

THE POWER OF A PREPOSITION! OR, WAS THAT A PROPOSITION?



GENESIS 37:1-4, 12-28
PSALM 105:1-6, 16-22, 45b
ROMANS 10:5-15
MATTHEW 14:22-33

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost
Nineteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time
Proper 14
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THE POWER OF A PREPOSITION! OR, WAS THAT A PROPOSITION?

(The preached portion of the sermon is in bold!)

Paul Simon once opined in his 1986 song *The Boy in the Bubble*, “These are the days of miracle and wonder; this is the long-distance call; the way the camera follows us in slo-mo; the way we look to us all; the way we look to a distant constellation; that’s dying in the corner of the sky; these are the days of miracle and wonder; and don’t cry baby, don’t cry, don’t cry.”

A decade before, in 1975, Jefferson Starship, recorded their hit song, *Miracles*. “If only you believe like I believe . . . we’d get by. If only you believe in miracles, so would I.” Of course, they were not singing about the Bible or theology, they were singing about the miracle of love! Miracles, it seems, are always on our minds, or at least not far away. We seem to have a fascination, perhaps even an obsession with the miraculous, hoping against all hope that miracles “still” happen in our day, preferably in the exact way they happened or were performed in the ancient world, in biblical times. Without really thinking about it, we have naively understood the biblical miracles as if they were a blueprint, somehow designed to exact specifications, describing down to the last minute detail, benignly believing that the various biblical models manifest in myriad ways throughout the Bible provide a

paradigm, illustrating the correct form or structure for the miraculous in our midst today, showing us just how they happen and exactly what they look like, every time, all the time, removing all possible opportunity for spontaneity, any potential for serendipitous mystery springing forth, welling up from within them, wonderfully, gleefully surprising us all. We have to be able to find ways in our mindset to separate the miraculous today from any of that detailed in the biblical texts. They are two distinct, very different subjects altogether. Even so, let's be honest, just once we would like to see a miracle moving among us, a manifestation of a miracle materialize in our presence, and not some questionable miracle of metaphorical mystery, but a real, bona fide, verifiable, measurable, empirical miracle, a miracle of much magnitude, of monumental magnificence and majesty, a miracle the equivalent, proportional with say, manna from heaven—yes, let's go there for starters—or maybe for example, the equivalent of a parting of the Red Sea, or how about—one of our all-time favorites—changing a substance, say something akin to water into wine, or while we are at it, feeding of the multitude, or something on the level of a walking on water variety. We want the real deal, not some facsimile, a miraculous misappropriation merely masquerading as scientific reality! We do not want to hear about the miracle of love, the miracle of conception and birth, or flowers in bloom, or any other natural phenomena we trivialize by benignly calling such pedestrian occurrences miraculous, incorrectly naming any number of them as miracle. No, we want to see

the evidence of a thing, any kind of thing that is not just slightly, but radically altered, amazingly transformed, a visual that proves the pudding, removing any shadow of doubt, while simultaneously breaking every natural law and all the laws of physics. Something bucking the routine of the gravitational pull would be a good starting point! Something challenging quantum physics might be a good place to begin!

And, that my friends, is the way we traditionally have understood the miracles recorded in the Bible, that they completely and totally suspend the laws of nature, making a mockery of science and physics. My goal this morning is not to remove the spontaneous and serendipitous possibility ever abounding that miracles can and do happen in the world today. The inherent danger in preaching an aspect of a text rather than the text itself, in this case the role of a miracle in telling a profound story, is that we quickly lose the big picture and obsess on what really would have been a minor consideration in times of old because miracles were considered commonplace in those cultures and thus including them in any a given text was normal. That being said, when we talk about miracles, especially from a biblical perspective, we must always do so with honesty and integrity, never allowing any mythology of the miraculous to overwhelm our intelligence, to stifle our intellectual curiosity, stunting our critical minds. A sobriety of intellect is never out of style when engaging these texts, seeking to discover their richest imagery, overflowing with deepest meaning!

