

“Miracles,” by Rev. Mark Caggiano, 3/22/26

Ezekiel 37:1-14; John 11:34-44

*He said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?" I answered, "O Lord GOD, you know."*

The account of Ezekiel and the dry bones is an unusual passage in the Bible. This was not an event that happened, but a dream, a vision, perhaps a personal brush with the divine. But it did not happen in the real world. And yet here we are talking about it two and a half centuries later.

We encounter this imagery of bones and how they might come back to life. And that exchange between God and Ezekiel is a moment of human humility in which Ezekiel remarks upon the power of creation and the miracle of life. Bringing those bones back together and back to life would be a miracle described by the prophet. But those bones having lived in the first place, that is just as miraculous, that is and always will be just as astounding.

In the gospel reading we heard about Lazarus. How Jesus came to see his friends, Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, only to find out that Lazarus had died. How Jesus wept for the man and how he went to his tomb. And then how Jesus prayed and how Lazarus came out from the tomb.

I must confess to you, that I struggle with the story of Lazarus. I struggle with how to think about it and certainly how to describe it to you all, in this setting. You might be thinking I struggle with it because I tend to be the rational pastor, the guy who writes philosophical or scientific or plain old nerdy sermons. And you would be partly right about that observation. I do struggle on that intellectual level with the story of Lazarus.

But there is at least one other reason that I struggle with this story. This is a story about a miracle. About a man who was dead coming back to life. That certainly challenges my philosophical and scientific and nerdy tendencies. And yet there is another aspect of the story I find hard to explain. That difficulty is that Jesus chose to bring that one person, a personal friend, back from the dead.

Which leads to a question: why did anyone have to die in the time of Jesus? And why does anyone have to die now?

There are other examples of people coming back from the dead in the Bible. Jesus raised at least three people, and in a couple of weeks, we commemorate Jesus' own resurrection. In the Hebrew scriptures, the prophets and Elijah and Elisha bring others back from the dead. Peter and Paul each performed similar miracles after the death of Jesus.

Back to my question then: why does anyone have to die? Ever.

Why did Lazarus get to live? And, on a more personal note, why did my father have to die just last year? Why did my mother have to die twelve years ago? Why does anyone have to die, if as it says in the Bible, people can rise from the dead? Yes, the day of Judgement is foretold as the day all will rise again, but still why did Lazarus get that chance, unlike the rest of us?

On most Sundays, I will simply skate over these stories. I will move on to some other portion of the scriptures or the events of the week. Something more manageable. Something more approachable from my admittedly rational perspective.

Yes, we just mentioned Lazarus, but let's talk about the daffodils bursting forth from the ground, la-dee-da isn't nature great. Yes, we are gathered to remember Jesus' resurrection, arguably the cornerstone event in Christianity depending upon who you ask. But let's instead talk about the sunset or the rainbows or fluffy bunnies out on the lawn. Turn to our next hymn, "Christ the Lord is Risen Today." Talking around the Biblical miracles is a cottage industry in mainline Christianity.

Last Sunday, we spoke about the blind man who was healed. A man who was born blind and had never seen anything. There was an effort within the narrative to anchor that story with accounts from his parents and testimony from the man himself. This is as if to say, miracles are happening over here so pay attention. Miracles, the supernatural intrusion of God into the world through the words and actions of special people given special permission to perform special deeds. Miracles as the sign offered as to the significance of Jesus, the disciples, and the prophets.

So yet again, if that is the case, why does anyone have to be blind? Why does anyone have to be ill or injured or suffer in any way, shape, or form? Because as it says in the Bible, suffering even up to the point of death need not happen, or at least need not be permanent.

But that is not what our churches are about. That is not what is spoken about on Sundays and that is not what typically comes up in my conversations with people. Which is helpful for me because I struggle with these stories. And, if and when they do come up, I will often shift quickly away from them with little commentary. And I do so because I have no power to raise the dead. I have no power to heal the blind or the sick. I cannot do so and I am not aware of anyone able to do so, at least in the form of healing as represented in the stories from the Bible.

Occasionally, when Jesus has done or said something, someone will say that Jesus acts with authority. In Matthew, we hear, "For he taught them as one having *authority*, and not as the scribes." The word "authority" here comes from the Greek word *exousia*, meaning with permission. This is like being authorized by the king to serve in a certain role, like a general or an ambassador. Jesus had authority, but the scribes did not, the scribes being those working in the Temple. They did not have authority from God, unlike the prophets of old like Elijah.

