

"THREE MIRACLES OF JESUS:

I. The Day That Jesus Walked On Water!"

Text: "But immediately he spoke to them, saying,
'Take heart, have no fear; it is I.'"

Matthew 14:27

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The outline and organization of this little three part sermon series in Lent is simple: 1) First, I want to talk to you about miracles in general, but Biblical miracles in particular. 2) Second, we will touch on what the miracles mean in the Bible and whether we are required to believe in them as literal events or symbolic. 3) Third, we will take a look at how the three miracles in the series can be helpful in the daily round of things as we seek to live our Christian lives.

So that we are all on the same page, let me define what I mean by "miracle." Most of us can point to miraculous events; some can even relate a miracle or two that we know of personally. Today however we are looking primarily in the Bible where "Miracles are wonders and works to show the power of God. A miracle occurs outside the laws of nature as we know them. Biblical miracles are events in the external world, but they are caused by the immediate power of and intervention of The Creator." (The Westminster Dictionary of The Bible, p. 622)

Curiously, the miracles of the Bible are confined almost exclusively to just four periods in Biblical History: 1) One, during the Exodus and the escape from Egypt, the opening of the Red Sea, as well as those miraculous events out in the Sinai Desert- like the provision of manna and quails from heaven and water from the rocks, et al.

2) The second occurrence of miracles came during the life-death struggle for the survival of the true religion in the time of Elijah and Elisha, say 850 B.C. The widow's son was raised from the dead. How the ravens fed Elijah in the wilderness or the meal and oil which lasted until the famine was over, or a most unusual miracle, the ax which floated on the water.

3). Thirdly they came during the Exile with the deliverance of Daniel, Shadrack and his friends, et al.

4) Fourth and last, they obviously arise again at the time Jesus, to validate his life and ministry. His miraculous power continued with the immediate disciples who were able to heal the sick and cause a crippled man to rise up and walk.

There are thirty-seven miracles of Jesus recorded in the Gospels. By the way only one, other than the resurrection of Jesus, is recorded in all four Gospels: The feeding of the 5000.

Eighteen miracles are told in only one of the Gospels. Six are told in two. An even dozen are related in three of the Gospels.

That number of thirty-seven does not include other miraculous events, such as the Nativity, the Virgin birth, the Star in the sky, the Angels in the field; nor the descent of the dove and the heavenly voice at his baptism, nor the Transfiguration, the Ascension or the post resurrection miracles where Jesus appears and disappears at will. Throughout the Bible, miracles are presented as a means by which God discloses and fulfills his purpose in the world, especially on behalf of his people. After all, the Bible is a book about what God can do for man.

C.S. Mann began his commentary on "The Gospel according To Mark" with a general introduction of a good way to view the Gospel miracles. He helps to set the stage for our sermon. Professor Mann writes: "The commentator on the Gospels must come to terms not only with the believing minds of those who recorded them in the Scriptures. Those around Jesus never disputed the reality of his miracles. But also there was a general belief in supernatural causation in the First Century." It was not uncommon for the gods of all nations, from the Pantheon on Mount Olympus to Rome to Babylonia, to show themselves in supernatural and miraculous ways. "At the time immediate causes were not considered as important as the remote, divine causes." (C.S. Mann, Commentary on Mark, p. 139)

This is to say that questioning minds in the modern world tend to begin their approach to miracles by asking whether they are true. "Did the cripple actually rise up and walk?" "Did the demons which made the man crazy actually rush out of his body and throw themselves down over a cliff?" Or the one I find the most difficult: "Did the bodies of those who had fallen asleep in the local cemeteries actually rise up out of their graves at the time of the crucifixion and appear to many in the Holy City?" (Matthew 27:52-53)

I have often been asked whether these occurrences are to be taken literally; or can they be symbolic messages to confirm the power of Jesus while he was alive on earth. In the case of our Scripture Lesson for this morning we could ask if Jesus actually walked on the top of the troubled waves and did he calm the raging storm? How did he do it, and more importantly why? Are we to be impressed that Jesus shouted at the wind and the storm and their fury?

What do I do with those questions which will not go away? Some of you do not have these questions I know. But many ask if it essential to believe all the miracles in order to be a good and faithful Christian? What if I have doubts? Should I just ignore them and believe?

