

When I was in seminary, I spent a summer interning as a chaplain at Vanderbilt hospital. I think I'd been doing that for all of a week when a man who was a patient on the cardiac floor asked me: "Have you seen any miracles in this place?" He sounded desperate.

And I felt a little desperate about how to answer him, because I knew he wasn't asking, *Is God able to do miracles?* He was asking something much more personal: *Is it possible that God could change what's going on in my life? Do I have a reason to hope?*

Those are questions we all ask from time to time – especially when things are hard. Even if we find it easy to believe in all the miracles we read about in the Bible – some of us do find that easy, and some of us don't – we still might wonder: but that was *then* – that was the special Bible time -- what about now? Does God still do miracles here and now? And we might ask desperately, *Has anyone seen any miracles in this place? In our time?* And we long for stories of miracles so amazing and unquestionable that we can feel certain that, yes, God is still doing miracles today, and so, yes, it's possible that God might do a miracle in my life.

During the Sunday School hour our kids will present an Advent program called, "It's a Miracle!"<sup>1</sup> And they will remind us of some of the big miracles of the Bible: like God parting the Red Sea so that the Israelites could escape Pharaoh's army; like the walls of Jericho falling, not because of catapults, but because the Israelites marched around blowing trumpets. And we'll hear the refrain: "It's a miracle, a real Bible miracle! A great act of God!"

When we think of miracles, these are the kinds of stories we usually think of. Spectacular events that go against the laws of nature, and so they can only be explained one way: God did it.

Unfortunately, we're really good at explaining away anything that might be a miracle.

C. S. Lewis points that out at the beginning of his book on miracles. He starts the book with this story:

*In all my life I have met only one person who claims to have seen a ghost. And the interesting thing about the story is that that person disbelieved in the immortal soul before she saw the ghost and still disbelieves after seeing it. She says that what she saw must have been an illusion or a trick of the nerves. And obviously she may be right. Seeing is not believing.*<sup>2</sup>

Even when something unusual happens – something that might fit the bill for a supernatural event – even then we can find ways to explain it away. We still think, *Well, that's not a "real*

---

<sup>1</sup> By Jeff Martison, published in *The Parish Teacher* (October 1998).

<sup>2</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Miracles*, (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1960), p. 3.

*Bible miracle.* And how much harder is it to think of things that are less spectacular as miracles? How do we let ourselves find reason to hope that God might change things in our lives?

But actually, even many of the “real Bible miracles” could have been explained away by the people they happened to.

Let’s think about the miracle we heard about in today’s gospel reading: the story of Joseph learning that his fiancée, Mary, has become miraculously pregnant. Mary’s pregnancy is one of the most amazing miracles in the Bible. If anything is a “real Bible miracle,” this is it, right?

But let’s think of it from Joseph’s point of view. He hears that his fiancée is pregnant – and he is 100% certain that he is not the father. As far as Joseph knows, there’s nothing miraculous about this; this is the kind of sad story of unfaithfulness we hear far too often.

And then Joseph has a dream, a dream in which an angel explains to him that Mary did not cheat on him – instead the Holy Spirit has given her a miracle pregnancy.

But think about it: how easy would have been for Joseph to ignore that dream? To dismiss it as just his sleeping brain trying to make sense of his broken heart? I mean, all of us dream, right? And some of us even vividly remember our dreams. I do.

When I was in 5<sup>th</sup> grade I had a dream that I was one of Jesus’s disciples, following him around Minneapolis. Jesus and the other disciples and I all ate dinner together. I definitely thought that dream was pretty remarkable at the time; I remember writing about it in my diary. And now it’s tempting to look back and wonder, *Hmm, maybe that dream was telling me that I was going to be a pastor one day.* But it’s much, much easier to think: *Hm. I probably heard the Last Supper story at church that day, and then my brain was spinning images of it at night.*

So surely Joseph could have woken up in the morning and thought, *What a weird dream. An angel! But that couldn’t be real. I mean, a virgin pregnancy?. That’s impossible!*

But Joseph *does* trust that the angel in his dream was really a messenger from God. Joseph *does* trust that his fiancée pregnancy is a miracle. Joseph *does* trust that God doing something amazing in their lives. He trusts so much that he takes action: he marries Mary, he raises that child.

