

Break Out!

A Message for Sunday Morning Worship on Father's Day
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT
June 26, 2016
Text: Acts 12:6-17

Miracles. How many of you believe you have experienced something miraculous in your life? Maybe not someone else might technically call a miracle, but for you what happened was so unlikely, so improbable and yet so very much what needed to happen in that moment that to you it was a miracle. Has anything like that happened to you? [pause while folks respond] So, who can share an example of this with us? Who has a “miracle” story to share with us? [pause for responses]

I do think miracles are a part of our everyday lives but that we have become so cynical, so jaded by all the bad news which inundates us each day that we just miss those little miracles when they happen. Like when a parking spot opens up just when you need it. Like when the “check engine” light comes on just as you’re driving past the mechanic’s. Or how about those experiences where you just miss being a part of something bad happening because some last minute something caused to change your mind about going somewhere, or taking a different route for no real reason you can think of or just altering a very, normal comfortable pattern for no real reason and then that little

serendipitous change makes all the difference. Let me explain what I mean.

When Jack was little, about 8 or 9, he had a doctor's appointment in downtown Providence. His health was fragile when he was little so we saw a lot of doctors and most of them were scattered all over downtown Providence. This particular doctor's office could be a nightmare to get to and to find a place to park. I was running late and due to traffic I missed the turn into the parking lot I needed to be in. I wasn't that familiar with Providence then but I knew I had to figure out how to go around the block and get back to try again. I was in an unfamiliar part of Providence and I completely missed seeing a traffic light which was not in the middle of the intersection but instead off to the side. So, I didn't see the light was red and went right through the intersection without stopping. A massive dump truck was at that moment gunning it to make the light for his direction which had apparently just changed from green to yellow. He hit me broadside in the Hyundai Accent I was driving with Jack in the back seat. I didn't see him coming, thank goodness, because the accident was horrendous.

Cars stopped and people ran over to me. One of them was an off duty police officer who told me to stay still and asked if anything hurt. I said no. I just kept saying what about my son, what about my son. I was so dazed I couldn't even hear Jack who

was crying. The police came quickly along with fire trucks and ambulances. We were transported to the ER by ambulance because they insisted. Someone called Peter and he came right away. Long story short, I was fine and Jack was fine. We were shook up and both of us had seat belt bruises but we were fine. Car was totaled, of course. And when the insurance adjuster looked at it, he said, “who died?” Peter said, “no one, thank God.” He looked at Peter and said, “I’ve never seen a car that looked like this when someone wasn’t killed. That’s a miracle!”

It was a miracle because Jack did something he never had done before when we got in the car that afternoon to go to the doctor’s. He got in the backseat behind me, instead of in the middle of the back seat where he usually sat. I thought it was odd at the time, but I was so frazzled that day, I didn’t say anything to him, thank God. Because sitting behind me is what saved his life. I don’t know why he sat where he did. He didn’t know why he sat where he did. We asked him and he didn’t know. He said, “I just thought I needed to sit behind Mommy” so he did. And it saved his life. That is a miracle. Plain and simple. We didn’t ask for a miracle. There was no time. The accident happened in a split second because I was lost and didn’t see a traffic signal placed at the side of a big, busy intersection I wasn’t familiar with. We didn’t expect to need a miracle. But we got one anyway and I have no idea why.

This is the same sort of situation described in the story we read this morning from the Book of Acts. Peter has been put in prison by King Herod Agrippa, the grandson of the King Herod who greeted the Wise Men looking for the birthplace of the baby whose star guided them on their long journey. Herod Agrippa was ruthless, close friends with the infamous Roman Emperor Caligula. So, when Peter landed in jail he knew he was destined for death. After all, Herod Agrippa had already murdered both John and James. But all the while Peter was in prison, the church members were praying for him, praying that something would happen to save him. And something did.

The night before he was to be “brought out” to his execution, Peter was asleep between two soldiers, bound hand and foot by two chains. Two guards were stationed outside the cell door as well. But an angel showed up anyway, illuminating everything with light without waking up any of the soldiers. The angel tapped Peter and said, “get up quickly” and as he said this, the chains slid off of Peter. Then he told Peter to put on his belt and sandals, wrap himself in his cloak and follow him. Peter did as he was told and they walked right out of the prison, past not one but two guard stations and right out to the city gate which opened of its own accord to let them out. Once they were through the gate, the angel left him and Peter suddenly realized what had happened to him was real, and not a dream. He quickly made his way to a

friend's house and knocked on the door. Seeing it was Peter when she opened the door, she was so excited she forgot to let him in. Instead she ran to tell the others Peter was at the door. They told her she had to be mistaken and she insisted she wasn't. Peter, feeling very vulnerable still outside the house, kept knocking and knocking so they finally went out to see who was there and dumbfounded when it was Peter. He told them what had happened and then he left.

