

Every Single Second Is a Miracle

You and I have a challenge today.

My challenge is not to keep repeating stuff I've said in this current "series" or "theme" I'm trying to develop.

Your challenge is to remember the previous talks for the last several weeks.

Today's talk is the third in a three part series that seeks to set the stage for talking about the questions found in the teachings of Jesus. Though we will be focusing mostly around the miracle stories told in relationship to the Jesus narrative, we'll also look at other questions Jesus raised as well.

One of the claims of Christian Fundamentalism is that the miracles attributed to Jesus are to be taken literally. Even people who claim to be very progressive in their religious views are tripped up by this one. For example, numerous people over the years have stated to me that one of the reasons they have difficulty with much Christian worship is that the creeds are impossible for them to say without feeling that they are lying. I understand that. But the creeds, all written with a pre-Copernican world view, were never intended to be taken literally. What literal meant in that world view is very different than what it means in ours.

I've also talked about how magic and miracles got introduced into humanly constructed religions and how cultures grow and develop just like humans do and how humans can get arrested at certain levels of development.

This is one of the reasons, not the only one, that I keep emphasizing the importance of having a daily spiritual practice. We have a practice so that we can live in the world openly, truthfully and lovingly. There is nothing you hear from me in here that will achieve any kind of depth or perpetuity or reality without some kind of practice out there.

Then I gave a brief overview of how miracles got introduced into the Hebrew or Jewish religion with Moses and Joshua.

I hope you remember those talks.

It is easy for any of us in this distracted culture to have rusty memories.

We were having dinner with friends in their home the other night. The women were in the kitchen. I wasn't cooking. Ralph and I were in the den and we were talking about this very thing - memory issues as we get older. He said to me, "I have found this absolutely incredible supplement that has given me an un-fogged brain. Since I have been taking it I don't seem to be forgetting things like I was."

"Really?" I said. "I think I would like to try some of that. What is it called?"

Ralph hesitated for a moment and said, "Uh - what is the flower, red, has a stem with thorns . . .?"

I said, "Rose?"

Ralph said, "Yes, that's it. Rose what's the name of that supplement I've been taking?"

(This, of course, is a totally "made up" story.)

If you don't remember or if this is your first time here, all of the previous talks in here are on the Ordinary Life website.

Nonetheless, we do face a challenge. I don't want to waste your time. Nor do I want you to be puzzled.

Even if none of these challenges confronted us, spiritual work is always a complexity of difficulty and exhilaration. Somewhat like riding on a roller-coaster that you weren't sure you wanted to get on in the first place but now it is far to late.

I want to continue moving into the territory, using the teachings of Jesus as our guide, of exploring a spirituality that is released from the confines of any religion's egoic assumptions. We are working toward a religious construct that moves beyond

comforting the ego. This is a challenge for us under the best of circumstances. I'm up for it if you are. Ready to go?

One of my goals in teaching this class is to free Jesus and his teachings from having been hijacked by so-called "evangelical Christianity" since the beginning of the 20th century. Yes, I know that culture has captured the Jesus movement since the fourth century. But, I am specifically speaking about our culture.

Since the beginning of the 20th century, around the early 1900s and the rise of Christian Fundamentalism in this country, many people came to firmly believe that there is a "god" who is out there in space somewhere who occasionally stirs things on earth with a stick.

Since the events we label as "9/11," "fundamentalism" has been an increasingly dangerous ideology in religions all around the world. And, in politics as well. The power and might wielded by this "fundamentalism" is not decreasing but growing. One of the great ironies of religious fundamentalism is that in its effort to protect religion and God, as if God needed protecting, it actually removes the Sacred from daily life and puts it off out in space and, further, as something humans control. Abraham Heschel, the Jewish philosopher and theologian said, "It is your capacity for wonder that dictates your level of holiness." We quickly lose our capacity for wonder if we remove the Sacred from every single second of our precious lives.

To follow Jesus is to have a commitment to truth, compassion, inclusion and justice. As Michael Dowd put it, "the future is calling us." My contention is that we cannot move into that future until we are clear about what we are leaving. We can't let go of what we have until we know we have it. Or, and this is what I think is more likely, what has us. To get where we need to be, we have to go through where we are.

What our culture has been taught about this God and Jesus is that God sent Jesus into the world to save the world by saving people from their sins. And, this person that this "god" up there in the sky sent to earth could do amazing things. And that people should take these "amazing things" literally. If they don't, they are not really believers.

So, after having talked about how magic and miracles got into human consciousness and culture and how miracles got introduced into the Jewish tradition with a focus on Moses and Joshua, I want to turn our attention to miracles in the prophetic tradition. Moses and Joshua had to do with “the law.” Today I want to tell you a bit about Elijah and Elisha - “the prophets.”

