



## Proof for those of little faith?

Church of the Spirit, Kingstowne March 8, 2009

**Introduction to the message:** We live in a modern scientifically advanced age. We're sophisticated people who have lived to see the atom split and men walk on the moon. We can fertilize babies in test tubes, create stem cells, and with the right equipment we can watch 2 TV shows at the same time with a screen inside screen while taping another show on our TiVo's.

The people who lived long ago would never have been able to comprehend the advances we've seen. It seems logical, then, to assume they did not comprehend much of anything else. Take for instance, any of the miracles in the Bible. We have come to expect that everything can be explained through science. Or, as a famous atheist and editor of Skeptic magazine has said, "There are no miracles, only things science has not yet explained." So it's natural to think that people back then were not thinking clearly when they believed God had somehow calmed a storm or cured a blind man. And what miracles! Does the church really expect us to believe that someone can walk on water, stop time, heal lepers, feed thousands of people with a loaf of bread, or live inside the belly of a fish for three days? A lot of miracles seem to be simply too hard to believe. How many of you agree you've had doubts?

But then, those miracles are only hard to explain, not hard to believe. Belief does not enter into it. Those who don't believe in God, waste their time looking for proof. As I said last week, if you don't accept that a miracle could happen, there's no scientific evidence in the world that would be acceptable to you. You've already made up your mind that miracles are unscientific and so, impossible. So there. The challenge here is not about what you believe has happened in one specific case or another but in whether or not you believe God has the power to make anything happen at all. Settle that, and the idea of miracles is no longer troubling, no matter how fishy they sound.

But as I also said last week, each of the miracles happen for a reason. God is not capricious, he has a purpose. Miracles are not meant to entertain, they are not magic tricks. Think of miracles as acted out parables. They're memorable, they're dramatic ways to teach you about God. Even the story of Jonah in the belly of the whale teaches something new about God. Only here's a miracle modern folk love to make fun of. And why not? It's so easy to get the story mixed up with the Disney classic movie of Pinocchio.

Yet in this miracle story we find God not only able to rescue Jonah from the depths of despair (and the ocean depths) God shows he is willing to help Jonah even if it takes something miraculous. And that fish? What of it? Jonah was drowning. Sending a fish to rescue him made more sense than God sending a submarine. Even in the miracles, God works with what makes sense and what he has at hand. I think by using a method of saving Jonah that was so outlandish, God reminded Jonah there was no way he was going to be able to save himself. It was a humbling experience. That's something Jonah needed. Sometimes, no, I think it's quite often, I need the same kind of reminder. I can see how much power God has only against the backdrop of my own powerlessness. It takes getting into a tight spot to be able to spot God's hand at work. That's something the apostle Paul learned the hard way too. He prayed for healing, only God did not heal him. Paul prayed for a miracle, but he didn't get one. Instead, as he writes in the Bible, he heard God's voice clearly say: "My grace is all you need. My power works best in your weakness." [2 Corinthians 12:9]

Miracles are all about that: showing God's power in our moments of weakness. They teach us that salvation comes from God, we can't do it ourselves.

So how often have you felt like you were sinking down, how often have you felt like you were no longer in control, perhaps you had been abandoned, or that things were dragging you down. Finances? Relationships? Distractions and doubts and addictions? What is it that entangles you, what is it that threatens to darken your joy in living? Each of us have something that threatens, storm clouds in the distance that seem to be coming on fast. In times like those you come to realize it takes a miracle to get you out of it safely ...

### Reading: Jonah 2

Jonah prayed to his God from the belly of the fish: "In trouble, deep trouble, I prayed to God. He answered me. From the belly of the grave I cried, 'Help!' You heard my cry. You threw me into ocean's depths, into a watery grave, with ocean waves, ocean breakers crashing over me. I said, 'I've been thrown away, thrown out, out of your sight. I'll never again lay eyes on your Holy Temple.' Ocean gripped me by the throat. The ancient Abyss grabbed me and held tight. My head was all tangled in

seaweed at the bottom of the sea where the mountains take root. I was as far down as a body can go, and the gates were slamming shut behind me forever—Yet you pulled me up from that grave alive, O God, my God! When my life was slipping away, I remembered God, and my prayer got through to you ... Those who worship hollow gods, walk away from their only true love. But I'm worshipping you, God, calling out in thanksgiving! And I'll do what I promised I'd do! Salvation belongs to God!" (The Message)

**Message:** Well I'm not ashamed to admit I've felt like that. For years I kept a copy of this prayer in my daytimer so I could offer too, each day.

Jonah's experience was life-changing. It turned him around. It didn't prove to him there was a God or that God had the ability to do big things. He'd never doubted it. When there was a huge storm at sea, right in the path he was taking to run away from God, Jonah was clearly convinced God was involved in it. Jonah believed in God's power. What he did not believe in was that God would care enough about him to save him from the storm. He didn't believe God could forgive him for what he had done. How many of you wonder about that this morning? You don't need proof God has power, you just worry he won't use it to help you.

