

Expecting a Miracle

Quapaw Quarter United Methodist Church

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The Children of Israel experience a miracle they do not expect: Pursued by the Egyptian armies to the shores of the sea, they behold their leader, raising the staff in his hand, telling them to cross the sea on dry land. Scripture paints in words the dramatic images brought to the silver screen by Cecil B. DeMille: The Israelites march to freedom between walls of water on their right hand and on their left. Then, as soon as they reach the other side, the waters close behind them, hurling Egyptian chariots and charioteers into the depths.

Miriam and the women take up their timbrels and sing a song. Moses and all of Israel join them and recite: “Who is like You, God, among the mighty? Who is like you, awesome in holiness, acting miraculously?” (Exodus 15:11). God is the miracle worker. After ten plagues, perhaps the Israelites should’ve known what to expect. But they do not. Time and again, the Israelites are skeptical, imagining that this time God and Moses have led them only to death and destruction.

An oddity in the Hebrew text of this verse from Exodus 15 occasions a profound lesson taught by the ancient rabbis. The first time we read, “Who is like you,” the Hebrew is *Mi Chamocha*. The second time, it is *Mi Kamocha*. The difference is subtle, but noticeable. *Chamocha*. *Kamocha*. Both mean the same. Still, the difference is noticeable. The rabbis understand the story like this:

God tells Moses, “Raise your staff, and I will part the sea, so that the Israelites might cross on dry land.” Moses instructs the people to march into the sea, to wade into the surf, as he raises the rod in his hand. The Israelites, though, are afraid. They are not swimmers. The sea is vast and menacing. Only one among them, Nachshon ben Aminadav, plunges into the water. Up to his ankles, to his knees, to his waist. Nachshon exclaims, *Mi Chamocha*, “Who is like You, God, among the mighty?” By now, the water has reached his neck, his chin, so much that the second time he starts to sing, the water is in his mouth. He can no longer make that “ch” sound. Still, Nachshon plods forward, exclaiming, *Mi kamocha*, “Who is like you, awesome in holiness, acting miraculously?” Only with Nachshon’s extraordinary act of faith, God responds as promised. The seas part. The Israelites cross on dry land. And all may sing together.

When I was a child of six, human beings walked on the moon for the very first time. The year was 1969. Only eight years earlier, the President of the United States had declared that men [sic] would walk on the moon before the end of the decade. What kind of foolishness was that? Today, in 2016, some forty years since Americans have been to the moon, we are told that decades of work would be required to accomplish the task that was completed in eight short years a half century ago. President Kennedy expected a miracle. The American people expected the miracle. With God's help, the miracle was realized.

Can we do it again?

In 1992, I was called to the pulpit at Temple Beth-El in San Antonio as Assistant Rabbi. My predecessor in that position, Rabbi Mark Goodman, was dying of AIDS. In his final major sermon to the congregation, Rabbi Goodman proclaimed, "I don't expect miracles; but I do depend on them."

Rabbi Goodman's life was cut short with his death the next year. The miracle did not come in Rabbi Goodman's lifetime. Still, in the decade that followed, HIV infection was increasingly transformed from a death sentence into a chronic illness. People still do die of HIV related illness, and tragically so. Still, at least among Americans and other westerners blessed with access to excellent medical care, many more people are living with HIV than dying of AIDS.

The same may be said of cancer. In my 25 years in the rabbinate, I have seen cancer transformed into a diagnosis with which many more people are living than dying – and they are living productively, often cancer-free for many years.

Perhaps we should regard the advances of modern medicine – and the moon shot, for that matter – as scientific achievements by human beings – nothing more, nothing less. By contrast, Albert Einstein observed: "There are only two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as though everything is a miracle."

Sixteen and thirteen years ago, I marveled as I watched our two sons emerge from their mother's body. Childbirth is a natural phenomenon. The moment happens whether we treat it as sacred or not. However, if we experience the birth of a child, the rising of the sun, the changing of the seasons, as miracles that enrich our lives, as gifts from our Creator, then our lives are enriched.

Please don't get me wrong. I do not discount the role of physicians and scientists in changing the lives of people infected with HIV and diagnosed with

cancer. I do not imagine that God reached down and created a rocket capable of catapulting human beings to the moon. Still, the story of Nachshon is instructive. Human beings can be God's partners in making miracles.

The moral of Nachshon's story may be even more profound: God wants and needs our participation in generating the miraculous. Don't take that too far. If God wishes, God is capable of miracle-making without us. The only One who can limit God's power is God. And Nachshon's example suggests that God has chosen to require human agency for divine miracle-making.

We do have the power to help God make miracles.

I think of Steve and Stephen, the first couple to ask me to officiate at a same-sex marriage. I consecrated their union in 1995. Their faith, their commitment, their determination in the face of adversity, along with so many others, created a change in the heart of America. In 1995, the availability of a marriage license for a same-sex couple in the United States was the stuff of fantasies. But the couples persisted, as did I, among many others who officiated those un-sanctioned ceremonies. To be clear, I was no hero; I am a rabbi in a religious movement that affirms LGBTQ members of our community as individuals, couples, and families. I faced no official sanctions and only limited congregational opposition when I officiated for these couples. The couples were the brave ones; not I. Still, we jumped into the water together, like Nachshon before us, expecting the water to part before we drowned. Surely, God was our Partner, reaching inside millions, turning American hearts of stone into hearts of flesh, until the Supreme Court made law out of the miracle that God and humanity had wrought: Same-sex marriage is marriage. In America as in our experience.

Our world today is beset with terrible troubles in search of miracles.

Too much of America has determined that every single Muslim is a terrorist, even the American-born Muslim who risks his or her life in defense of our own country. Please join me in rushing toward the sea, believing that the waters will part, that God will reach into other hearts to join ours, with love and acceptance replacing hatred and prejudice in American life.

Too much of the Muslim world is gripped by death-loving extremism, perpetrating terrorism that threatens life-loving men, women, and children around the globe. But I believe: Somewhere out there is the Muslim Nachshon,

ready to jump into the sea, until Allah is his or her partner in returning the Muslim world to its true and peaceful faith.

Let's be honest. Along the way, some, like Rabbi Goodman, will drown in that sea. Miracles require sustained effort. Boundless courage. Faith that God is our Partner even when God seems to be silent. And a willingness to sustain losses on the way to the miracle.

Sixty years ago, right here in Little Rock, the idea that Black and White children could attend the same school seemed to require a miracle. Today, we look around, and we see tarnish on the realized miracle. Yes, schools are officially desegregated. Too many children are drowning in a sea of resegregation in pursuit of an ideologically-driven dismantling of our public schools. Like the Little Rock Nine who jumped in the sea before us, we must be willing to jump repeatedly, expecting a miracle more complete than those of the past.

28 years ago, the Methodist congregation that worshiped in these pews had moved to the suburbs. Only a few dedicated souls were here, contemplating the possibility that Quapaw Quarter could sustain a Methodist Church of its own and transform the neighborhood around it. Achieving that dream would require a miracle. The traditional Methodist demographic wasn't here. But a new mission, and a new spirit, a holy spirit, would join the hard work of men and women unafraid to jump into the sea.

May we learn to expect the miracles contemplated by the founders of Quapaw Quarter United Methodist Church and those who dream of its future today. May we learn to expect that the mission expressed in the outreach of this church and others like it will become a reality, too, even when miracles are required. If we jump in the sea together, with God as our partner, let us expect the sea to part.

Amen.