

Starting next Sunday we will begin a summer long sermon series on relationships. We will look at our relationships with God, our relationship with each other in the church, and our relationship with the world around us and our community. My hope is that by the time our interim pastor comes in the Fall that we are ready to address our identity and work with him on what direction we want to go as First Presbyterian church. But before we get going on that series I wanted to pause and address something God did a few weeks ago. God did a miracle in the lives of one of our families and there was so much going on with Pastor Mike’s retirement that we didn’t have a chance to address it. So today I want to celebrate a miracle look at the issue of miracles. Because in the passage that we are going to look at this morning not only does God do a miracle, but Peter immediately uses the miracle as an opportunity to preach about Jesus. So I would like to look at this issue of miracles and preach about Jesus. So let’s look at Acts chapter 3 starting at verse 1. This is right after Pentecost, right after the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Acts 3:1-16

One day Peter and John were going up to the temple at the time of prayer—at three in the afternoon. <sup>2</sup> Now a man who was lame from birth was being carried to the temple gate called Beautiful, where he was put every day to beg from those going into the temple courts. <sup>3</sup> When he saw Peter and John about to enter, he asked them for money. <sup>4</sup> Peter looked straight at him, as did John. Then Peter said, “Look at us!” <sup>5</sup> So the man gave them his attention, expecting to get something from them. <sup>6</sup> Then Peter said, “Silver or gold I do not have, but what I do have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk.” <sup>7</sup> Taking him by the right hand, he helped him up, and instantly the man’s feet and ankles became strong. <sup>8</sup> He jumped to his feet and began to walk. Then he went with them into the temple courts, walking and jumping, and praising God. <sup>9</sup> When all the people saw him walking and praising God, <sup>10</sup> they recognized him as the same man who used to sit begging at the temple gate called Beautiful, and they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him. <sup>11</sup> While the man held on to Peter and John, all the people were astonished and came running to them in the place called Solomon’s Colonnade. <sup>12</sup> When Peter saw this, he said to them: “Fellow Israelites, why does this surprise you? Why do you stare at us as if by our own power or godliness we had made this man walk? <sup>13</sup> The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of our fathers, has glorified his servant Jesus. You handed him over to be killed, and you disowned him before Pilate, though he had decided to let him go. <sup>14</sup> You disowned the Holy and Righteous One and asked that a murderer be released to you. <sup>15</sup> You killed the author of life, but God raised him from the dead. We are witnesses of this. <sup>16</sup> By faith in the name of Jesus, this man whom you see and know was made strong. It is Jesus’ name and the faith that comes through him that has completely healed him, as you can all see.”

This is God’s Word for us this morning. Thanks be to God. According to the Pew research center as of 2014 23% of Americans were non-religious. This is up from 16% back in 2007. This means that in a period of 7 years 19.2 million Americans left Christianity. And the majority of them, 78% of them, left because they simply did not believe. They do not believe in God and do not believe in miracles. Lots of people do not believe in these things.

The question is, do YOU believe in miracles? For some of you that might sound like a silly question. Others of you may be saying yeah, I have my doubts about those things. The reason I am taking time to look at this question this morning is that if we do not believe in miracles, we are not saved. We are saved by a miracle savior. His conception and birth were a miracle and his resurrection, which is necessary to save us, is a miracle. So if we do not believe in miracles, we have a serious problem. So why can we believe in miracles? How do we know that God can act and does act in that way? And what should our response be?

First of all, even the greatest skeptical scholars admit that the miracles of Jesus had to have happened. They dominate his whole ministry. About 31% of the Gospel of Mark is about Jesus' miracles. They are as central to his ministry as his teachings are. One scholar put it this way: "So central are miracle reports to the Gospels that one could remove them only if one regarded the gospels as preserving barely any genuine information about Jesus." In other words, if you accept anything in the Gospels as true about Jesus, then you have to accept the miracles. So we know that Jesus' miracles were real because one, they pervade all the gospel accounts. Two, we also know there are countless eye-witnesses, and three, even non-Biblical sources record Jesus performing signs and wonders. Even non-Christian writings all seem to agree that Jesus performed miracles. So it does not make sense to doubt the validity of early miracle accounts both by Jesus and then in the early church like the one we read this morning.