Years back, before we started Sunday services here, I held a weekly worship service at a local nursing home. I met a woman there in her 80's who would not receive communion. She came to all the service as and participated, but she felt she could not receive communion because she did not deserve it. Her family spoke with me about it. Some 40 years before there had been some slip in her marriage, some indiscretion on her part, and she had carried the shame of that with her ever since. It had kept her from being at ease with her family, it had kept her from God, in many ways it had built a wall between her and a sense of peace. I talked with her for months about forgiveness, about God's love. I reminded her God was not so much concerned with where she had been but with where she was going next. It was one of my biggest achievements as a priest when shortly before she died she had asked to be forgiven and received communion. At last she had come to believe God was not just able to forgive her, he was willing to do it. After 40 years. Later that year her family asked me to hold her funeral. They said their mom had died reconciled to them, and at peace. Some miracles are a long time coming ...

Jonah learned a lot about God here, and he too was reconciled to God at last. He learned God could hear his prayers even when he went down to where the weeds grabbed him and pulled him down. God heard him at the gates of death. There was nowhere he could go to escape from God. That was a good thing because he too had wandered a long ways away from God in his life. What's more he learned, get this, he learned to give God thanks before he was scooped up miraculously and

saved. Ask yourself how ready you are to give God thanks the next time you're feeling dragged down. Most of us, when feeling dragged down do something else. We whine. Only we don't call it that because we feel we have every right to complain. But it's still whining. We wait for proof God will save. We wait until after God has done a miracle to thank him, not before. But not Jonah. He called for help, and knew God would answer him, even if it would take one whopper of a miracle. So he was thankful even while he was sinking ... Sometimes the biggest miracles are the ones that happen inside of a person, you know?

Jonah called out to God in his moment of great need. So, how often do you call for help? When you call out for help do you really expect God to be there? A member here at The Spirit wrote in this week to say he had gotten to the point where he needed help. He couldn't juggle everything. He was struggling with worries over his job, and his bills, and it was all piling up, and dragging him under. As he was commuting he saw a sign that said, "Need Help? Call on Jesus." And then it gave a phone number. Well, in a moment of decision or madness, he thought he'd give the number a try. He said it didn't go just as he had hoped. There were no miracles waiting for him at the other end of the line. But he did have a very nice chat with a guy named Jesus who owns his own landscaping business. Got a good quote on

some work he needed done at home so it didn't turn out all bad.

There's a difference though between asking God for a favor, and relying on God to save you. The miracle we're looking at today is something Jesus did which showed he was God. But it was not a miracle that proved anything. Instead, it was a miracle that taught his followers something important. In the next few minutes, I want it to teach you how you can rely on God in the week ahead.

### **Reading: Mark 8:31-38**

Jesus got into the boat and started across the lake with his disciples. Suddenly, a terrible storm came up, with waves breaking into the boat. But Jesus was sleeping. The disciples went to him and woke him up, shouting, "Lord, save us! We're going to drown!" And Jesus answered, "Why are you afraid? You have so little faith!" Then he stood up and rebuked the wind and waves, and suddenly all was calm. The disciples just sat there in awe. "Who is this?" they asked themselves. "Even the wind and waves obey him!" (NLT)

**Message:** The disciples are amazed that even the weather obeyed Jesus. That's something that makes our modern scientific minds get uneasy. We've never met anyone who could take control of the weather. But what of it? That's not the important part of the story, but let's deal with it now so we can move on.

**Jonah believed in God's power, he didn't believe God would care enough about him to save him from the storm. Jonah didn't believe God could forgive him for what he had done. How many of you wonder about that this morning?**

Christians believe God created heaven and earth and everything seen and unseen. While weathermen track cold fronts and predict storms, they simply make predictions. How often are they wrong? You ever wonder if you were wrong that many times at your work if you'd still have a job? But then we all know even with the computer models the weathermen can't tell you what will happen ahead of time. Certainly none of you believes the weathermen have any control over the weather. They just try to predict it. But what if God does? What if God has control over the weather, so that any storm might be just a process of a cold front and a tropical stream mixing it up, or it might be something God made happen. You can't prove it one way or the other. But one thing you can know about every storm ... sooner or later they end. And who's to say God does not have any say in the matter. Maybe he does, maybe he doesn't. Maybe he leaves most of the weather alone, but once in a while dabbles in it a bit, like an artist putting a finishing touch to his work of art. If so, then every storm that ends might end because God said so. Again the issue here is not this miracle or that but whether you think God has the power to do miracles in the first place. If so, calming a storm is quite tame.

It's not the stopping of the storm that makes me wonder in this story. But the other miracle at work here. He changes the hearts of those in the boat. One thing's sure from the story, the disciples were not asking Jesus to prove himself here. And the disciples were not asking for good weather because they disliked the rain. They weren't asking Jesus for a favor or for a proof, they were pleading for their lives. That makes a whole lot of difference in whether or not God responds to your prayer with a miracle. I mean this. Ask yourself when you pray are you making a wish or asking for a fish? Are you asking God to do you a favor or to do something only he could do?

