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Matthew 14:22-33
Miraculous and Amazing

In her book *Putting the Amazing Back in Grace* Anne Weems ponders about how we humans have reached a point where we are amazed about nothing. In ancient times when Jesus told people to love their enemies, the people were amazed. When he told them to have compassion for the stranger and the poor, the people were amazed. When he told them to open the prison door and set the captive free, the people were amazed. When he touched the unclean and healed the sick, the people were amazed. How did we ever get so un-amazed? What happened to amazement, awe, wonder?

In this age of rationalism most of us consider ourselves too sophisticated for miracles, too reasonable for the mystical, too realistic for the spiritual, consequently we are not often amazed. We have a hard time accepting the miracle stories of Jesus and the unexplainable, religious sightings, paranormal activities which have captivated audiences for centuries. It is curious that our species has always sought the experience of the amazing, the miraculous, the wonder-filled and the transcendent.

Perhaps that is why the word *miracle*, and its experiences, is not confined to Biblical times. In fact, the word *miracle* seems to be very much part of our modern world. I typed the word on Google and was inundated with 56,900 sites. There was Miracle Baby, Miracle Ear, Miracle Software, Miracle Baseball, Miracle diapers, Miracle herbs, Miracle lyrics, Miracle Beer Diet, Miracle Skin Care... there's even a Miracle Distribution Center. I suppose one can even buy miracles. And in many refrigerators today one can probably find a jar of Miracle Whip, in gardens a box of Miracle Grow, in cabinets some Miracle Minerals.

Then there is a different kind of experience that feels miraculous – when frozen food defrosts in a microwave in just a few minutes, it is some kind of miraculous. When email is sent to friends thousands of miles away and is received instantly, it is kind of amazing. Antibiotics used to be miracle drugs. Walking on the moon for the first time was miraculous. We humans seek experiences that will cause amazement and awe. Our inner being longs to transcend the chaotic everyday moments, to give meaning to the mundane, common experiences, and to discover the mystical.

Perhaps this is why Jesus' miracles made him popular. Large crowds followed him around just to see what He would do next. They brought their sick and lame, their suffering and pained so Jesus would touch and heal. In this way they would experience not only healing but amazement as well.

In our reading today before Jesus walked on water, he had stilled the storm on the Lake, had raised Jairus' daughter from the dead, cast out demons, and had fed the five thousand with bread and fish.

As much as we love these stories and pass them on to our children, probably in some ways, these Gospels miracles present a problematic area to us. In our post scientific and rational world we are tempted to explain, scrutinize the miraculous, and find rational analysis for the wondrous. While the people of ancient times, the first century, and most of the Middle Ages believed that miracles really did happen. Magical powers were real to them. And those powers were not unintelligible or

irrational. The people understood the order of the world in a way that allowed the miraculous to happen.

To the ancients there was a magical world, a spirit-world that included divination, oracles, dream interpretation, spells, predictions, curses, and many other aspects of medicine and healing. Along with religion they had a worldview that included magic, and they did not differentiate the two. The magical and the superstitious, the spiritual and the religious, were all one and the same. They belonged to the spirit-world and were part of the cosmological structure of the universe that undergirded everyone's religious outlook. This is why there were magic makers, miracle workers, healers, saints, holy people and so on... Jesus of course was one of them, and many of the miracle stories of Jesus have parallels in other ancient traditions. (White)

Accordingly, in the NT one of the Greek words translated to *miracle* is *dunamis* which means *power*. So a miracle was the display, the doing of God's power, often interpreted as a sign. The word *amaze* means to *stupefy, make crazy*, its root goes to the word *maze* which means *delusion, bewilderment*. In Arabic the word *crazy* is *majnoon* which literally means *possessed by the jinn*. The spirit-world was real and what moved people to experience wonder in the ancient world is perhaps quite different than what prompts us to awe and wonder today.

In today's evolving world the miracles of Jesus recorded in the Gospels no longer evoke amazement or awe in us. Most of us no longer find amazement in the world of magic, divination, spells or curses. In fact, some experts suggest that presently we are experiencing the dawn of a new mystical age around the world. The world has changed yet our hunger for amazement and awe, for wonder and transcendence has not. Our hearts continue to long for the amazing, for the spiritual and the miraculous, for that which will give meaning to our life experiences and take us beyond the common moments of our days.