My answer is usually "No, you are allowed to question and to wonder." In my opinion, God does not require us to believe all of the Biblical miracles. You are, as the Bible says, entitled to test all things; but it does add: "Hold fast to what is true." You have to be careful. Once you start deciding which Biblical stories are true and which are symbolic, where do you stop? It sounds innocent enough to ask whether the Blind Man's eyes were opened as a symbolic truth for the spiritual blindness of the world; or to note that the Virgin Birth of Jesus is surprisingly similar to countless other immaculate conceptions among the ancient gods and goddesses. But before long you come to the Resurrection of Jesus, and while some good and wholesome folk believe that is also to be taken more like a risen spirit than a real life body, still without a Resurrected Jesus the whole Gospel message is a sham, and as Paul says bluntly, "If the resurrection is not true, if we have hope in this life only, then we among all people are to be most pitied". (I Corinthians 15: 12-19)

The Gospels suggest that our modern concerns are misplaced. We think too highly of ourselves and our ability to discern the will and ways of God. And the faith we need to embrace an openness to all that God is capable of doing gets lost along the way. Which is a long way of saying that God's ways are different from our ways.

It might seem reasonable to say that you do not have to believe that Jesus walked on water in order to acknowledge him as your personal savior. You can still share his love without believing in the Virgin Birth. But, if you skirt around those miracles, you have to quit dodging the question when it comes the miracles of the Incarnation and the Resurrection. Without them, the whole of our theology crumbles and falls to the earth. When someone asks you what criteria you use to accept or reject the miracles you have to have an answer. Is it just your opinion? Does it not fit with what you think is reasonable? Are we the final judge? Is each of us free to pick and choose what is palatable to us in the Bible, and then discard everything which does not measure up to our personal standards? The alternative is to believe that the New Testament is a pack of lies. I doubt that the most of us would want that kind of responsibility. End of Introduction.

Today's miracle sermon is "When Jesus Walked On Water." There are six occurrences in the Gospels where Jesus showed his power over nature on the sea. I should alert you that some persnickety scholars maintain all six are variations of the same incident. And some say that incident probably took place following the resurrection. There are ways to respond to that but we do not have the time and this is not the place.

The six stories divide evenly. In the first three Jesus calmed the sea and rescued his disciples. The second triad tells of the time when Jesus walked on the water, a spectacular miracle to be sure. While each of these renditions of the story has some personal details and individual messages, they all join hands in showing how the wind and the waves were at the beck and call of our Lord. These miracles do not prove that Jesus Christ is the Son of God; but if you had been there and saw him walking on the water in the middle of a storm, there would be little doubt in your mind as to who rules the world.

We shall not analyze all six in detail, but I will list all of the references in the printed copy of the sermon on the web site so that those of you who want to look further will have a ready layout for your further study. The three times where Jesus calmed the sea and the storm are told in the Gospel of Matthew 8:23-26; in Mark 4:35-41, and again in Luke 8:22-25.

The second set of stories where Jesus walks on water are found in Matthew 14:22-27, Mark 6:45-52, and John 6:16-21. It is curious that John shares this incident with the synoptic writers. It is most unusual for John to follow the order of the other three Gospel writers. It is also peculiar that St. Luke does not mention that Jesus walked on the sea. No one knows why. He surely knew about it and he could have easily have included when he told how Jesus calmed the troubled waters.

Anyway, the miracle of walking on the water follows the miracle of The Feeding of the Five Thousand. After the crowd was fed, Jesus was exhausted and he wanted to be alone. Even prior to the Feeding Miracle he intended to go off around the lake to be alone for a while; but the crowds rushed around to find him. He seldom got to be alone. Everywhere he went, they followed him. You know how he must have felt: the pressure of events keeps rapping at your door, as a pesky woodpecker used to knock on the tree in your backyard.

When evening came, it says that Jesus sent the disciples away. Actually it says that he "made them get into the boat" to cross the Sea of Galilee. Then, he went up on the hillside to be alone for awhile and to pray. I have been up there in those hills on a visit to Palestine. It is peaceful, near where it is believed Jesus first delivered the Sermon on the Mount.

