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“Practically Impossible”
Pastor Mary Scheer, Brewster Baptist Church

Mark 6:30–44

I want to start today by asking you a question. What do you think about miracles? Some folks are skeptical about miracles and while we might agree that they have happened we might think of them as things that happened in the past.

You know, God did some big ones like parting the Red Sea so the Israelites could get away from the Egyptian army, and of course Jesus did some like raising Lazareth from the dead.

But are they just stories from the past or do they still occur today?

From Genesis to Revelation, the Bible is full of miracles. Jesus performed miracles; the prophets performed miracles, even the disciples performed miracles.

But what about you and I, can we expect miracles today?

“It has been said by many researchers that ninety percent of Americans believe in God and eighty percent believe in miracles. Why? It would seem we are in need of a God who is bigger than we are. We need a God behind us who can take our hopeless situations and fill them once again with hope. We want to be mystified and enthralled by a God whose every movement is larger than our problems.”¹

On June 21, 2005, CNN reported this story.

Only 12-years-old, and in a moment one Ethiopian girl's world turned into a nightmare. Seven violent men abducted the pre-teen, intending to force her into marriage. The men held the girl for seven days, beating her repeatedly. Such incidents are common in Ethiopia, as several men band together to abduct young girls for the purpose of securing a bride. The girls are typically abused and beaten into submission. In this particular instance, there was not a human being within earshot to hear the cries of this girl. But her cries were heard. The unlikely heroes were three majestic Ethiopian lions. Famous for their large black manes, these lions are the national symbol of the country. In response to the girl's cries for help, three large lions leapt from the brush and chased her captors away. Perhaps the child thought she had traded one danger for another, but remarkably, her heroes formed a protective perimeter around her. A half-day later, when the police arrived, the guardian lions simply stood up and walked away. Sgt. Wondimu Wedajo said, "They stood guard until we found her, and then they just left her like a gift and went back into the forest." Among the explanations for the lions' unusual behavior, one wildlife expert suggested the girl's whimpering could have sounded like a lion cub. For whatever reason, the predator served as protector. The carnivore became a sentinel. "Everyone...thinks this is some kind of miracle," Wondimu commented.²

We may not need a miracle that includes lions, but some of us will be hoping for a miracle of timing this Thursday when we're trying to get the Thanksgiving dinner on the table all at the same time while still hot.

Some folks will be praying for a Thanksgiving day miracle that there won't be any fighting this year as they gather with family that may not get along very well.

¹ Calvin Miller, *Miracles and Wonders*, (Time Warner Company, 2003) p1

² David Slagle, *Decatur, Georgia*; source: Anthony Mitchell, "Lions Rescue, Guard Beaten Ethiopian Girl," *Yahoo News* (6-21-05); "Lions Free Kidnapped Girl," *CNN.com* (6-21-05)

Some folks will be praying for a thanksgiving miracle just to be able to put dinner on the table because of the cost.

(I want to take just a moment to plug our Food Pantry – As you know we have a food pantry that feeds families within the church as well as families in the community referred to us by Lower Capt Outreach. By the end of October we had served 240 adults and 248 children. Over the past two months, we've seen a significant increase in the number of families who've been coming for food and on Friday we gave out around 25 food baskets to help our neighbors be able to celebrate Thanksgiving. Another way that we help people is through our Deacons "Assistance Fund" from the offering that we take the first Sunday of every month. We want to thank you for your generous support and let you know that because we have a cushion in this account we will not be collecting a Deacon's offering next Sunday. Because we are in good shape there, we'd like to ask you to consider buying some extra food for our food pantry perhaps while you're out shopping for your Thanksgiving meal. If you think you'd like to do that, some of the items we could use can be found in the bulletin).

Both the Old and the New Testament have stories of folks who struggled to put food on the table.

