

Today we are talking about miracles and what are we to make of them—**that's** what we are talking about today. Let us pray:

A mother sits in a darkened hallway outside the PICU. She reads from the Bible the stories of Jesus healing others, healing children. She finds great comfort in those stories. And so she prays. She prays that she and her husband can have a miracle, like in the Bible. They pray that their child will be healed. The lights blip and the monitors beep as the parents pray for a miracle.

Miracles—they are all through the Bible, the stories of the church and in particular the gospels, all through the stories of Jesus. Some people are excited by miracles—they are the stuff of faith. Others find miracles problematic, unscientific and unbelievable.

People in the first group take great comfort in miracles. Miracles are a source of great inspiration. They love sharing stories of miracles, both biblical and personal. There is a problem with miracles. They can stir up hopes that are never realized—worse yet, hopes that can raise expectations unreasonably high and, when **those expectations aren't realized**, people can be crushed. There is the story of Jesus raising a little girl from the dead.

Parents, faithful, heartbroken parents of sick and dying children, have prayed and pleaded for a miracle but instead have grieved the loss of those children. They did not get their miracle. Why not? Why **didn't God heal their children or raise their children from the dead?**

Or what do you tell starving people about the miracle of the loaves and the fishes? When Jesus could feed thousands from just a few fish a couple of loaves of bread, why do 21,000 people die every day from hunger and hunger-related causes? How many have starved to death while praying for a miracle and the miracle never came, even when Jesus said we his followers would do greater things than him?

If God could change it all with **a snap of God's fingers or a wave of God's hand, and doesn't? Doesn't that make the suffering so much worse?** And as if that **doesn't make the suffering bad enough, there are people who will blame the victim for their own suffering—it's their own fault** for not having enough faith.

On the other hand, if you are skeptical of miracles, you avoid those problems, but invite others. If we eliminate the miracles, the magic, we can end up in what Brian McLaren calls **"a reduced world, a disenchanting, mechanistic world where the impossible is always and forever impossible."** You become a Deist—where God is a clockmaker who set the world in motion and is no longer involved.

When the miracles are reduced to just silly stories, make-believe, or even deceitful propaganda, we reduce hope and meaning and the chance for change.

Two extremes—either of which can crush the spirit and make the gospel less than it is. But there is another way—what happens to us when we imagine miracles happening? What if the miracle stories are intended to expand our mind, expand our possibilities? What if the miracle stories are supposed to shake up our expectations and inspire us to try to do great and wondrous things?

Perhaps by getting us to **consider impossibilities, these stories “stretch our imaginations” so we can see ourselves as part of God’s work and join in building God’s kingdom—new possibilities for God’s new world.**

With this perspective, let’s look at two of Jesus’ miracles: turning water into wine and casting out demons.

First, what is traditionally considered Jesus first miracle—turning water into wine. Jesus is at a wedding. It seems like it must be the wedding of a family friend **because Jesus’ mother is also there.** The wedding runs out of wine—Mary says to Jesus, “they have no wine.”

Jesus responds, “woman, what is this to me? My time has not yet come.” Nevertheless, Mary tells the servants to do whatever Jesus says. Jesus relents.

What Jesus tells them to do is to take 6 water vessels, ones used for ritual cleaning, religious cleaning. This cleaning was to keep them a clean people, a pure people. And the containers were giant stone containers, 20 to 30 gallons, about half the size of a 50 gallon drum, if that helps. Imagine the amount of time it takes to draw up 120 to 180 gallons of water from a well—there was no running water, after all. And then, miraculously, the water becomes wine and not just any wine—the best wine.

If we allow ourselves to imagine this miracle, to look at the sign that this miracle is, **a sign of Jesus’ glory. Let us imagine and wonder. How are we, how is our country, our culture, our religion, like a wedding banquet running out of wine?**

What are we running out of? Opportunity? Dreams? Hope? Inspiration? Excitement? Newness?

What are the empty container? What is it that is supposed to renew us, supposed to get us back on track? What are the stone containers of our time? Huge empty containers for religious purposes? Our churches perhaps? Our traditions?

What would it mean to fill them, not with their intended, but with wine? Can you imagine shaking it up? Changing the tradition or the church so completely?

And what does it mean to have that much wine? Can you even imagine 180 gallons of wine? If we have a dozen bottles of wine in our house it seems overwhelming.

Do you remember the blessing of a home from It's a Wonderful Life? "Bread so this house may never know hunger. Salt that life will always have flavor. and Wine that joy and prosperity will reign forever."

Wine a symbol of joy and prosperity.