So evening grew on into dark. The disciples were out on the sea about four furlongs away, but before they knew it, a sudden storm came up. Storms often came up on that sea. Their boat was swamped and they could not make any headway. In the middle of their terror, with the storm raging and the waves rising, to make matters worse, there came the appearance of a man walking on the water towards them. Oh dear. It was Jesus, but like Mary at the tomb, they did not know that it was Jesus. The Bible says that they thought it was a ghost, a not uncommon assumption, even for experienced fishermen. A troubled sea in the middle of the night can conjure up all sorts of fears and visions. Naturally, they were terrified. Here was a phantom, spectral figure strolling along the top of the pounding waves and it scared them to death. My guess is that it would scare you also. I know what it would do to me. I have a low tolerance of darkness and fear.

Whatever, while the storms hammered away at their little boat, they screamed out for help, and it says he took pity on them. Well, maybe not pity, as we use the word. He reassured them and said: "Take heart. Have no fear. It is I." I have come to help you out of this danger.

Then it says, he climbed into the boat and the winds ceased. In the other set of stories he calmed the seas while he was already with them inside the boat; in one case, he was asleep in the bow (Luke.) Then "He commanded the sea to be still." And it obeyed. The story ends with "They were utterly astounded and asked 'Who is this that even the winds and waves obey him?'"

John adds an adorable little ending. He writes that when Jesus got into the boat, he and the twelve other passengers were teleported immediately to shore. Not only did he calm the sea, he whisked them instantly out of danger and over to the other side. "O.K men, the miracle is over. Let's go home." I am not sure why he added it, but it is a good symbol of what will

happen when you and I come to the end of the road: Jesus miraculously will transport us to the other side.

Matthew adds his own touching sequel to the story. Only Matthew includes it. When the Lord was still coming to them on the water, Simon Peter called out – remember they were still not sure who it was - “Lord, if it is you, bid me to come out on the water to meet you!” Jesus said, “OK, Peter, come on out!” So, Peter, being brave (at times anyway) got out of the boat and began to walk on the water, too. “Cruising down the river on a Sunday afternoon.” That was great. But he soon lost his concentration and when he turned his attention to the wind and the waves, he became afraid again. He took his eyes off Jesus and he lost his confidence, and when the fears returned, predictably, he sank right down into the water.

As he sank, Peter cried out, “Lord, save me.” A short prayer, but that was all the prayer he needed. You might not know the long and fancy prayers from the Episcopal Prayer Book beautiful and lovely as they are, but you can learn this little three-worded one, easy as pie. “Lord, save me.” That is the only prayer you ever need when you are in trouble. “Lord, save me.” And he did.

That is the miracle; now turn you attention with me to the storms of life which greet us day by day and see how the Biblical message applies to us. Storms come from every which way, often suddenly and without warning. Sometimes –to be honest- they come at our own bidding. Often when you look at the storm and ask what happened, all you can honestly say is: “I caused it. I was stupid.” You can hardly blame God if your life breaks down because you have broken down your life. If you refuse to take care of yourself, you can hardly blame the Lord when your body breaks down and rebels. Ignore your family, put you personal pleasures above your spouse or children, and if your family begins to waiver and waste away, you can hardly blame the Lord. If you compromise and cut corners for long enough, as so many have in our greed filled world of today have done, you can hardly blame the Lord for what comes next. As the Bible says “Your sin will find you out!” It will! It did! It has!

Sometimes we do not take the necessary precautions, but not always. At other times, troubles come through no fault of your own, no matter what you do. When they do, don't blame yourself. In this instance, the disciples had done nothing wrong. Remember it says

that Jesus made them get into the boat, not that he was heading them for trouble on the stormy seas; he just wanted to be alone.

The author of Ecclesiastes says, "Time and Chance happen to them all." They do. Some people take excellent care of themselves and still face the most worrisome sorts of illnesses and accidents and family situations. Some parents are close to perfect in their primary concern for their home and children, and yet for a variety of reasons, one or more of the children does not have the innate capabilities or the following will to grow up according to the rules. You know what I mean. It is sad; but bad things do happen to good people. Time and chance happen to them all.