And by that same logic, *no one* now has such authority. Not me, not anyone around these parts. Not the pope, not any bishop. Not the preacher on television asking for money in exchange for the blessings of God – that is not a miracle, that is marketing.

Of course, someone might say that miracles have happened. If someone is canonized as a Catholic saint, there has been documentation that someone experienced a miraculous event, often a cure. Cured of cancer, cured of some illness or disability. By the way, you need one miracle to be beautified and a second miracle to become a full saint.

Pope John Paul II is credited with healing a nun who was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease. Another woman had an inoperable aneurysm that suddenly healed. I cannot explain why these things happened. But I also cannot explain why anyone gets Parkinsons' disease or how aneurysms happen. I do know that my father struggled with Parkinsons' disease for years and he honestly believed that his symptoms were lessened by the intercession of John Paul II.

I had no response for my father and I have no explanation for you. But I also know good people who have Parkinsons' disease. And if I had the power, the authority, to heal them of that illness or to alleviate their suffering, I would. But I cannot.

Why can't I, meaning me personally as a minister, invoke the power of God and heal those who are sick? Why can't I take a few loaves of bread and some fish and feed thousands of people? Why can't I take my handy shepherd's crook, tap a rock, and have clean drinking water flow out? Why can't I do any of that?

Someone might say that I lack faith. That is possible.

Question: do any of you have insurance? And odd non sequitur, I realize, but here we are. Do you pay for insurance on your car, insurance on your house or apartment? Do you have health insurance from your work or perhaps from the government?

And, if you do have some form of insurance, might I ask another question: why do *you* not have any faith? Because insurance is a sign that you do not have faith. Faith that bad things will not happen to you. Faith that you will not get sick or suffer an injury. Faith that you will never be in a car accident.

Please, *please* do not leave this building with the idea that you should go cancel your insurance. I am just making a point – a *Biblical* point.

Under the broad parameters of the Hebrew scriptures, blessings come to people who are good and suffering comes to those who are wicked. So, whether you win the lottery or get hit by a bus happens because it is supposed to happen, at least under a very old and strict understanding of the Bible.

For example, the Amish do not believe in insurance because it shows a lack of faith in God. When something bad happens, the community gets together and offers help to the people affected. Which, honestly, sounds like insurance. Community-based insurance for those who suffered misfortune. Because if it was truly a matter of faith, faith that blessings and misfortune come from God, the person deserved the good and deserved the bad.

Which, I must add, is complete nonsense. It was nonsense in the time of Jesus, let alone right now. Many sections of the Bible discuss how to help people who are suffering. Many verses call for charity and almsgiving. The Bible does not tell us to build our lives around divine intervention.

Specifically, the Book of Job was intended to undercut such a description of the world. Job was a pious man, known for his charity and faithfulness to God. He was blameless and yet he suffered greatly. His friends gathered round and told him to repent his sins, sins we as the readers know he had never committed.

God came down in a whirlwind and chastised Job for speaking about things he did not understand. And God then chastised these men, these questionable friends, because they were wrong. They were wrong because bad things can happen to good people and good things can happen to bad people. And that is simply the way of the world.

Does that mean that I do not believe in miracles? That none of you should believe in miracles? Not at all. But before we get to that belief, we need to discuss a few things.

Like what is a miracle? One definition of a "miracle" is a surprising and welcome event that is not explicable by natural or scientific laws and is therefore considered to be the work of a divine agency. That definition pulls together a lot of ideas, so let's break it down.

That something is improbable, which makes sense if we are busting out a word like “miracle.” That something is not explicable by natural or scientific laws – let’s put a pin in that one. Considered the work of a divine agency. That still works for me.

Why accept improbable and divine but place aside natural and scientific? Because I do not believe in the supernatural. I do not believe in it at all. I believe in the natural.

And yet, you might note, that I was okay with divine agency. How does that make any sense? I believe in God, and yet I do not believe in anything supernatural, because I do not believe that God or the universe or anything about them is *supernatural*. Meaning beyond or outside that which is natural, meaning beyond natural laws. In my estimation, God is not supernatural, which is arguably not a very traditional view of God. But I have the microphone this Sunday, so let’s get into it.