Why?

This story tells us that “Joseph was a righteous man.” That means he had faith in God. He trusted God. And he believed that God could act in the lives of ordinary people. So when something happened in his life – something really quite ordinary: a pregnancy out of wedlock, followed by a weird dream – well, Joseph had the faith to be able to see that ordinary thing as a miracle, an act of God in the ordinary messiness of life.

So while we wait for miracles to be something so extra-ordinary that we have to be certain they are supernatural acts of God – often God acts through ordinary events to do miraculous things – and through our faith, we can see these miracles. Real Bible miracles.

We also tend to assume that miracles will be God doing things that we want, making things the way we want them. But the story of Joseph and Mary reminds us that this isn't usually the case. I mean, Joseph probably would rather not have gone through the worry that his fiancée had been unfaithful, not have had to deal with the neighbors talking behind their backs about how Jesus was born less than nine months before Joseph and Mary had gotten married. Having a miraculous messiah baby was probably not an answer to their prayers, exactly – God disrupted their lives with this miracle.

A musical called *The Unusual Tale of Mary and Joseph's Baby* describes this from Mary's point of view. After she finds out she's pregnant, but before she knows that Joseph is going to stay with her anyway, Mary sings to her cousin Elizabeth:

*I know I told God I'd do whatever he needed.  
I know that once he starts a thing, he's gonna complete it.  
I know that if you live the life of God's chosen servant,  
Sure, you get a faith that's alive and fervent –  
But nobody ever wants the prophet around.  
They always chase 'em all to the edge of the town...*

*It feels like deliverance is going to be personally expensive.  
So, Elizabeth, forgive me if I'm just a little apprehensive...*

*I told God I'd give up anything to help set his people free.  
I meant what I said, and I got what I wanted,  
But I never thought about how lonely it would be,  
'Cause Joseph's never gonna believe me.<sup>3</sup>*

The story of Mary and Joseph reminds us: miracles often aren't God giving us exactly what we want – instead, they are God changing our lives in the way that fits God's greater plan. Real Bible miracles aren't easy. Think about Moses, seeing the miraculous burning bush, but begging God to send someone else to go challenge the powerful pharaoh. Think about the disciples, being called away from their home and their families in order to follow the messiah, sleeping wherever they can find a spot, sometimes getting so hungry that they have to pluck grain from the fields they're walking through.

---

3 “Joseph's Never Gonna Believe Me,” from *The Unusual Tale of Mary and Joseph's Baby* by Don Chaffer and Chris Cragin-Day (2015).

Sometimes God does do exactly what we want. Sometimes God answers the prayers of the blind and makes them see; sometimes God answers the prayers of the lame and makes them walk; but sometimes God does something we don't expect, something we never asked for, something that messes up our plans.

Believing in miracles – believing that God does change our world and our lives, not just in Bible times, but here and now – having that faith does not mean having certainty that we will get whatever we pray for. It does not mean that God is going to make our lives easy – at least not all the time.

But it does mean trusting that there is something beyond what we're going through.

It means trusting that there is a possibility for healing. A possibility for things to get better. It means we always have reason to hope. Even when our lives are hard, even when we can't see a way forward, even when the world seems broken beyond repair – we always have reason to hope.

As Bishop Strickland said in his Christmas message:

*The hope of Advent that we find incarnate in the birth of Jesus at Christmas is that [the] angel's message [to Mary and Joseph] remains true for you and for me and for all the world. "For nothing is impossible with God." For in God's incarnation in Jesus, all things are made possible. Possible that love will always win over hate. Possible that goodness will always drive out evil. Possible that even in your darkest hour, light will shine. Possible that in the Church, we can continue being a message of possibility when all seems lost...What a word of hope and comfort that the world yearns for. "For nothing is impossible with God.""<sup>4</sup>*

---

4 Kevin Strickland, "2019 Bishop Strickland Christmas Message," 17 December 2019. <https://youtu.be/gJImBgkpSvY> Accessed 19 December 2019.