

“Miracles Are Hard Work”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
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John 2: 1-11

What is a miracle? How do you define “miracle”? If you look in the dictionary, miracle is defined as: “an event or effect that apparently contradicts known scientific laws and is hence thought to be due to supernatural causes, especially an act of God” ([Webster’s New Universal Unabridged Dictionary](#), © 1983: 1147). Many times, it takes something that we cannot explain logically for us to categorize it as a miracle.

I’m a fan of Star Trek, and in the movie “Star Trek: Into Darkness,” the crew’s ship, the Enterprise, has no power and is falling back into earth’s orbit. Without power, the ship will burn up in the planet’s atmosphere. Unbeknownst to Mr. Spock and the crew on the bridge, the captain, James Kirk, is exposing himself to deadly radiation to get the ship’s power restored. When he finally does this, and the ship is safely out of danger, one of the crew on the bridge says, “It’s a miracle.” To which Spock replies, “There are no such things.” It is then that Spock and the crew realize that the captain has made the ultimate sacrifice to save them.

For some of us, we can look at events in life and readily describe them as miracles. We get an “A” on a test that we hardly studied for, and we attribute it to a supernatural force. We find something which we surely thought was lost forever, and we thank God for that miracle.

For others of us, we may look at the world more through the eyes of Spock from Star Trek. We get an “A” on a test that we hardly studied for, and we assume that we had that knowledge already in our heads. We find something which we surely thought was lost forever, and we attribute it to retracing our steps and logically figuring out where it was.

How we define a miracle often is an insight into how we view God’s movement and actions in our lives. Something may happen that we’ve been hoping and wishing for, and we immediately say it’s a miracle from God. Something may happen that we cannot explain, and we simply say, “thank you, God,” and recognize it as one more way we are not alone in this journey of faith. Miracles don’t always have to be sensational events; many times, miracles are happening all the time around us, for they are signs of God’s presence in our lives.

Throughout the gospels, we read of Jesus performing miracles. He heals those who are lame or possessed by demons. He feeds thousands of people with very little food. He calms the stormy seas, and he walks on water to meet his disciples in a boat. All of these signs are meant to

signal that God is present in the world in a new and transformative way. The miracles of Jesus point us in the direction of God.

This story from John's Gospel is the first of several signs that the gospel writer shares. Indeed, on Christmas Eve, when we welcomed the birth of Emmanuel – God with us – we read from the first chapter of John: “And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth” (1:14). For John, the miracles are evidence of how “we have seen his glory,” as God's own flesh lived and breathed in this world. As Jesus turns water into wine, it is the first of many ways God breaks in and shows God's people that the divine presence is active in their midst.

But you know something? Miracles can also be hard work. Not just for God, but for us, as well. Joanna Harader writes: *Much of the time, I feel overwhelmed by the problems of the world. I think many in the church feel the same way. So even those of us with distinctly uncharismatic leanings welcome all the help we can get . . .*

Sometimes the problems that keep us up at night, yearning for the Holy Spirit, are large and far reaching: environmental degradation, gun violence, systemic racism, rape culture. And sometimes our desire for a miracle is focused on more mundane realities: getting over a cold, finding a nursery attendant, finishing a sermon.

For Jesus' mother, the problem is that the wine has run out at the wedding party. She knows that only divine intervention can save the party guests from disappointment and the newly married couple from shame. Fortunately, she also knows someone who can work miracles.

Transforming water into wine is Jesus' first sign in the Gospel of John. I always thought of it as a lighthearted, simple little miracle – until I considered the servants' perspective. Jesus tells them to fill the nearby jars with water, “and they filled them up to the brim.” This one short sentence describes so much work.

These servants – at least some of whom are likely women – fill up six stone jars, each of which holds 20-30 gallons. Even empty, the jars would be extremely heavy; filled with about 200 pounds of water each, they would be nearly impossible to move. And without faucets or hoses, this 120-180 gallons of water would most likely have to be drawn from a well.