Remember, Jesus talks about “the law” and “the prophets.” And, when we get to the Jesus narrative about miracles, all of these miracles are going to be found wrapped around the story told about the “new Moses” and the “new Elijah.” It is so hard for people in our culture to hang on to the fact that Jesus wasn’t a Christian. Jesus was a Jewish mystic.

After Moses and Joshua there was a four hundred year hiatus in miracle stories - at least in the Jewish tradition. Moses lived around 13 century B.C. Stories weren’t written about him until around 300 years later. Other religions in other places in the world were developing their own stories.

One of the genius things about the Jewish religion is the development of what came to known as the prophetic movement. This is the element in Judaism that enables it to be self-critical. There is nothing like it in any other religious movement that I am aware of.

Somewhere around 900 years before the common era, another Jewish hero came on the scene. His name is, or was, Elijah and he is known as the father of the prophetic tradition. This is important because this is the tradition Jesus was in. The early followers of Jesus, those who crafted parables about him, drew their inspiration for these stories from Moses and from Elijah. This is another reason why I think it is important for us to know this information. The parables created about Jesus and his mighty deeds were influenced by the miracle stories told about Moses and those told about Elijah.

I want to encourage you, as I have done before, to get a readable translation of the Bible, I recommend Eugene Peterson’s, and read the stories yourself. In I Kings you’ll read this:

“The moment Ahab saw Elijah he said, ‘So it’s you, old troublemaker!’”

Elijah replies, "It's not I who has caused trouble in Israel but you and your government - you've dumped God's ways and commands and run off after local gods."

The miracle stories associated with Elijah are astounding. He could make it stop raining. He could call down fire from heaven.

There is this one story where Elijah, one lone Jewish prophet, takes on 450 prophets of Baal - somewhat like Moses taking on Pharaoh's magicians. What he called for was two sacrificial altars to be set up. They were going to have a bull-sacrificing contest. They would put all this wood up to build an altar, put a slaughtered bull on it - I'm glad we don't worship like this any more - but they would not light the fire. Elijah said, "You pray to your gods and I'll pray to mine and we'll see what happens." Everybody thought this was a good idea.

Elijah said to the Baal priests, "You go first. There are more of you."

So they start their praying. "O Baal, answer us!" But nothing happened. They jumped up and down and stomped on the altar they had made.

Here is what is in the actual story -

"By noon, Elijah had started making fun of them, taunting, 'Call a little louder - he is a god, after all. Maybe he's off meditating somewhere or other, or maybe he's gotten involved in a project or maybe he's on vacation. You don't suppose he's overslept, do you, and needs to be waked up.'"

I like this Elijah fellow a lot. He keeps jabbing at them and jabbing at them. They try every trick in the book to make something happen. There is not a flicker of a response.

Then Elijah says, "It's my turn." Elijah had his altar. He had them dig a trench around it. Then he had the altar and all the wood and the trench all drenched with water. Then he had it all drenched again. And a third time. Then he said, "Stand back." Then he called down fire from heaven that not only consumed the wood and

the ox but also the twelve huge stones he had put around the altar to represent the tribes of Israel.

Then he said to the crowd, “You grab those Baal priests, every one of them, and you take them down to the creek and kill them.” That’s going a bit too far.

Of course, this upset Ahab, the king, and he wanted to kill Elijah so Elijah went into hiding. He hid in a cave and there, at God’s command, he was fed by ravens each morning and evening with both bread and meat.

After this he moved on and God directed him to a widow’s home where the widow would take care of him. Elijah asked her for something to eat but she said, “I only have enough to make one little piece of bread for me and my son. We are going to eat it and then starve to death. Elijah said, “Don’t be so dramatic. You use your oil and meal to make me some food and I promise you the supply of oil and meal will never run out.” And, you know what? It didn’t.

In the Moses story there was the miracle of the expansion of food in the wilderness by the manna that came from heaven. Here there is the expansion of the food supply that never runs out. And, when we get into the Jesus story there is the expansion of the food supply when the loaves and fish are multiplied for thousands.

In this Elijah story this only son of this widow got sick and died and Elijah brought him back to life. It is the first occurrence in the Bible where a dead person is brought back to life in this world.

While he was in hiding Elijah was depressed and scared. God came to Elijah and comforted him with a vision of others who were still faithful and in one of the most beautiful and moving stories in the Bible where there is a mighty earthquake and a wind and a fire God directs Elijah to look for God, not in the earthquake, wind or fire but in a still, small voice.

