

Not Even a Whiff

A Message for Sunday Morning Worship
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC
November 18, 2018
Text: Daniel 3:14-30

Without a doubt my most powerful and vivid memory of Thanksgiving as a child has to be the year my mom's sweet potato casserole caught fire. Now my mom was an excellent cook in the 1950's June Cleaver tradition – complete with pearl necklace and apron, especially on Thanksgiving. Her pies were legendary. Her stuffing and gravy were traditionally delicious, her turkeys always moist and tender. She did experiment occasionally with side dishes with mixed success like the one cranberry relish that was so bitter it made your mouth pucker uncomfortably, but such fails were few and far between. Like the sweet potato casserole straight out of the Betty Crocker cookbook, complete with melted marshmallows, at least that was the plan.

I seem to recall Mom making the marshmallow sweet potato casserole every year up until the time of the fire, but not after. No surprise there. I don't know what went wrong exactly. Maybe she used the regular marsh-mallows instead of the smaller ones. Maybe she had the broiler set too high. Maybe she didn't know how to use the broiler. Whatever happened on that fateful Thanksgiving, before smoke detectors were routine household fixtures I might add, suddenly I heard a shriek from the kitchen

and ran to see what was going on. I arrived just in time to see my mom put the flaming sweet potato casserole into the sink and turn on the water. The flames were quickly doused but the smell of really burnt marshmallow and sweet potato lingered. She and I opened the back door and the windows where I was put on fan duty with a tea towel. Surprisingly, by the time she called everyone to the table in another 20 minutes, all signs of the flamed-out casserole were gone and her Thanksgiving feast was ready to go, delicious as ever. Not even a whiff of burnt marshmallow remained. And no one missed the casserole. That was the day I knew my mom was truly a miracle worker.

Miracles are something we do talk about now and then in church, and in life too. When some mundane thing happens at precisely the right time to change a bad situation into a good one, or even to prevent a bad thing from happening, that's a miracle, or so it seems. Like when I changed lanes in the snowstorm the other night only to see the car which had been following me rear-end the car that was now next to me. If I hadn't changed lanes, I would have been the one rear-ended and I can't tell you why I decided to change lanes at that moment. But I did. A miracle? Maybe. Perhaps I just have a really good guardian angel.

When we talk about miracles in church, we are usually talking about one of the many Jesus miracles. Like turning water into wine at the wedding in Cana – his first miracle in the Gospel

of John. Then of course there is the miracle of the loaves and fishes which appears in all four gospels. And we can't forget all the healing miracles scattered throughout the Gospels. Demons and diseases of all sorts were no match for the healing power of Jesus. It was the miracles that drew the crowds to hear his unique message of the loving God who asked only that people love God and each other. And, let's be honest, it's often the miracle stories we remember about Jesus. It's the miracles we crave for ourselves that don't come which propel us toward doubt and questions about this supposedly loving God who lets bad things happen to good people.

Miracles – why they happen, who they happen to and what they really mean – are so much a part of faith, even as they act as the loose thread that can unravel our whole relationship with God if we tug on it too hard. Such has always been the case with our Judeo-Christian God. So many of the stories we have focused on this fall – like Noah and the flood, Abraham and Sarah, David and Goliath just to name a few – are at their core about some sort of miraculous intervention by God into human history. A man and his family survive a flood because he builds an ark when everyone else thinks he's nuts. A couple in their 90's has a baby. A young boy defeats a huge, mature warrior with a single blow. These are miracles. These are examples of God directly intervening in the lives of humans, into the course of history, to make things okay

for the people God loves. These are great, inspiring stories. They give us hope. They reinforce our faith. They remind us over and over again what a difference God can make in the lives of ordinary people. The only problem is – miracles like the ones in the Bible are in pretty short supply. In other words, when you really need a miracle there is absolutely no guarantee you'll get one. In fact, odds are, you won't. So where is God then? What good are all these miracle stories in the Bible, like three men surviving a fiery furnace, if they are all just make believe? And if they're not make believe, if they're real, then why is God so stingy with them now? These are real questions we all have. And answers are hard to come by.

The story we read this morning is from the Book of Daniel, one of the books written from the Diaspora – the Jews displaced from Israel into the Babylon captivity – for the Diaspora. It begins with a series of stories, like the fiery furnace one we read today, that are called court tales. These stories describe the dangers and triumphs of Jewish heroes who find themselves in positions of influence in the foreign court of a peevish king. The formula of these stories is simple: one or more Jewish young *men* are recognized as exceptional – good looking, intelligent, gifted – and this puts them in a position when they come to the notice of the king. In today's story our heroes are Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego – three such extraordinary Jewish men who get ratted

out by others for not following the peevish king's latest edict. In this case, it was to fall down and worship a golden statue of the king whenever the music played – sort of like a bizarre combination of musical chairs and freeze tag. Only in this instance, if you missed the cue, you were bound up and thrown into the fiery furnace!! Yikes!