One day Elijah, told King Ahab, that there would be no dew or rain during the next few years until he gave the word!" Then the LORD said to Elijah, "Go to the east and hide by Kerith Brook, near where it enters the Jordan River. Drink from the brook and eat what the ravens bring you, for I have commanded them to bring you food." So Elijah did as the LORD told him and camped beside Kerith Brook, east of the Jordan. The ravens brought him bread and meat each morning and evening, and he drank from the brook. But after a while the brook dried up because of the drought. Then the LORD said to Elijah, "Go and live in the village of Zarephath, near the city of Sidon. I have instructed a widow there to feed you." So he went to Zarephath. As he arrived at the gates of the village, he saw a widow gathering sticks, and he asked her, "Would you please bring me a little water in a cup?" As she was going to get it, he called to her, "Bring me a bite of bread, too." But she said, "I swear by the LORD your God that I don't have a single piece of bread in the house. And I have only a handful of flour left in the jar and a little cooking oil in the bottom of the jug. I was just gathering a few sticks to cook this last meal, and then my son and I will die." But Elijah said to her, "Don't be afraid! Go ahead and do just what you've said, but make a little bread for me first. Then use what's left to prepare a meal for yourself and your son. For this is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: There will always be flour and olive oil left in your containers until the time when the LORD sends rain and the crops grow again!" So she did as Elijah said, and she and Elijah and her son continued to eat for many days. There was always enough flour and olive oil left in the containers, just as the LORD had promised through Elijah. (1Kings 17:1-16 - NLT)

In the same way that God supernaturally fed for the widow and her son, Jesus supernaturally fed hungry people in his day.

SCRIPTURE: The apostles returned to Jesus from their ministry tour and told him all they had done and taught. Then Jesus said, "Let's go off by ourselves to a quiet place and rest awhile." He said this because there were so many people coming and going that Jesus and his apostles didn't even have time to eat. So they left by boat for a quiet place, where they could be alone. But many people recognized them and saw them leaving, and people from many towns ran ahead along the shore and got there ahead of them. Jesus saw the huge crowd as he stepped

from the boat, and he had compassion on them because they were like sheep without a shepherd. So he began teaching them many things. Late in the afternoon his disciples came to him and said, "This is a remote place, and it's already getting late. Send the crowds away so they can go to the nearby farms and villages and buy something to eat." But Jesus said, "You feed them." "With what?" they asked. "We'd have to work for months to earn enough money to buy food for all these people!" "How much bread do you have?" he asked. "Go and find out." They came back and reported, "We have five loaves of bread and two fish." Then Jesus told the disciples to have the people sit down in groups on the green grass. So they sat down in groups of fifty or a hundred. Jesus took the five loaves and two fish, looked up toward heaven, and blessed them. Then, breaking the loaves into pieces, he kept giving the bread to the disciples so they could distribute it to the people. He also divided the fish for everyone to share. They all ate as much as they wanted, and afterward, the disciples picked up twelve baskets of leftover bread and fish. A total of 5,000 men and their families were fed from those loaves! (Mark 6: 30-44 - New Living Translation)

To give a little context for this story, we have to look back to see what was happening.

After spending a great deal of time talking with the disciples about faith in Mark ch3, he rode with them through a storm in the middle of the night that nearly capsized their boat and when they cried out to him, "don't you care if we drown?" he quietly calmed the storm. Then he healed a man possessed by demons, raised a dead girl back to life and healed a woman who had been sick for twelve years. Then while on a trip through his own home town, it says he couldn't do very many miracles because the people there doubted him because they didn't understand who he was. They kept saying, "who is this? Isn't this Mary's son? Who does he think he is?" He sent the disciples out on their own to do some mission work preaching, teaching and healing. Then after a disappointing and less than affirming trip home, he received the terrible news that his cousin, John the Baptist has been murdered, he was beheaded by Herod.

It was a time of business with exhilarating success followed by disappointment, failure and crushing grief. They were exhausted and needed some time to slow down and get away, to process and recover. Mark says, the apostles returned to Jesus reporting on their ministry tour and Jesus said, "Let's get away by ourselves to a quiet place so we can rest awhile." They got in their boat and headed out, but they'd been seen, and needy people from all over the place ran ahead of them and got to the shore just as they pulled their boat in.

I wonder what they were feeling?

Can you imagine after waiting all year for your vacation, you finally get on your way and just when you arrive at your vacation spot, your boss and anyone else who needs something from you is there to meet you, all shouting and yelling at you at the same time! Personal grief, constant stress and pressure had caused them to seek out a quiet place to get away and rest. But now their own need gave way to empathy. Jesus saw the people and he saw their need and he was moved with compassion. He said they were like sheep without a shepherd. So he began teaching and healing the sick. This went on all day, and as the afternoon sky slowly faded to evening shades of gray and with their own stomachs grumbling the disciples remind Jesus that the people have been there all day and urge him to "Send them away so they can get something to eat." But Jesus says, "You give them something to eat." Five thousand men, plus women and children...That's impossible! We don't even have enough food for us, (just five loaves and two fishes), and even if we had some money it would take eight months salary to pay for the food needed to feed all these people, it just can't be done.

