

The Last Sunday after the Epiphany, Year C
February 10, 2013 :: Luke 9:28-43a
Fr. Jim Cook

“What’s in a Miracle?”

We’ve just heard the story of the transfiguration of Jesus. It’s a story that occurs in three of the four gospels, which tells us that it was an important story for the early church. And it’s a story which we get to hear twice each year—today, on the Last Sunday after the Epiphany, and on or about August 6, which is the Feast Day of the Transfiguration of Jesus— which should tell us that it’s still an important story for the church.

Now, according to Thomas Aquinas (who was an extremely influential 13th century priest and theologian) the transfiguration of Jesus was the greatest of all the miracles recorded in the gospels, because it was an echo of what transpired at the baptism of Jesus— that is, at each event, the voice of God is heard to be affirming the person and ministry of Jesus.

And, what’s more, many scholars view the transfiguration as a singular and unique miracle, because it was a miracle that happened to Jesus himself. (Which makes me think they’ve forgotten about something we call the “resurrection.”) So, the transfiguration is kind of a big deal.

But to be completely honest, when people start talking about miracles, I start feeling uneasy. And it’s not because I don’t believe in miracles; I do. The problem is that our culture has taught us to look for a particular type of miracle. Here are a couple of brief examples of what I mean.

Many years ago, my brother lived in a Christian community. And he was told how, sometime before, a member of that community was involved in a car accident and killed instantly. However, another member of that community just happened to have been at the scene; he prayed for the victim, who immediately came back to life. The community’s verdict? It was a miracle.

When I was in seminary, I worked one summer as a student chaplain at an area hospital. One of the wards I was assigned to was the cardiac bypass intensive care unit. One afternoon a patient was brought into the ICU right from surgery, but the doctors and nurses were having difficulty getting the patient’s heart to work on its own. After a while they gave up the effort, and brought in the family for a final farewell. I stood with the family, gathered around the man’s bed, and we said a few prayers. A few moments later, the heart began to work on its own.

The family's verdict was that it was a miracle. The doctors weren't necessarily convinced it was a miracle, but they did joke about offering me office space nearby.

Now I can't explain exactly what happened in each situation. But having seen the movie *The Princess Bride*, I do know that there's a difference between someone who is "mostly dead" and someone who is "all dead." But the reason such stories make me uneasy is because, when we focus our attention on the spectacular miracle stories that we hear about only every now and then, we become more or less blind to the more common and subtle miracles that are taking place around us every day. And that can be a problem.

I want you to look at the image on the back page of your worship booklet. It's a reproduction of a 16th century painting entitled *The Transfiguration*, by Raphael. The actual painting is in the Vatican museum, and it's huge— 9 by 12 feet!

In the top half of the painting, Jesus is going through his transfiguration, with Moses and Elijah floating on either side of him; and the three disciples are sleepily sprawled across the ground.

In the bottom half of the painting, the other disciples are trying to— but failing— heal a sick boy; something they've seen Jesus do many times. Now, where things start to get interesting, are the 2 men in the bottom half of the painting who are looking at the people around them, and pointing towards Jesus; as if



to say, “If you’re looking for a miracle, you’re looking in the wrong direction.” So, let’s look at the top half of the painting and see what’s the miracle these guys are pointing to.

If you recall from the gospel reading, Moses and Elijah are talking to Jesus about his “departure, which [Jesus] was about to accomplish at Jerusalem.” Jesus’ “departure”— in some translation it’s described as his “exodus”— it’s another way of talking about his death. So, Moses, Elijah, and Jesus are talking about the fact that Jesus is going to die in Jerusalem. So, what happens next? Simply this: Jesus returns to his ministry, and he continues with his work.

St. Paul talks about this in his letter to the Romans, when he writes:

“Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:7-8, NIV).

Therefore, I would like to suggest that the miracle of the transfiguration is the fact that Jesus chooses to continue down the path of self-sacrifice for people who— to use St. Paul’s words— are neither “righteous” nor even “good,” but “sinners.” In other words, the miracle of the transfiguration is that, even after receiving the news of his impending death, Jesus continues to think of the needs of others.

Several years ago, I was introduced to the story of Susie Mann. Though she was in her late 70s, she enjoyed things like white-water rafting, bungee-jumping, and swimming with the sharks.

One day her doctors told her she had Stage-4 colon cancer, and had only 6 to 9 months to live. Her response was: “Oh, good, that’ll give us time to do some things!” So, Susie immediately created a bucket list of adventures she wanted to have with her children and grandchildren. And during her final months they went hang-gliding, skydiving, they swam with the dolphins, and they explored the Grand Canyon in a helicopter.

For me, the story of Susie Mann is a bonafide miracle story. And it’s the same miracle as was in the transfiguration. That is, a person learns they have only a short time to live, and rather than collapse into a heap of self-pity, instead they embrace life and use what time is left to do good and help others.

Now, the Season of Lent is just about to start, and it's a time when we tend to be more introspective, more aware of the choices we make.

I've made some color copies of Raphael's painting, and they're on one of the tables in the Narthex. If you want, take one home with you. Or, not. Either way, I'd like you to spend some time during Lent thinking about the story of the Transfiguration, and thinking about the story of Susie Mann. And while you're doing that, to be in the mind set of asking yourself,

“Despite what I may be going through, what can I still do for others? Who is around me that needs what I can offer? How can I make a difference in the world, and for the people around me?”

Because the real miracle of the Transfiguration is that we, like Jesus and like Susie Mann, though we may be dying— or, at the very least, dying to self— can still teach others how to live.

Amen.