Now before we get too far, we should look at what a miracle is. A definition of terms might help. Because as we know from the Bible there are different types of miracles. There are healing miracles like the passage we have this morning. There are miracles where God the Father and Jesus interfered with natural sciences, like Jesus calming the sea of Galilee or God parting the Red Sea. There are miracles where Jesus encounters demons or mental illnesses and is able to make those people whole and in their right mind again. And there are things like turning the water into wine. So I want us to recognize that there are different kinds of miracles, but basically what they all have in common is that they are a deviation from what is expected from the norms of science and nature and culture. One dictionary put it this way: "a miracle is a highly improbable or extraordinary event, development, or accomplishment that brings very welcome consequences." I like the end of that. "That brings very welcome consequences." It is important to remember that God's miracles are good.

So, if we believe that miracles were real events in the early church, how do we feel about miracles today? Do miracles happen today? I think one of the challenges for understanding miracles today is that God created a world with order. And we have spent generation after generation learning and studying and analyzing that order. And we are still getting surprised by what God has created. Science learns new things every day. But the temptation is to say that once we understand an order, to say that God cannot operate outside that order. And we do not have the right to say that. God created everything that we study out of nothing. So of course God can operate or act outside the created order of our world. So our inclination to say once we understand something that it has to stay in that box for God causes some people doubt the validity of miracles today. But indeed they do happen. New Testament scholar Craig Keener who teaches at Asbury Theological Seminary published two volumes of scholarship about miracles, past and present, and has hundreds of pages of examples of modern-day miracles. You don't have to take my word for it. If you have a LOT of spare time you can read these volumes. However, we have an example right in our own congregation and I will explain in a moment. But I think we need to address the misconceptions that some people have about miracles that cause them to doubt them or not see them. The reality is that we want to put human expectations on miracles that simply are not there when it comes to God.

The first is the frequency of miracles. Miracles are rare. They are not every-day occurrences in our lives. They are not meant to be. If they were they would not be miracles. They would be common-place. So miracles are going to happen only on the limited schedule that God chooses to use them. When you look at this two-volume scholarship on miracles it can seem like they happen all the time. But these two volumes look at miracles over the course of 2000 plus years. If you spread them out, in real time they happened rarely. Now during the ministry of Jesus the frequency went up. But that was a unique time in the world when God was here walking among us. Of course that is going to be different. But in reality, in today's world, they do happen but

they are by design rare. And of course we wish we saw them all the time. We wish we could dial a miracle, but we can't.

The second challenge in understanding miracles is that they are timed by God for God's purposes. And we know that God has told us in scripture that his ways are not our ways and his timing is not our timing. So when miracles do not happen when we want them, we can get frustrated. And I would bet that most of us in this room have prayed for a miracle that did not happen. I know I have. So when someone is healed over here and someone else is not healed over here, my temptation is to ask God why didn't you also heal the person over here? And we, as disciples of Christ, have to accept that God's miracles are for God's purposes, not ours.

If we take this passage of healing that we have this morning, we have two ways of looking at the healing of the crippled man. First, we could be angry or frustrated that God did not heal this man sooner. This man in Acts 3 suffered as a cripple from birth to adult. Imagine the years of suffering. If we look at this miracle healing from the purpose of benefitting this man alone, we could actually see it as cruel that God did not heal him sooner. However, if we broaden our view and look at this healing as being at just the right place and just the right time to convince an entire community of the reality and power of Jesus Christ, we could then see it for the purposes of God which then furthered and spread the early church. I mean if you look at the facts in this passage, everyone in the town knew this guy. They knew he was crippled from birth. Verse 10 says they recognized him. They knew him. They saw him every day begging at the gate. There was no room for them to not know this was a miracle when they saw him jumping around with legs that used to be atrophied now made whole and strong as we are told in verse 7. This was a clear miracle for every person there and the early church, without which we would not be here today, grew as a result. This miracle was perfectly placed for God's purposes. And that is how miracles work. They are for God's purposes, not our own.