Miracles were nothing more than the medium, the occasion, but not the issue at stake in these kinds of stories. They were very familiar, popular in the ancient world. They were not unique to the biblical writers in general, or more specifically even to the Gospel writers who used them with great frequency in describing Jesus and his exploits. Miracle stories were so commonplace, so ubiquitous that it might even be argued that they could be regarded as a literary genre in their own right, used intentionally as a direct means, a method describing events and/or persons that we might call larger than life. And, therein is a hint about today's walking on the water episode in the Gospel of Matthew. I believe there is plenty of gray area, enough mystery within this vast universe and our earthly home to leave open a very wide swath, a door or window of possibility allowing for the unimaginable, unexplainable, and indescribable coexisting within the vast nuance of verifiable data, something always simmering just beyond our finite comprehension. Never underestimate the powerful capacity of God's awe producing and pervasively still speaking Spirit. We have all heard stories of strange and unusual events taking place, including reports of healings that were beyond any medical description or diagnosis, confounding doctors, and medical personnel alike, immediate cures that defied logic and any rational explanation whatsoever. Some in our midst, thankfully, have experienced this level of what they sincerely believe, perceiving in their spirit to be an intentional intervention, hopefully, faithfully of divine origin. To dismiss these kinds of testimonials, a personal witness of this character,

would be foolish and as equally close minded as the narrowest doctrines or dogmas of any rigid, inflexible fundamentalist.

Our very belief in God, our perception of a divine reality, a Holiness of awe inspiring and inspiriting transcendent mystery, is a baseline acknowledgment that, despite our inherently, innately human limitations, we are somehow intuitively in touch with a profound energy, a powerful presence leaping all bounds into boundless possibilities, a ubiquitous reality propelling us past the limitations of all creation, including our finite, often frail and fragile selves. Belief in God is a starting point for all of our belief shrouded mythologies, a faith and trust, even comfort or security, intuitively sensing something beyond our knowing, our limited grasp, all of our thinking, all rational arguments, all empirical evidence to the contrary, what we label as proof, existential existence—and yes, that is redundant and repetitive and all at the same time—something transcending, escaping the boundaries governing time and space, suspending every natural law, that challenge, even threaten our escape from the confining clutches of reality, all that we know to be true in every way, factual beyond all question, all reasonable doubt. Therefore, when engaging the biblical narrative, reducing miracles to magic tricks performed by magicians is never acceptable and only serves to diminish the original message intended by the writer. Likewise, continuing to insist absolutely, solely relying on a literal world of fantasy and make believe, the reader, both then

and of course now, was and is negatively impacted, poorly informed. The Gospels were written within the confines of a narrowly focused context, purposefully developed with a Jewish audience in mind, designed from within a completely Jewish cultural milieu and religious orientation. What we are coming to understand more and more is that the first audience to read these ancient texts sought from within these narratives the same as do all of us, discovering deeper meanings oft hidden, but very much present in the nuance of the narratives. We continue an ancient quest began by our forebears in the faith, seeking, as they once did, an encounter that hopefully engages a broader perspective as we dare to dance with the mysteries surrounding these not so frozen in time manuscripts. Unfortunately, we are prone to erroneously interpret, traditionally assume these texts to be literal, probably from about the 2nd century, after the expansion of the faith into Hellenistic cultures. That is the way the Gospels came to be understood as reliable historical reports, renderings of factual events that actually happened in real time in the exact way they are described. Nothing could have been further from the truth! In the final analysis, we know, convinced beyond all shadows of doubt that these stories were by design, by intent extremely exaggerated, obviously excessively embellished to make their most salient, most profound, significant points. It is that premise into which we lean today.

Today, we read one of the most popular stories in the Gospels, Jesus' stroll on the water, recorded in Matthew, Mark, and John, but omitted from Luke.

Sadly, the miracle stories found throughout the biblical narrative have been reduced to their least common denominator, trivialized, amounting to nothing more valuable than litmus tests, exclusively separating true believers, those who accept at face value, literalizing while unfortunately trivializing these rich stories, from the false prophets, heretics who are accused of shamefully cheapening the miracles contained within these myths by interpreting them, mocking them as mere metaphorical musings, allegorical symbols that supposedly only serve to point to a larger, a far greater and grander meaning revealing the depth and breadth of a mystery that always seems to be just out of reach, stretching our boldest and most radical imaging, somewhere beyond our wildest imaginations.