This is a fantastic story. We can just picture the whole scene and it sounds almost Harry Potter-esque, especially when it comes to what seems to be a first century version of Harry's invisibility cloak! And then when he finally gets to his friend's house, it's like a sit-com where a bumbling maid almost messes up everything but not letting Peter in right away. This is, in fact, a miracle story. But it is not like Jesus' miracles when he healed people of blindness and illness or all sorts of physical incapacities. In most of those stories, those folks all asked to be healed. Peter, on the other hand, had accepted his fate. He was ready to die for his faith, if that was God's plan. But God had something else in mind and God's plan carried the day.

I think this story invites us to consider just what it means to have a miracle burst into your life, something you didn't ask for and weren't expecting. This is a different kind of miracle, the kind that pops into your life and upends everything. This kind of

miracle might start out as something unpleasant or even bad, like losing your job or getting a scary medical diagnosis. That's not the miracle part. It was no miracle Peter got arrested. It was a problem! A big one. The miracle came later. The miracle came when Peter turned himself and his life completely over to God, being ready to accept whatever God had mind for him. Then the angel showed up and Peter's miracle unfolded before he knew what was happening.

That's the thing about these kinds of miracles. They often happen without our being aware of them. We don't see them as miracles, as God's action in our lives, until long after the fact. I didn't think about Jack's life being saved because he sat behind me that one day, something he never did, until the insurance claims investigator heard my story and said, "wow, that's an honest to goodness miracle!" And she was right. It was. But I didn't see it as one until she named it for me.

The thing is, these kinds of things are always happening in our lives. Something bad that could have happened, should have happened but didn't. Something incredibly wonderful that you never saw coming but came to you at just the time when you needed it most. Something scary that could have taken you to a very bad place, but instead resulted in a life change that was just what you needed. These are all miracles, dear friends. These are the moments when God's presence in your life becomes visible for

just a split second, so fast you can miss it. But it's there and once you recognize it, you just can't look at life unfolding around you the same way.

Now does this mean that miracles are always there when you need them? No, of course not. Sometimes a miracle desperately needed never comes. I've sat at the bedsides of enough terminal children during my chaplaincy work to know that is truth. Why is that? Why do miracles unasked for come to us when others desperately needed never happen? I don't know. I just don't know. And I defy anyone to give any other answer than that. Miracles aren't earned in some kind of holy points contest where if you pray hard enough or repent loud enough, you accumulate enough heavenly points to get what you want. Faith doesn't work that way. Grace doesn't work that way. God's grace is a gift unearned and freely given to each of us by our loving, abiding and steadfast God. But I do know this. I do know that God is so much bigger, so much more, so far beyond our limited human capability to understand that it's really no surprise that there are some answers we just don't have. That's when trusting God takes on a whole new meaning. That's when living a life grounded in the bedrock of faith allows you to keep going when the miracle you want, you need, you prayed for never comes. And you keep going anyway because somehow, someway that lack of a miracle is still

part of a God's plan. Or perhaps that God's miracle is just so different from the one you imagine, that you just don't see it.

In closing this morning, I'd like to leave you with a thought to ponder. It comes from a most unlikely source, a movie you might have seen called *Men In Black 3*. Griffin, a key character who is the key to saving the earth from destruction by a brutal alien species, is a unique being who can experience multiple time dimensions at the same moment so he is very aware of how seemingly unrelated simple, everyday events can change everything for seemingly unrelated people. He is also very sensitive so he realizes that "J" is worried that things just won't work out the way they need to. That's when Griffin tells him what a miracle is. He says, "a miracle is what seems impossible but happens anyway." So, as you head back into your life beyond the doors of the church, I encourage you to look for all those miracles, big and small, that so often slip by unnoticed. At the same time I urge you to surrender your life and everything in it – your fears and worries, your joys and delights – turn it all over to God's tender, loving care, confident that God is always a part of every situation you encounter. Come what may, you are never, ever left alone. You are never without God's grace, God's love, surrounding you. That's all the miracle anyone needs. Amen.