Mark wrote that while there are things that seem impossible to humans, nothing is impossible for God. (Mk 9:23; 10:27)

Illustrating the words of Psalm 23, Jesus, “the Good Shepherd” has them sit down in large groups in the grass... ‘The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not be in want. He makes me lie down in green pastures...he prepares a table before me...my cup overflows, his goodness and love follow me.’ The people were following Jesus, and his goodness and love were following them. The text says he had them ‘recline’ in the grass. This is the posture they would have taken at a great banquet. By faith they behaved as though they were going to have a great feast. And they did, they ate all they wanted and the disciples picked up enough leftovers to fill twelve baskets!

“At the very place where their need met God’s supply a miracle was born.”³

What was the point of the miracle? To feed empty bellies? More than that, miracles tell us that God cares.....

“As a baby only seven months old, Emily Weichman had a stroke. While it was the only stroke she ever had, she remained a weak child never enjoying a robust state of health. In September 1991, the Weichman’s were driving across Wyoming. They were in a mostly deserted area when Emily said, “Mommy, I’m sick!” Soon thereafter, she began to vomit. The Weichman’s suddenly knew the grip of fear. They knew Emily must be taken to a hospital at once, but how? They were in a desolate and unpopulated area. Then a wonderful thing happened. Suddenly everyone began to see those wonderful blue and white markers. They passed at least four of these signs which led them right to a hospital. Emily’s condition was quickly diagnosed. Her life was spared. The hospital attendants stabilized her with anticonvulsant drugs. Once Emily was in her room, Mrs. Weichman told the doctor, “If it weren’t for those hospital signs we might still be driving around.” The physician was dumbfounded, “What signs?” “The ones lining our route,” Marlene explained. “They were literally a lifesaver – we couldn’t have found the hospital without them.” The doctor was perplexed. “I live about eight miles out on that road. I travel it ever day here,” he told her. “I’ve never seen any hospital signs.” Marlene was puzzled. No hospital signs! But all four adults in the van had seen them. The next day Marlene phoned the Rock Springs Chamber of Commerce to ask about the elusive signs. “There have never been any hospital signs along that route,” said a city official. Emily is now healthy and happy. Her parents consider her a “miracle child.”⁴

Now maybe you’re thinking, what about me? What about the times I prayed for a miracle and nothing happened?

“Sometimes we ask and God answers...and our needs meet his supply. But sometimes we pray and our desperation doesn’t seem to make any difference. We pray and pray and the only thing we hear back is the sound of crickets chirping. Our physical needs do not always end in a miracle.

³ Calvin Miller, *Miracles and Wonders*, (Time Warner Company, 2003) p10

⁴ Joan Wester Anderson, *Where Miracles Happen* (NY: Brett Books, Inc., 1994) pp. 25-27.

Jesus did not heal all the sick of His day. When He came the world was sick. It was still sick after He left it...The big miracle is not in having someone make us entirely well, but the ability to see ourselves that way.”⁵

It is said that, “There are none who never doubt. Some doubt all and are called atheists. Some doubt most and are called agnostics. Some doubt only a little and are called believers.”⁶

“Perhaps the major difference between Christians and skeptics is this: Christians accept a mysterious God and the universe is solved. Atheists deny God and must therefore live in a mysterious universe.”⁷

Jesus performed miracles because he cared. Often his miracles were precluded by the statement that he was moved with compassion.

He performed thirty five miracles.. Nine times he countered the natural world...turning water into wine, stilling the storm, feeding the multitude. Six of his miracles were exorcisms and three times he raised the dead, but the bulk of his miracles were acts to alleviate suffering, seventeen times he healed, which earned him the title of Great Physician.⁸

“We trust that Jesus saves our worst moments of desperation by doing something so wonderful and unexplainable that by common consent we call Him the Miracle Worker ...Jesus’ miracles offer us a double gift. They assure us of God’s presence in our world. And they bestow upon us the gift of mystery.”⁹

