauletich had not received the trial treatment at all. He had been part of the control group; the patients selected to receive a placebo to ensure the effect of the treatment was not due to other factors. His faith in the trial had literally made him well. Although the evidence is anecdotal, thousands of people who make religious pilgrimages in search of healing each year find that their faith in God has the power to make them well.

To Mike Pauletich, his healing was a miracle that gave him his life back, regardless of whether it could be explained by modern medicine or not. Similarly, to the people Jesus healed, the miracle

may have seemed like the return of their lives and livelihoods, rather than the actual healing event. Miracles don't have to be things we can't explain.

As Albert Einstein once said, *"There are only two ways to live your life: as though nothing is a miracle, or as though everything is a miracle."*

And I would argue that everything *is* a miracle. One thing my work has given me is profound insight into the scope and scale and complexity of life on Earth. The wonder of creation is not only in the individual entities – the birds and the insects and the trees - but in the way life operates. The relationships and interactions that uphold the delicate balance of life are unbelievably intricate. Salmon can relocate the spawning pond in which they were born after a decade at sea. DNA can replicate hundreds of times a day with precision humans could only achieve with a supercomputer. The arctic tern, weighing less than a bar of soap, flies 71 000 km every year, between Greenland to Antarctica. These are only a few examples of millions.

We truly live in a miraculous world. But we do not only live in a world of miracles. We are ourselves living miracles. In his novel, 'A Short History of Nearly Everything', author Bill Bryson writes:

"Consider the fact that for 3.8 billion years, a period of time older than the Earth's mountains and rivers and oceans, every one of your forebears on both sides has been attractive enough to find a mate, healthy enough to reproduce, and sufficiently blessed by fate and circumstances to live long enough to do so. Not one of your pertinent ancestors was squashed, devoured, drowned, starved, stranded, stuck fast, untimely wounded, or otherwise deflected from its life's quest of delivering a tiny charge of genetic material to the right partner at the right moment in order to perpetuate the only possible sequence of hereditary combinations that could result -- eventually, astoundingly, and all too briefly -- in you."

If you need a reason to feel awe, or to find evidence for miracles, you need only consider the fact that you exist. You are here today, one of seven and a half billion people, one of eighty-two million species on Earth, on a tiny blue planet in a galaxy that contains a hundred million stars.

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Miracles happen each and every day. Some are amazing and inexplicable, like the miracles of Jesus' healing. Some are small and explainable, like a magically re-inflating balloon or a floating paperclip. Just as those science demonstrations at the Space and Science Centre taught me to love the intricacies of the natural world, so understanding the miracles of Creation help me to love and understand the nature of God.

To close, I would like to leave you with a poem I wrote as a young adult, while pondering the concept of being a living miracle. It is called 'The Dream Pool'.

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The Dream Pool

By Emily Bamforth

“A fisherman stood on a lonely pier at the very edge of time
And into the ageless pool below he cast his lonely line.
Below him in the waters swarmed those things that might be to come
The chance of being caught by him outnumbered twelve thousand to one.

But those chosen moments were drawn to his hook, they swallowed up his bait
And the fisherman pulled them into life, caught up in his net called Fate.
When dusk falls and day is done, his reward is you and me
We are the products of his catch; of things that were chosen to be.

Sand grains in the desert, the stars in the sky, every hair on every head;
The number of things that could've been, that might've happened instead.
Every one of us is more precious than gold, rarer than any exquisite gem
For the beautiful moments that fashion our lives will never be caught again.”

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Thanks be to God.