John Greenleaf Whittier wrote a wonderful poem that has been set to music and has become one of the most beloved of all hymns -

Dear Lord and Father of mankind,
forgive our foolish ways;
re clothe us in our rightful mind,
in purer lives thy service find,
in deeper reverence, praise.

Breathe through the heats of our desire
thy coolness and thy balm;
let sense be dumb, let flesh retire;
speak through the earthquake, wind, and fire,
O still, small voice of calm.

The story of Elijah's departure from this world is amazing. It is, like all of these stories, beyond belief.

But before it happens Elijah is traveling now with his successor, Elisha. Moses had Joshua. Elijah has Elisha. The two of them come upon the river Jordan. They needed to get across but they couldn't so Elijah took off his cloak and swept it out across the river and immediately the waters parted and they walked across on dry land.

They are walking along and suddenly a chariot and horses of fire came down from heaven and Elijah went up in a whirlwind to heaven. It's in the Bible so it must be true. I'll bet if you called for an Uber and this chariot and horses of fire showed up, you wouldn't go. When we get to the story of Jesus ascending into heaven we'll revisit this because this story is the model for that story.

By the way, this is the story that provides the inspiration for the great AfroAmerican spiritual,

Swing Low, sweet chariot, coming for to carry me home.
swing low, sweet chariot, coming for to carry me home.

I looked over Jordan, and what did I see,
coming for to carry me home?
A band of angels coming after me, coming for to carry me home.

Elisha is understandably somewhat stunned by this. He walks back in the direction they have come. He comes to the Jordan River. Can't get across. But now he has Elijah's cloak and he uses it to part the waters and across he walks. He is the fourth person in the Bible to have this ability.

I won't recount all of Elisha's miracles but they parallel Elijah's. He is able to expand the food supply. A widow's bottle of olive oil become endless, no matter how much is used. He also raises someone from the dead. And, he is the first one in the Bible to do a miraculous healing.

After these miracles go away for 800 years, that's a long time, before they appear again told in relation to Jesus and his immediate followers. You will see when we get to them that the miracles attributed to Jesus are very similar to those attributed to Moses, Joshua, Elijah and Elisha. They are nature miracles, raising of the dead miracles, and healing miracles.

If you look carefully at these stories, they were never intended to be taken as stories of supernatural divine power intervening into human life. My hope is that in letting go of the "no-longer" and moving toward the "not-yet" we may be able to get back to the original meaning of these stories.

I've laid the foundation now for our continuing to our going further out and deeper within in our effort to be better practitioners of the values taught by Jesus, whom we are using as a teacher, in our effort to inhabit the more beautiful world our hearts know is possible. (I got that image from Charles Eisenstein.)

We live in an increasingly divided country. And, religion has gotten mixed up in this divisiveness. There are several sociological reasons for this. One of these has to do with religious illiteracy and just general ignorance. Chris Hedges, who is a Pulitzer prize-winner reporter, has written about these two Americas that we live in that are distressing. One America, which is becoming more of a minority as every day passes, functions in a literate world. This America can cope with complexity and has the intellectual tools to separate illusion from truth.

It was ten years ago when I first mentioned in this class a book that I had heard about from Father Richard Rohr. The book was “Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business” by Neil Postman. It had been written twenty-five years before that! That’s thirty five years ago.

It is hard for us to keep in mind but when this book was first published, there was no Internet, no cell phones, no smart phones, no cable channels by the hundreds, no DVDs, no caller id, no blogs, no flat-screen TVs, and no iPods or iPads, no streaming videos. Nothing like that. The book’s point is that because of these things what is truly meaningful is being lost and that we no longer care what we’ve lost as long as we’re being entertained.

I want to read you some excerpts from the Foreword of the book. They are worth our hearing:

“We were keeping our eye on 1984. When the year came and the prophecy didn’t, thoughtful Americans sang softly in praise of themselves. The roots of liberal democracy had held. Wherever else the terror had happened, we, at least, had not been visited by Orwellian nightmares.

“But we had forgotten that alongside Orwell’s dark vision, there was another - slightly older, slightly less well known, equally chilling: Aldous Huxley’s “Brave New World.” Contrary to common belief even among the educated, Huxley and Orwell did not prophesy the same thing. Orwell warns that we will be overcome by an externally imposed oppression. But in Huxley’s vision, no Big Brother is required to deprive people of their autonomy, maturity and history. As he saw it, people will come to love their oppression, to adore the technologies that undo their capacities to think.

“What Orwell feared were those who would ban books. What Huxley feared was that there would be no reason to ban a book for there would be no one who wanted to read one. Orwell feared those who would deprive us of information. Huxley feared those who would give us so much that we would be reduced to passivity and egoism. Orwell feared that the truth would be concealed from us. Huxley feared the truth would be drowned in a sea of irrelevance. Orwell feared we would become a captive culture. Huxley feared we would become a trivial culture.”