If we are to ever unlock the full potential of these ancient texts, revealing meanings that even to this day, in these very moments, are often hidden, remaining shrouded in mystery and wonder, then we must unbind ourselves from the confines, the restricting and suffocating limitations of literalism. As John Dominic Crossan observes, “My point, once again, is not that those ancient people told literal stories and we are now smart enough to take them symbolically, but that they told them symbolically and we are now dumb enough to take them literally.” It might be a painful word, but it is a much-needed word of truth. We must risk allowing ourselves permission, giving us the freedom to examine and explore in uncluttered and unlimited ways all that the biblical writers, editors, and compilers sought to portray and reveal at the time they wrote as they sought to convey

these kernels of truth to a vast congregation who would read and study their content down through the ages, including you and me. This will only happen once inquiring minds are liberated from the bonds of literalism. Ironically, these texts are as timeless as they are time bound, and therein is part and parcel of their beauty and relevance.

One of the reasons that we do not do not do too much, over functioning with the miracle stories in the Bible, from either the Hebrew scriptures or from the Gospels, is that they present us with, for all intents and purposes, a no-win scenario. If we preach the miracles as true, as factual, historical, literal events that happened in time in the exact way they are presented, then we come across as Bible thumpers who have no grasp of historical or scientific reality. If we take the approach that the biblical miracle stories are allegorical in nature, symbolic metaphors that speak to a greater truth, a larger than life reality, choosing to engage the miracle stories, like all the Bible, seriously or literately, but not literally, then we are accused of being liberals, branded as progressives who deny the very veracity of the Bible, daring to even remotely suggest that these words of Holy writ might not be the inerrant, infallible “Word” of God. And so, these texts are often read at face value and then avoided or ignored altogether because we make a very poor assumption, fearing that they no longer offer a relevant word for us, contain nothing of value that might inform our postmodern 21st century age.

At the risk of giving a Sunday School lesson, teaching a Bible study at the expense of a sermon, the miracle stories can serve as reminders that these grandiose stories indeed speak to a far larger purpose than simply coming off as poor attempts to capture our attention and imagination by amusing us with fascinating tales of incredible, unbelievable, and legendary proportions. First, recent study shows that the Gospels, in general, and Matthew, in particular, were written with the Jewish liturgical calendar in mind. (Sidebar: This Thursday Rabbi Carla Freedman will be joining the Emmaus group to critique this theory, which is most clearly articulated by John Shelby Spong in his latest book, *Biblical Literalism, a Gentile Heresy*. All of you are invited this Thursday at 10:00 a.m. to hear Rabbi Carla. It will be worth your time!) And not only that, but there is substantial evidence that the miracle stories in the Gospels were written to show the Jewish reader that Jesus was a super-sized version of Elijah and even Moses, an Elijah or Moses on steroids. These writers wanted to convey the idea that Jesus was super human, a real-life flesh and blood superhero! Sadly, they accomplished this, at least in western minds, sacrificing his real humanity on the altar of his assumed divinity. In the Gospel narratives, anything Elijah or Moses could do, Jesus could do better. Moses could part the sea, with a little help from Yahweh, but Jesus could walk on it. Moses could bring manna from heaven, but Jesus could multiply the loaves and fishes. Moses could strike a rock and bring forth water to

drink; Jesus could turn water into wine! Top that! It is said of Elijah that he went to heaven on a chariot of fire accompanied by a whirlwind; Jesus is reported to have lifted off into space like a slow moving, slow motion rocket, ascending under his own jet propulsion power. Think O. J.'s infamous Ford Bronco chase! You get the point! The Gospel writers wanted to make plain, making known to everyone that Jesus was greater than any king in Israel's illustrious history, even outshining, one-upping all the law and the prophets of old. Finally, there is one other significant point to be made about these Gospel musings, their Jewish writers never anticipated these works getting into the hands of the Hellenistic culture long driven by the Greek philosophers. Generally speaking, this was simply not on their radar, though this trend was beginning to come into focus in the later Gospels, those written after the fall of Jerusalem in 70 CE. The Gospels were originally written to a solely Jewish audience and that the idea of their falling into gentile hands, spreading into gentile territories would have seemed strange, even ludicrous to these faithful Jews. However, with schism on the horizon in the synagogues, it became readily apparent, painfully obvious that the Gospels would be read by a wider population, and we see clear hints of that unfolding drama in these texts. The problem when we read these miracle stories is that we get so enamored with, fascinated by the miracle included within the text, to our own detriment, to the degree that we lose sight of the text, forgetting the larger meaning, the important lesson driving the narrative in the first place.