For example: two friends of mine, about my age, one in the State of Washington and one in Pennsylvania, in separate incidents –three thousand miles apart- both fell on the ice on the same day about a month or so ago. The one hit his head on the pavement so hard he never recovered. The other got up, brushed himself off and walked away. In fact he flew back to attend the funeral of our mutual friend. When he got home he wrote to me, his ministerial friend, to ask me why it happened that way: that Alan was taken away and he was spared. Did God do it on purpose? I still haven't answered, but I keep rumbling around with Time and Chance happens to them all.

Do you have your sermon yet, if your neighbor should ask you what the sermon was about, are you ready with an answer? Or, are you still scrambling around in all these scattered ramblings, wondering what the real point is? Let me settle it in for you, in three small points:

1. One, when the winds and storms are raging, contrary to the peaceful way we want to live our mortal lives, anchor your vision and your hopes on Jesus. When the storms of life are raging, the old hymn says, stand by me. At such times, no one should be alone. Even when you are all worn out and frightened to death, and your boat is taking on water and the rudder is broken and the mainsail snapped in two, and you look out at the waves and no one seems to be there to help you. Keep on looking and you will see the form of a man walking on the water. You won't believe it either. But then, just close your eyes and listen for his voice. It will be the Lord telling you not to be afraid; it will only last a little longer. I am coming to

rescue you. And listen to what might be the most beautiful words in all the Bible: "Take heart, have no fear, it is I." It is I."

2. Two: Try to remember that the Lord will never take his eyes off of you. Sometimes it seems so. But at the moment of your baptism, as it was with the Baptism of Jesus at the Jordan River when a dove came down from heaven and alighted on his shoulder – the dove being a sign of peace and of the presence of the Holy Spirit - once the Spirit lands on you, once you give your life to Jesus Christ, he will never go away. You and I are fragile and mortal. Fear is part and parcel of our daily rounds. We are likely to forget. In the storm it is easy enough to forget who you are and to whom you first belong. You are not really dust and to dust you will not return. That was never spoken of the soul. But the Lord will not forget. You are a child of God, made in His image and likeness, one of his own, and you are precious in his sight.

You are unique and precious and final. You are you. He will never fail you nor forsake you. He is always with you. That does not mean he is riding co-pilot in the right seat every moment of your journey, with his hand on your controls. Some things you need to do alone. After all he gave you freedom to act, and as they found out in Eden, even the freedom to fail and make a mess of it. Some challenges you have to face all by yourself. The lonely valley is an individual journey. They had to go across the sea without him.

But he was watching from up on the hillside, even though he was in deep and fervent prayer. Just as a mother keeps one ear on the children even when she is asleep, Jesus kept an open eye on them to make sure they were OK. I picture him looking up every now and then to see how it was going out on the lake. He never took his eyes off them, not for very long. Why he left them to face the storm alone, I don't know. He could have prevented it. But, he had not forgotten them and he will not forget you either, or me. The Lord will never take his eyes off of you. Even when we forget, he remembers.

3. Third and last...resurrect in you mind as we close, that little addendum to the miracle which Matthew alone included, of how Peter got out and walked on the water too. Big old brash rambunctious Simon Peter was brave enough to call out to the vision on the water "Lord, if it is you, bid me to come out and walk with you on the water." Jesus replied, "It is I Simon, come on out." And Simon Peter did, just as he did that post Easter morning on the Sea of

Galilee, he leapt on or into the water and began to cruise along. And presto, there he was, walking on the water. While he kept his eyes on Jesus he was able to do it. "Hey, look at me! I'm a Miracle in progress!"

But then, when he realized where he was and what he was doing, he let his fears get hold of him. And worst of all, it says, "He took his eyes off of Jesus." When he did that, guess what, of course, he sank into the sea. His walking on the water days were over. As he was sinking he cried out again "Lord save me." That short sweet little prayer is all you need when you are in trouble – no fancy liturgical gem, just "Lord, save me." And Jesus did. He reached out and took hold of Peter's hand and lifted him up into the boat. "It's alright Simon. I'm still here. What happened to your faith? Why did you take your eyes off of me and began to believe in the storm again?"

Peter said, "I don't know. I cannot always live up to the man I want to be. Sometimes my faith goes into a slump. I am sorry I disappointed you." Jesus said "Don't worry Simon. I know. I have watched you every day of your life – from the moment you were a new born infant until now. It's OK. Come on now, just keep your eyes on me, and together we can make it." For now and forever more. Amen.