The world we live in, the level of reality on which we function, is what I might describe as normal. Go above or below that normal level, that middle band of human perception and experience, and things quickly get weird. Weird, meaning they are very different than our everyday understanding.

In my normal world, things do not pop into existence out of nowhere. Things do not suddenly disappear in one place and reappear in another. And if that were to happen here on the mean streets of Newton, it could be described as supernatural.

But that happens all the time. Below the level of human perception, those events happen every second of the day, at least on the level of subatomic particles. We cannot see or interact on that level of existence, so it is effectively nonexistent to us even though it truly exists. It can be examined and measured. We can make predictions about it. Predictions but not certainties because on that weird level of existence things sometimes happen in unexpected ways. But that does not mean it is supernatural. We might call that *differently* natural.

When I think about miracles, I have perhaps a wider definition for the natural and no tolerance for anything beyond the natural. Beyond the natural, beyond the scientific.

Do I believe in the invisible, the unseeable? Yes, because I am not capable of seeing most of the universe. I cannot see most of the substances that make up everything – the atoms and molecules that cannot be seen with the naked eye but can be studied by science and manipulated by industry. That leaves the majority of what is around us as mysterious on the normal human scale.

But being unseen, or currently unknown, does not make something supernatural. It is still natural, just not what anyone of us might describe as normal or everyday. For that reason, I think of miracles as being around us all the time. And yet they do not take the form of miracles familiar from the pages of scripture.

Here’s a story for you. Many, many years ago, a bolt of lightning struck the earth. That lightning hit a pool of materials, the so-called building blocks of life. The lightning caused certain chemicals to form, the first organic compounds on a young planet.

And those compounds somehow began to organize themselves. They began to move about and form organisms, creatures that lived off basic materials like carbon dioxide. These spread out and began to evolve into other forms. They grew and spread, they changed and transformed. They got bigger. They got more complex. As big as a dinosaur and as complex as a human being.

According to this story, all life on this earth began from that moment. All life connects back to that ancient incident or, maybe, a series of incidents like it around the world. All life, including anyone listening to these words or reading them at home, is connected to that miraculous moment about 4 billion years ago.

To me, that is a stunning miracle.

Let's go further. Every human being alive now is related to every other human being. The people we love, the people we hate, our dearest friend, our moral enemy; we are all interrelated. We are all connected back, back, back to that beginning. We are all cousins a few million times removed.

The struggle I have with the miracles in the Bible is that they are *personal* miracles. They are made-to-order miracles that do not translate into our everyday lives. And I do not think it is within our best interest to organize our ways of thinking and living around them. The Book of Job suggests that same concern, along with many other passages calling upon us to help one another and not wait for a miracle.

Think of this another way. God gave us the miracle of creation and the miracle of being created. The world and the universe as they exist in their mind-numbing complexities. And with that giant stack of miracles already out there, it seems more than a bit ungrateful to expect more. To expect a system in which God removes all our struggles and suffering because we think we are worthy of supernatural intervention.

I am not trying to suggest that suffering is good. But if someone was kind enough to give you a house, it would be a bit presumptuous to expect them to fix the roof, to pay the bills, and to mow the lawn. The gift of creation is such a gift. And the suffering of human beings is to be overcome by human beings working together. The Amish have the right idea. About the community coming together when someone is in need, even though I am not against getting some insurance to fill in those gaps.

The Bible is a deep well of wisdom about many aspects of human life and culture, but it is not a book of science. It was never intended to be that. The miracles in the Bible are not where I would place my focus because I cannot predict when they might be forthcoming, if ever, and absolutely no one else can do so either, no matter what they might claim in their promotional materials.

The story of Ezekiel and the dry bones never happened, but it was never intended to be a real-world event. It highlights the miraculous nature of creation, of life and all its complexities. The real miracle was bringing all those bones together in the first place through the natural processes of the universe and evolution.

Asking for anything more miraculous than that, to me at least, is a bit presumptuous. And yes, the stories of miracles in the Bible might not exactly fit into that understanding of the world. The blind being able to see. The dead coming back to life.

I am not going to tell you not to believe in those miracles. But I would strongly suggest that you still go to the doctor, eat a balanced diet, and pay your insurance premiums.

God has given us the entirety of creation. We can at least be expected to clean up after ourselves and to take care of one another.

Amen.

Hymn - Insert

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