That's what gets me about people who pray for sunny weather or for parking spots. It's like praying for the Redskins to win a game. Such prayers are really not prayers to the Almighty God and more like asking a friend for a favor. Sure, you can dress these requests up in fancy prayer language, but they come down to the same thing ... "Almighty God, maker of Heaven and Earth, and lover of souls, we entreat you to hear your servants who give you thanks for your gracious love; Grant now, O Lord, if it be your will, that my lottery ticket be a winner." I've told you before I know, about the guy who prayed for parking spots. He was on a diet and it was hard because each day on his way to work he passed by a Baskin Robbins, complete with 36 flavors of ice cream. One day he figured he'd been good all week, he'd ask God for a sign. "Lord, if there is an open parking spot in front of the Baskin Robbins I'll know it's OK with you if I stop and splurge." Well sure enough, on his sixth time around the block, there it was, an empty spot ...

OK, if you want to pray for a parking spot, OK. But it's not a miracle God is going to do for you. According to the Bible there are no known accounts of God doing favors like that with his miracle. Maybe you believe God has given you a parking place before, or done a small miracle for you. But it would be an odd thing, considering God does not do miracles just for fun. And no wonder people make fun of Christians when we cheapen God's miracles down to who wins a ball game.

Miracles are bigger and better than that.

So there the disciples were, in fear of their lives. "We're going to drown! Save us!" the disciples pleaded. I'm sure you can hear in this an earnest entreaty for help, not an academic discussion of the changeability of storms. After Jesus acts, they wonder at his power ... a power made clear in their weakness. Jesus reminds them they did not need to be afraid, even so. He had been right beside them the whole time. It must have been pretty hard to be asleep in a small boat tossed about in a storm ... but there you are. Jesus saves them by calming the storm, this one time, but then Jesus challenges them: "Why are you so afraid, you have so little faith." He could have added, "I was right there beside you. And still you were afraid. Why was that O men of little faith? Why is it not enough to trust I am with you no matter what?"

I want to be able to trust God, no matter what happens. I have been working at it for almost 50 years now. Surely there have been crises in my life, some disappointments. Not everything has gone the way I planned. Why should it? Like many of you, I have had to deal with the death of loved ones. But I also wonder, maybe it's more like I worry ... what would happen to my trust if something happened to one of my kids ... or to my wife? How faithful would I be if life was harder than it is now? I can not tell you now, I can only tell you I think about it. And as far as I can see, the question is not one of if, but when ... because challenges come into every life. You can't make every storm go away, and God doesn't promise to calm them all. He promises to be with you in each storm, and to make his power known in your moments of weakness.

Well anyway, that's the answer I get to my worries. Certainly difficult things may be on the horizon, but I won't need to face them by myself. I find I pray less for God to do me favors, and instead to favor me with his presence every day. I don't make wishes, but I keep looking for the big fishes, those miraculous things only God could do to save me time and again. Like Paul I'm learning to trust that the times of weakness are not all bad, because it's in them I learn again and again to rely on God. And I'm trying something else, I'm trying to thank God before he proves himself, before I get what I asked for in my prayers. It's not a strategy to manipulate God, as if by thanking him for his blessings I somehow now obligate him to give them. God is not tricked. No, I have learned to thank God just for being there, when I celebrate, when I rest, and yes, when I am being dragged down under.

We don't have a lot of other references to Jesus calming every storm that came their way. This one event was enough to teach the lesson. It's a tough lesson to learn, tougher to remember. God has the power to take away the storms in life, or to save you when you are going under. But more often God leaves the storm and sits it through with you ... Sure there have been times when I wanted God to make the storms go away. Instead he said he would not let them harm me. I've wanted there to be no more pain, instead he said that nothing would separate me from him. And you know, trusting in his simple "I am with you" is enough to help me learn to praise him in the storm. So why am I so afraid?

## **Solo: Praise you in the storm**

*words and music recorded by Casting Crowns*

I was sure by now, God, that you would have reached down  
And wiped our tears away, stepped in and saved the day.  
But once again, I say amen and it's still raining as the thunder rolls  
I barely hear you whisper through the rain, "I'm with you"  
And as your mercy falls I raise my hands and praise  
The God who gives and takes away.  
And I'll praise you in this storm and I will lift my hands  
For you are who you are no matter where I am  
And every tear I've cried you hold in your hand  
You never left my side and though my heart is torn  
I will praise you in this storm  
I remember when I stumbled in the wind  
You heard my cry to you and raised me up again  
My strength is almost gone how can I carry on  
If I can't find you and as the thunder rolls  
I barely hear you whisper through the rain "I'm with you"  
And as your mercy falls I raise my hands and praise  
The God who gives and takes away  
I lift my eyes onto the hills, where does my help come from?  
My help comes from the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth  
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