It turns out that even miracles can be hard work. Not just for the person performing the miracle, but for anyone who happens to be in the general vicinity and gets drafted into service. The servants have to fill up the jars. The disciples have to hand out food to more than 5,000 people – and pick up the leftovers. Those who love Lazarus have to push the stone from his tomb's entrance and remove the grave cloths from his resurrected body. Miracles may be inspired and holy and wonderful, but they are not easy (Joanna Harader, [The Christian Century](#), December 11, 2018).

This past Tuesday was the tenth anniversary of the Miracle on the Hudson, when a US Airways plane landed in the Hudson River in New York City and all the passengers and crew survived. There is no question that it was an incredible marvel that this aircraft could lose both engines, make a water landing, and that everyone made it out safely, especially because such instances are so very, very rare.

And yet, this miracle was very hard indeed for all involved. It required the pilots and crew to rely on their emergency training, whereas in crisis mode you are more prone to panic and forget such important lessons. It necessitated the passengers working together to help one another and not allow anyone to be left behind. It involved ferry boat operators, police, and emergency personnel to respond with rapid deployment, to bring all those passengers to safety on land. It was a miracle, to be sure. But it was a miracle that was very hard work for everyone involved.

Part of what also makes miracles hard work is that we have to realize that God is doing something new and different in our lives or the life of the church. And this miracle story embodies that in an interesting way.

Brian Stoffregen writes: *Something I hadn't noticed before is that these jars were empty. The servants have to fill them with water before the miracle occurs. Jesus is not transforming the purification water that was in the jars into the wine; but he is transforming new water that has been placed in the old containers . . . In contrast to Mark 2:21-22 - new wine needs new wineskins - here the image seems to be that the new wine can be held by the old containers . . . I might suggest that the "old container" could be our bodies, and that Jesus can transform what is inside the "container" - the sinner becomes a saint, the pagan becomes a child of God, the polluted becomes pure* (Brian Stoffregen, *Exegetical Notes*, www.crossmarks.com/brian/john2x1.htm).

Do we believe that God can transform our old bodies into something new? When we have lived in the shadow of sin for so long, that can be something liberating and, at the same time, painful to hear. It's liberating to believe that our old, stale, polluted water can be poured out of these old containers, and new, purified water can fill our every crevice. It's painful to consider letting go of what we have grown accustomed to, and how something new will sit inside the limits of our old selves. Do we believe that God can transform our old bodies into something new?

Do we believe that God can transform the old skins of the church with new water that fills its walls? I have heard it said that it is easier to start a new congregation than to try and change an established one. If that is the case, does that mean we don't believe our own water can be transformed into something new? Do we believe that God still performs miracles in the old, established church we all are a part of?

Look around this place and tell me what you think. Are there signs that we need our water transformed into something new and life-giving? Are there signs that such water is flowing freely in the lives of those who come to worship, grow, and serve in Christ's name? How might your life be changed if you freely pour out the old water that you are holding onto, and allow God to pour into you new wine that is life-giving? Miracles are not just easy fixes by God. Miracles are hard work for all who are touched by them. But they are signs of God's abundant love for us through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Joanna Harader concludes: *Jesus' first sign in John also flows with abundance. We are told that the six jars present at the party hold water for the Jewish rite of purification. Those jars would have held enough water to purify 200,000 people - certainly more than could be expected to show up for a wedding party in Cana. There is an abundance.*

Yet the servants fill the jars "up to the brim." These jars that hold far more than is possibly needed are nevertheless filled completely. And when the miracle occurs, it is not a miracle to make ends meet, to help the couple manage. It is a miracle of abundance. Gallons and gallons of good wine, wine that impressed the steward. Wine that reveals the glory of God (ibid).

As we go from this place, may we be open to the miracles of abundance which our Lord showers down upon us. For even though they may change and form us in ways that are unexpected, these miracles nevertheless fill us to the brim with the unconditional love of Emmanuel - God with us.

Thanks be to God. Amen.