Well, as soon as we hear about the fiery furnace, we know what's coming. Sure enough, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego do not bow down and worship the statue when the music plays. The king hears about it and calls them in to account for themselves. "Come on," he says to them. "All you have to do is bow down to the statue when you hear the music and it's all good." "No, we won't," they said. "We worship only our God, no other gods." At this the king gets so angry he orders them bound and thrown into the fiery furnace which he orders heated to seven times its usual temperature – so hot that the guys throwing them in immediately die. But they don't. The king looks into the fiery furnace and sees not three guys writhing in pain but four guys just hanging out. And one the king says looks like a god! So, he calls them to come out of the furnace which they do. The king and all his courtiers see that the fire has left no trace on the three guys. None at all. Not even the smell of the fire came from them, the text says. The king, recognizing a miracle when he sees it, immediately makes a decree that no one in his kingdom is to

blaspheme against the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego because of this incredible miracle of their delivery from the fire.

Great story! Dramatic! Scary in the right places and happy at the end. Now as it happens, the king continues to have issues with God, avoiding his own decree on a technicality again and again. So, the miracle of the three men surviving the fiery furnace is still a miracle, but it didn't really change anything. The king was still peevish and liable to go off his rocker at any moment. The Jews serving in his court were still in captivity, still unable to do as they pleased and observe their own religious traditions without fear. So, was this miracle really a miracle? Or put another way, is a miracle without a happy ending still a miracle? It's an interesting notion to consider, especially when we throw in those other questions of why miracles seem to be rationed so tightly by God. Why do some people "get a miracle" and others don't? Why were some people miraculously rescued from the Camp Fire in CA while others burned to death? Why were some homes destroyed in the Florida hurricane while others came through the storm unscathed? Why does healing come to some and not others? These are the questions that consume us when we ponder miracles and faith in the midst of our lives lived each day. We wonder, is God still present when the ending isn't happy? Does God still love us when the miracle we hope for isn't to be found in the reality of life as it unfolds?

The answer is a simple one but that doesn't mean it isn't still painful. Yes, God is still present when the ending isn't happy, doesn't deliver the answer we want to our fervent prayers. Yes, God still loves you even when it feels like God doesn't. The thing is, God never promised any of us that life would be easy, that disappointments would never come, that people we love would never leave us before we're ready to lose them. God never promised that life would hum along smoothly, all the pieces fitting neatly into place at every step along the way. This is not now, not ever, what God promised – a simple life with easy answers always at the ready. It's easy to get confused on this point, especially when we look at all those miracle stories in the Bible where Jesus heals someone at the point of death telling them their faith has made them whole or like today's story when three young men are saved from a gruesome death because their faith was so strong they were willing to die. We hear these stories, we read them and we think – what's wrong with me that God doesn't help me that way? Am I not praying enough? Am I not doing enough? Am I not good enough? Why can't I get a miracle! Just this one!

Dear friends, I know how you feel. Really, I do. But, might I suggest that you are surrounded by miracles every day and you just don't notice them because they are not of the grand and glorious type like a fiery furnace escape. The thing is, a miracle doesn't have to be big and flashy to be a miracle. It doesn't have

to have a fairy tale happy ending. A miracle is a moment when you feel the touch of God on your heart just when you need it most. A miracle is when you *just know* that you are not alone in your sadness or your pain. Dear friends, God's love and abiding presence with you come what may is the miracle in your life each day. Whatever happens, good, bad or ordinary, God is a part of it in some way. God does not reward you with good things because you are good nor does God punish you with bad things because God finds some fault in you. Instead, God is in the midst of your joy on the happiest days, delighting in your happiness. And on days when our hearts are breaking or pain threatens to overwhelm, God is there in the miracle of the unexpected kind word and gentle touch of a stranger. God is present with you on the days when the future is hidden behind clouds of confusion and despair, smiling at you through those incredible shafts of sunlight piercing the clouds, reminding you that with God all things are possible, even hope in the midst of despair.

So, as you enjoy your Thanksgiving holiday this week in whatever way you have planned, I hope you'll pause to remember and give thanks for all those little miracles of life each day. I hope you'll even find it in your heart to give thanks for those moments when not even a whiff of a miracle is present but it's okay because you know beyond doubt God still is. Happy Thanksgiving. Amen.