Folks, for centuries the Jews had read their epic tales, the adventures of people like Moses, Elijah, and David, among a great host of many. Never once did these faithful folk stop and ponder that the great narratives describing their exploits were intended to be read as literal renderings, factual presentations of any of their experiences. This was epic history, an adventurous tale describing the Israelite journeys as a wandering Bedouin people who were transitioning, becoming agrarian as they settled in a land they believed they had been promised and were thus entitled, becoming a great and victorious nation. Never did they stop and ponder, wondering to themselves, or to anybody else, whether any of their salvation history recorded in these sacred books as holy writ and guiding their worship was a historical play by play of their communal life. It was not a question they would have asked, even as some surely accepted the premise of these stories at face value. At the same time, these tribal peoples lived in a world of the supernatural, believing that every natural occurrence—storms, earthquakes, floods, and the like—all were directly connected to the whims of the divine, that God manipulated these events, suspending the laws of Mother Nature to achieve these jaw-dropping works understood as miraculous in their very essence, at their very core. This was the way these ancients interpreted the world around them, everything that affected their reality.

The ultimate goal of the many miracle accounts recorded in the Gospels was to show that in Jesus, there was something incredibly special. In their eyes

Jesus was so much more than a man among men. In their not so humble estimation, Jesus was unlike any human being who came before him or would come after him, and many, if not most of us gathered here, would probably say the same thing. John Shelby Spong likes to describe Jesus as one who fully embodied the presence of God, so much so that when you saw him at work as he taught the masses, when you spoke with him, when he performed his many acts of grace and compassion, even to the point that they were described as miraculous in every way—feeding the multitude, healing the sick, raising the dead, turning water into a libation, a wine worthy of a wedding celebration, walking on the water, calming the seas and the storms, both real and those that negatively impacted the lives of those he encountered—so much so that people regarded him as the very essence, the very manifestation of God in the flesh, Immanuel—God with us. I mean, no one is going to say such things about any of the likes of us! Clearly, there was something about Jesus, and none of our words suffice!

The miracle is not that Jesus is credited with having walked on water, but that Jesus had the powerful ability to inspire goodness and grace in all those he encountered and engaged. Sidebar about today's text: In New Testament Greek there are scarcely few prepositions, totally unlike English which has a preposition for every location imaginable. Conventional wisdom assumes that Jesus walked "on" the water, but other plausible possibilities are in play here, "in", "by", "beside," "toward", probably not "under"! Peter took care of that one! It

appeared to the disciples that Jesus was really and truly walking on water. In the eerie morning haze, the thick fog of a new day dawning, Peter, poor, gullible, faithful Peter thought that Jesus was levitating right across the pond. Bold, brazen, naïve, foolish! Who else, besides the always vocal Peter, would have been so cocky, so arrogantly sure and certain? We can almost hear the other disciples laughing hysterically as Peter flails the water, attempting to find dry land or the safety of the boat! Jesus made Peter an interesting proposition, using whatever preposition he might have chosen, proposing that Peter come and join him in dawn's early light, inviting this always brave disciple for a stroll and Peter, whatever his motive, was courageous enough, quick to respond. Immediately, he sinks like a rock, ironically the very thing for which he is named, but at least he had the temerity, the audacity to get out of the boat!

So, let's float an idea here, pun intended, the miracle in Jesus is not found in magic, but is found in his great capacity, the amazing ability to inspire, motivating us, for moving us to move forward, or in a new direction, for getting us to get out of the boats that bind us, that limit our full participation in life and the realm of God in which we are called to humble service. Jesus calms our spirits when we cower in fear at any of life's painful realities. It is so true, that miracles are all around us if we would only choose to see them. Miracles are everywhere if we are willing to risk experiencing the gifts of the Spirit in our lives and in our

world. Stop looking for magic, for when you settle for that pedestrian way, you will miss the potential for miracles in your midst, removing all possibility that a miracle just might be manifest in your life within your sphere of being on any given day. Folks, there are no unicorns, but there is a very real energy, a pervading presence at work all around us. Your job is to be open, to allow yourselves to open your hearts and minds to all that God is doing in this wonderful creation wrought by very holy and caring hands.

Today's text once again provides a subtle reminder that there are those "out there" who are looking for a church home, searching for a congregation that that does not insist that anyone be required to check their brain at the door, forcing them to believe things they regard as irrelevant or irrational, perhaps even nonsensical, a place devoid of the suffocating effects of literalism, allowing for metaphorical imagery, a belief and faith that challenges the mind while tugging at the heart, willing to joyfully engage the cutting edges of the greatest mystery undergirding the ancient faith once given to the Apostles. As my friend Jill Bierwirth says, if we choose to continue to literally embrace biblical mythology, to postmodern critically thinking, intellectually curious people, we are speaking what amounts to nothing more than a foreign language. We might as well be speaking in tongues! There are many who seek a place to worship and gather for fellowship as beloved faith community, engaging in the kind of social justice

mission and ministry that reflects the divine realm of God. Here at SouthShore we offer such a place, we provide such an atmosphere.