So I have been pondering the question – what amazes us today? What is miraculous and sacred to us? What evokes awe and wonder in us? What is it that we humans hold holy and wondrous? If the words of Jesus are no longer amazing, if the mysterious works of God are no longer miraculous, if the presence of the Spirit is lost in our daily lives, then what is amazing and miraculous? What is sacred, meaningful, hallowed?

Albert Einstein was right when he said – *The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the fundamental emotion which stands at the cradle of true art and true science. Those who know it not and can no longer wonder, no longer feel amazement, are as good as dead.*

At the core of our spiritual longing is this deep desire for the miraculous and the amazing, for that which takes us beyond ourselves, and opens us to moments of transcendence and awe, making us truly human in our vulnerability, in our desire to experience the beyond, to connect to the sacred, the divine, the spiritual, the mysterious, the amazing and the miraculous.

As a result perhaps the words of Thich Nhat Hanh ring true for us today – *The miracle is not to walk on water. The miracle is to walk on the green earth, dwelling deeply in the present moment.*

Long ago in India a young woman had a baby. She loved the child as dearly as life itself. One day the child became ill and died. The mother was beside herself and refused to accept the death of her

child. She ran to all the healers in the village, begging them to give her a potion, or something to bring the child back to life.

Finally she came to a healer who said, Yes, I can make you a potion to bring the child back to life, but the ingredient required to do it is very hard to find.

I'll get it, whatever it is, cried the mother.

Bring me a mustard seed, said the healer, a mustard seed from a house that has not known loss in the past year.

The woman hurried off to the nearest household. Please she begged, I need a mustard seed for a potion that will bring my baby back to life. The people ran for their mustard seed supply. As they handed her she remembered the condition. Your household has not suffered any losses in the last year, has it? She asked.

Oh yes, we lost both my parents in the last year, came the reply.

The woman hurried on to the next house... A mustard seed please she begged. You have not had a loss have you? She asked. I lost my husband three months ago, came the reply.

The woman hurried on to the next house, and the next and at each house the question was met with the same answer – Yes, we have known loss in the past year.

Finally the woman stopped and looked at her child. The pain enveloped her and she realized loss is as common to life as a mustard seed is to cooking. She returned home and began her grieving.

The story reminds us that each of us has known loss and pain, each of us has known struggle, death, betrayal, violence but each of us is here to tell about it, to continue the journey; and perhaps that's the miracle and the amazing. There is none who is exempt from difficulty and struggle. There is none who was promised a smooth and trouble free journey. That many of us overcome tremendous odds is miraculous and amazing. That many of us can heal our broken hearts and rise above the pain and the resentment, the anger and the betrayal is miraculous and amazing. That we do not let our hurt and bitterness, our disappointments and distress take over our lives and make of us a miserable people, is miraculous and amazing.

I suggest that for us living in this post modern world, the miraculous and the amazing happen in the ordinary, common moments, not in supernatural, grandiose or paranormal experiences. Perhaps to us in the world today, the miraculous and the amazing is found in the ordinary moments of loss and healing, alienation and connection, brokenness and wholeness; any and all moments when we are aware, awake, responsive to the gift of life itself. Our miraculous happens in the everyday, ordinary, commonplace, mundane moments when we are aware and attentive, mindful and grateful. For how often the miraculous passes us by and we miss it? How often does the amazing happen and we are asleep to it and lost? What makes the moment miraculous and the experience amazing is our awareness, our responsiveness, our attitude of gratitude.

Besides, even the miracles of Jesus point to this reality beyond themselves, to the experience of mystery and spirit, to a place where our hearts come to know the miracle of love and healing, the amazing and the wonder-full, connecting us to the Divine within the mundane, to the amazing within the everyday. May we live the moment aware and awake to the amazing and the miraculous. A tall order indeed!

Resources used:

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<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/religion/symposium/magic.html>

The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, 1968, Abingdon Press