There is a culture out there that is made up of many people who live in a non-reality based belief system. Because it has severed itself from the importance of being literate, it cannot now differentiate between lies and truth. It is informed by simplistic, childish narratives and cliches. If you bring up something like non-dual mind to these people it throws them into confusion.

We are living in a culture that is addicted to the finite, with the illusion that it is enough for us. What is “getting us through the day,” is destroying us.

Hedges says that it is this divide, more than race, class or gender, more than rural or urban, believer or nonbeliever, red state or blue state, that has split the country into such radically distinct and antagonistic entities.

The statistics are stunning. There are over 42 million American adults, 20 percent of whom hold high school diplomas, who cannot read. This number is growing by two million people a year.

It gets worse. A third of all high school graduates and forty-two percent of college graduates never read a book after they finish high school. Eighty percent of the families in the United States last year did not buy a book.

So, both the media and our politicians cater to an audience that is either entrapped in shallowness or amnesia. It is all about style and story.

News, political debate, theater, art and books are judged not on the power of their ideas but on their ability to entertain.

Huge segments of our population, especially those who live in the embrace of Christian Fundamentalism and/or who embrace the religion of our culture, consumerism, are completely unmoored from reality. The way I would modify these observations by Hedges is that I know many very bright people - that is people who have graduate degrees in matters like law and medicine - who are as equally unmoored from reality when it comes to religion. They live in an incredibly narrow world.

There are lots of reasons for this. One is that many people are unwilling to do the tough work of “growing up.”

Plato said, “Ignorant people do not seek after wisdom. For herein lies the evil of their ignorance, that those who are neither good nor wise are nevertheless satisfied with themselves; they have no desire of which they feel no want.”

Here is a scary thing: We begin to think our culture is normal so it becomes so. So many people never question the assumptions on which they base their lives.

I try to be very clear in my teaching in here that I am very grateful for both my church and religious background. Unlike so many, many others I was not damaged by it. But, I did have to outgrow it. Such growth in wisdom and understanding is our primary purpose. We cannot do that without study and practice. The kind of growth I have in mind is not automatic or effortless.

I will add that I am also grateful for the church and religious practices I have now. It makes this possible. I also know that everything about it humanly constructed and it is humanly fallible. I know how the sausage is made.

As we go forward from the “no-longer” into the “not-yet,” we do not do so blindly. We have a guide. Jesus. And, following both his teaching and example, I want to remind you and me, us, of our potential; not your brokenness. There is nothing wrong with you.

Our task is to go out from here and work for wholeness, not make judgments. To be involved in gracious behavior rather than focused on right beliefs. We are called to live into the questions much more than having or giving answers. Because life in this world is what we are called to participate in, create and communicate rather than focusing on some imagined afterlife. We are called to be answering people. We are called to live in this world.

If we can go back to our scriptures and read them, as I intend to do in the weeks ahead, and bring only 21st century interpretations to them what a different story of faith we will have. If we free ourselves from interpretations that could only ever have been as good as they could only ever have been, we can fast-forward

ourselves to this reality, to this world, and the challenges that are actually facing us now.

While working on this talk I ran across some words by Oscar Romero. He is the one who said, “When I feed the poor, they call me a Saint. When I ask why there are the poor, I am called a Communist.”

Listen to these words of his: “Unfortunately, brothers and sisters, we are the product of a spiritualized, individualistic education. We were taught: Try to save your soul and don’t worry about the rest. We told the suffering: Be patient, heaven will follow, hang on. No, that’s not right, that’s not salvation! The salvation that Christ brings is salvation from every bondage that oppresses human beings.” I would add that it is bondage also to live in the religious and theological straightjackets most of us have inherited. There is more.

In her book, “The Unbearable Wholeness of Being,” Ilia Delio writes:

“We’re reaching a fork in the road; two paths are diverging on planet Earth, and the one we choose will make all the difference for the life of the planet. (And, I would add, for our own lives.) Shall we continue our medieval religious practices in a medieval paradigm and mechanistic culture and undergo extinction? Or shall we wake up to this dynamic, evolutionary universe and the rise of consciousness toward an integral wholeness?”

The miracles told about Jesus were never meant to be taken literally any more than the miracle stories attached to Moses, Joshua, Elijah or Elisha. Not literally. But, seriously. We are called to make the paradigm shift to a new cosmology where every single second is a miracle.

No matter where you go this week, no matter what happens, remember this: you carry precious cargo. So, watch your step.