As I reflected on the nauseatingly disgusting events of this week, haunted by the prospects of nuclear war with North Korea and its nut job, and then saddened and distressed by the horrific events in Charlottesville, Virginia yesterday, insidious acts that have already claimed at least three precious lives, I realized that as I sat at my computer doing what I do every week as I plan for our sermonic moments together, all of my work on this sermon, in the big scheme of things, was really irrelevant, amounting to not much more than intellectual calisthenics—as one critique once deridingly labeled some of my theological thinking—because of the serious situation confronting us. Indeed, we do need, desperately need some miracles in our world. We need a massive, major miracle, the magnitude of peace and harmony and the miraculous ability of having the goodness and grace allowing everyone to embrace the beauty of God’s diverse human creation. Sadly, yesterday’s awful moments remind us that we are not “there” yet! I am dismayed beyond all comprehension that white supremacy and white nationalism, spurred by the nuttiness of the alt-right nonsense, and revealed in the outright hostility and hatred of persons of other races, African-Americans and Hispanics in particular, in antisemitism, and in everything which all of us abhor and that diminishes our common humanity, is still on the radar of our

reality, the collective conscience of our nation. Obviously, there are some who either cannot or will not name this wickedness, this ominous evil threatening our overarching good and even our democracy, and so I must declare a prophetic word from this pulpit in this sacred time and space. Why is it important to name as extremist “radical Islamic terrorism,” but evidently not important to name another scourge infecting our country, inflicting its peculiar brand of hate, that is, the toxic blight, the cesspools known as the KKK, Nazis, Neo-Nazis, along with other assorted hate groups from that infamous “basket of deplorables,” under the general headings of white nationalists and white supremacists? I mean, have you really stopped and thought about it, Nazis in America? Come on, seriously! I guess we now know exactly at least some of the contents of that basket! **It’s just nuts! Enough is enough!** Rodney King’s plea, “Can’t we all just get along?” is simply not enough to stem this level of hostility, this deep-seated cancer of the social order that is living and lurking among us, threatening to kill our spirits, if not our person, destroying the very fragile fabric that knits us together, undergirding this great and grand social experiment, a communal system that thrives on celebrating our rich diversity as a people united around some wonderful bedrock principles. Where is our socially just society? That is why we are who we are! That is why we do what we do here! For such a time as this, in these trying times, a congregation open to all people is desperately needed, a church where, “No matter who they are or where they are on

life's journey, they are welcome!" May the light of the SouthShore Church shine ever so brightly, helping light every dark corner, blinding the dim bulbs that walk about us, seemingly surrounding us, seeking to poison life's party. I am reminded of the words of the Apostle Paul this morning, reminding us that in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek. Take that phrase everywhere it will take you, to every extreme, every human possibility, and in so doing you will discover the essence of Christ's gospel of "extravagant welcome", expansive inclusion, and radical hospitality. In this age of political, societal, and religious unrest and upheaval, some of the behavior unfortunately being manifest in our midst, even managing to match the worst in human history—and that is saying quite a lot—calls for a miracle, daring even to demand a miracle of the greatest magnitude. Sadly, it seems that we humans do not have the capacity to manage our own insanity! Finally, explaining the miraculous is all fine and good, but praying for a desperately needed bunch of miracles in our midst is what is needed today in these challenging moments. That is the hope of our humanity, perhaps the only hope! So, come, Lord Jesus, and fill the earth with your peace. And that, my friends, would be the biggest miracle of all!

"These are the days of miracle and wonder; this is the long-distance call; the way the camera follows us in slo-mo; the way we look to us all; the way we look to a distant constellation; that's dying in the corner of

the sky; these are the days of miracle and wonder; and don't cry baby, don't cry, don't cry." "If only you believe like I believe . . . we'd get by. If only you believe in miracles, so would I."

In the name of the One who creates, redeems, sustains, and continues to perform miracles in our midst even when we manage to miss them. Amen and amen.

Benediction: Go forth from this place, and may the light we proclaim outshine the dim bulbs who unfortunately, still walk about us.

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