But we are not just recipients of the mystery, we are often called to be participants. “Janice Stiehler of Baldwin, New York said she “worried on the night of the Yankees game her teenage son was attending, for the game had gone into extra innings.” She knew that Kurt and his friends would have to take the Penn Station subway. This would have to be done in the wee small hours of the morning. She went to sleep but woke at precisely 1:10a.m. when she heard the crash of a shattered windowpane. At first she thought someone was breaking into her house. Frightened, she woke her husband and both of them searched the house but found no evidence of burglars or of broken glass. But her son Kurt was still not home. “For some reason, I felt compelled to pray for him,” Janice remembers. So she sat down in the kitchen, prayed and waited. “An hour later, a Penn Station security officer phoned. The boys had been horsing around at the terminal, and Kurt’s arm had crushed through a huge storefront window. The broken glass pieces were so jagged and heavy that the arm should have been completely severed. But Kurt had sustained no injury, not even a scratch. “When did this happen?” Janice asked. “About one-fifteen,” came the answer. Then Janice understood. She had been awakened just in time to pray for Kurt. And somehow, across the miles, her prayers had protected him.”¹⁰

When the disciples wanted Jesus to send the people away to get something to eat, Jesus said, “You give them something to eat!” CS Lewis wrote: “God seems to do nothing of Himself which

⁵ Calvin Miller, *Miracles and Wonders*, (Time Warner Company, 2003) p12-13

⁶ Calvin Miller, *A Hunger for Meaning*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1984).

⁷ Calvin Miller, *Miracles and Wonders*, (Time Warner Company, 2003) p163

⁸ Calvin Miller, *Miracles and Wonders*, (Time Warner Company, 2003) p38

⁹ Calvin Miller, *Miracles and Wonders*, (Time Warner Company, 2003) p2-3

¹⁰ Joan Wester Anderson, *Where Miracles Happen* (NY: Delacorte Press, 1974) pp. 15-16

He can possibly delegate to His creatures. He commands us to do slowly and blunderingly what He could do perfectly and in the twinkling of an eye.”

We participate in miracles when we offer hope to those overwhelmed by circumstances they cannot change, When we bring food for the hungry, when we are willing to give even when we aren't sure where it will come from. when we stand the gap in faith praying for the impossible because we believe in a God who says all things are possible, when we accept a challenge and step forward to help because we have heard God say to us, you do it and I will be with you and multiply your efforts.

Miracles happen more often than we think. Some are small, some grand and all of them remind us that we matter to God. “They point to the fact that we never lost our place in paradise, as far as the love of our Maker is known. God gives us miracles not to show off, but because he loves us too much to see us hurt or be puzzled about his reality or live under the heel of Satan...His love was his presence, and his presence after all is the greatest of miracles.”¹¹

Thanksgiving is a natural time to talk about and give thanks for the miracles of God's grace, for the miracles of life both physical and eternal, that was won for us at the cross through what was the greatest miracle, the miracle of the resurrection when Jesus victory guaranteed that even death will have no power over us.

The good news is that miracles are still happening. “God is still alive and doing unexplainable and glorious things in the lives of those who believe.”

May you be encouraged and filled with joy this Thursday as you reflect on and give thanks for God's intervention and interaction in the world, for the miracles big and small, ordinary and extraordinary.

LET'S PRAY:

Dear Lord, thank you for being a miracle working God of wonder. Help us to appreciate the mystery that surrounds the things we can't explain. There can be so many things in this world that fight against our faith, things that make us doubt, tragedy and devastation in the world and in our personal lives that leave us wondering why you, who can do all things, sometimes perform miracles and other times seem to do nothing. God hold us tight in those times and help us even when we don't understand. Thank you for all the times you break through, the times we see your hand at work in our lives, the times we are encouraged by the hope and comfort of our friends, the times we are sustained through prayer and for all the privileges of grace, the provisions of mercy and the security of your love. For all these things and more, we give you thanks. In Jesus name. Amen.

BENEDICTION: (from Psalm 77: 11-15)

Remember the deeds of the Lord, yes, remember his miracles of long ago. Meditate on all his works and consider his mighty deeds. God's ways are holy. What god is as great as our God? He is the God who performs miracles; and displays His power among the people. With his mighty arm he redeemed his people.”

Give thanks to the Lord for he is good!

¹¹ Calvin Miller, *Miracles and Wonders*, (Time Warner Company, 2003) p96

And all God's people said, Amen.