Imagine the kind of prosperity and joy 180 gallons of wine would symbolize.

What might it mean to repurpose what was intended to make us clean and holy, into something to bring joy and prosperity?

And **Brian McLaren asks us to consider**, "what does it mean for God to save the best for last?"

Maybe the goal should not be to go back to the good old days after all—maybe the best is truly to come.

When we engage our imaginations with these questions we can see new possibilities, new ways to bring joy into the lives of others. Extravagant hospitality. Extravagant renewal and blessing.

The first miracle in Mark's gospel is quite different. Jesus is teaching in the synagogue when a man cries out. The Bible says he had an unclean spirit. Now today we would describe this differently, mental illness, chemical imbalance, delirium, or some other disorder.

Jesus heals the man with less than 10 seconds of therapy and no medicines.

Let us go again into that place of imagination. What are the questions that this story raises for us?

What are the irrational fears, the disturbances, the troubles that plague us, or our society? What is unhealthy about our systems, our patterns, our values, our ideologies, or our social systems that oppress so many and keep them poor, strip them of hope, rob them of security, make them cry out?

What would it mean for faith and the power of God to heal us? Can we imagine that faith can free us? Heal us?

Last week I went with the police to an apartment complex that has become an area of crime, 3 murders in a year, shooting with an AK—only one person in the entire complex called the police. The police asked for assistance conducting a survey. We asked if people felt safe, was there enough lighting, enough security, were living conditions acceptable. The answers were startling. The only people who said they felt safe also said they never leave their apartment. One man was buying 1" thick steel plates to line the walls of his child's bedroom. The

plumbing breaks down and the people take the plug out, that one on the outside of the building that is intended to give access to clear clogs, and just let the water from the sink drain down the side of the building. Lights are out all over. **Repairs aren't made. The laundries have more non-working machines than working machines.** And the unclean spirit is crying out—in the form of violence, and gangs and fear. And so many have lost hope.

What does it mean to imagine that miracles can happen? What could it mean for THAT place to imagine that miracles can happen? Can you imagine a miracle there?

In the story in Mark, there are two points to remember:

Jesus does not let the man push him away.

Jesus silences the fear and restores the man.

“What would it mean for faith in the power of God to liberate us from an unhealthy, imbalanced, self-destructive disorders?” asks Brian McLaren.

This week was a momentous week for our country. We had the peaceful transition of power to a new president. We need to remember and appreciate how rare that is, in the history of the world and even around the world today.

Yet, there are many on both sides of the aisle, as they say, conservatives and liberals, republicans and democrats, who have concerns and even fears about our new president and his proposed cabinet. Those fears may be unfounded, those fears may be exaggerated.

Or those fears may be prescient. But all fear brings anxiety and too much fear can crush hope.

And yet we saw millions, almost 3 million, in various Women's Marches yesterday, millions of people saying they care, they are engaged, they are involved. **Women and men saying women will not be ignored, women's issues will not disappear and women matter, our daughters matter, our mothers and our sisters matter, and WE matter.** People replaced their fear with action, and community, and courage. Was that a miracle—no. Could it become one? Maybe. Are there miracles? yes.

Are they literal, violate the laws of physics and biology miracles—there is a time and place for that conversations—but for today, let us focus on meaning.

What is the meaning of the miracle stories? People met Jesus and they shared wild stories of unbelievable things, stories of healing and abundance and **profound meaning.** Brian McLaren sums it up this way: **“They felt their emptiness being filled to overflowing.** They watched as their lifelong obsession with *clean* and *unclean* was replaced with a superabundant, supercelebrative joy. They

felt their anxiety and paranoia fade, and in their place faith and courage grew.” He summarizes it well.

They were healed of blindness and paralysis and fear and suffering. They found hope and celebration and new life and light and communion and purpose. **And they shared their stories to inspire others. And that’s why we share the stories.** Because faith still works wonders, and when people can imagine it making a difference, when people can imagine that THEY will make a difference, people will get up and walk, they will open their eyes, they will fill the jar. And when they do—that is all the difference we need to change the world.

Imagine the change that will come if those 3 million people who joined the **women’s marches yesterday** all write their senators.

Imagine the change that will come if we all write our senators and our representatives. Imagine how different a government by the people would be with the people actually engaged. Because if we act, it will make a difference, and if we believe it will make a difference, we will act. And that is the power of stories of miracles—so we can believe in the miracle, believe that we can make a difference, that faith can make a difference, believe in the power of change, and when we have that belief—we act. And when we act, when Christians act as God calls us to do, the world does change and the miracles do happen.