So, I told you that we had a miracle in one of the families in this congregation. I want to share that with you and then I want us to consider how are we supposed to respond to a miracle. Peter answers that for us in Acts 3 and we will learn from that. But first, the miracle. Back in 2005 one of our Pakistani families applied for the immigration of their brother. The brother was the only member of the family still in Pakistan and they applied for him to immigrate here to join the rest of the family. The typical wait time for an immigration from that country is 14 years. They knew this going in. They have lots of experience as immigrants themselves that have now become US citizens. So they applied in 2005 and began the waiting process. Every 6 months they would check on the status. They checked online, by phone, and through one of the senator's offices. Every 6 months the response was the same...the case is pending and nothing more is being requested. They thought it was odd that nothing else was being requested, but they continued to check and the answer year after year was the case was pending. Then, fast forward 10 years to 2015, they make the regular trip to the senator's office to check on the status, and they are told that the case was denied. And it was denied back in 2009. So here they are. They have already waiting 10 years and now they have to start the 14 year process all over again. And they would have addressed the denial back in 2009 had they been told about it. But they were told the case was pending. What apparently happened is after it was denied it was not updated in the immigration system. So every time someone checked on it, it said pending when it was denied. So they immediately applied again. But since 10 years had already gone by, they appealed to immigration to give the new application from 2015 the years they already waited. They appealed multiple times. I got involved part way through the process. And they got denied the appeal at least three times that I can remember. Finally the senator's office said the only thing left to do would be to go through the ombudsman's office in California. So they applied for that by mail first. When we followed up they said they did not have it. Then I submitted it scanned and emailed. Then they came back and said if we had computer access we had to apply online. So I applied online and you know how it

is when you have to fill in an online application and use drop down options and what you want to put is not an option? This is what was happening so I was not even filling it in correctly. I was doing the application for the third time and not even correctly. And I thought there is no way this is going to work. We have been denied several times. The application is wrong. And the government has labeled Pakistan as a country to not accept immigrants from, and last January the government cut the number of immigrants to be accepted by 40%. What are the chances that this appeal to change the application date back to 2005 be accepted? What are the chances someone will have compassion and approve a person in Pakistan for immigration? I honestly think our chances of this working were 0%. And then, the letter came. The approval letter for immigration to the United States and guess what the application date was? 2005. That is our miracle.

The next question is how do we respond to this miracle? For that we go back to Acts chapter 3. While the healed man is still clinging to Peter starting in verse 12 it says this: “<sup>12</sup>When Peter saw this, he said to them: “Fellow Israelites, why does this surprise you? Why do you stare at us as if by our own power or godliness we had made this man walk? <sup>13</sup>The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of our fathers, has glorified his servant Jesus.” Peter immediately uses the miracle to point to God and gives the power of God all the credit. Peter takes no credit. His first words are to say that this is the power of Jesus. When the approval letter for immigration came through some folks wanted to thank me for the help I had tried to give during the process. And I can stand here and tell you my help had nothing to do with. There is NO human power involved here. And that is important to understanding miracles. If I had any ability to bring on that miracle, then I now have a power and responsibility to do others. But I don’t. I had nothing to do with the approval. If anything the third time I did the application online and did it wrong probably made it worse. God stepped in and made this happen and the appropriate response is to say “thank you Jesus.” Thank you Jesus for what YOU have done.

So, the first response to a miracle is to point to God, give God all the glory, and say thank you Jesus. The next thing Peter does starting in verse 13 is to preach what would have been a very unpopular sermon. He tells the crowd that the Jesus that provided the power for that miracle is the same one they rejected and crucified. I love in verse 15 Peter says to them “You killed the author of life.” That could not have gone over well. Probably not the most popular sermon ever delivered. However, Peter preaches the truth about Jesus so that they come to believe in Jesus as their Lord as well. Shouldn’t we do the same? When a miracle happens, shouldn’t we want to go tell everyone we can that Jesus has done this? This is why you should believe. Because we have a real and living and powerful God.

Friends, we have a real and powerful and living God. A God that still takes action in our world and in our lives. We will not always understand the reasons. I do not know why God did this miracle with this family from Pakistan. I don’t know if it was to further your faith this morning. Or maybe one of those three little children coming in that family will grow up to be a doctor and find the cure for cancer. Or perhaps one of those family members will be used to further the Gospel in Salt Lake a way we do not yet know. We don’t know yet. But, what we do know is that God gets all the credit for the miracle, that the miracle will be for God’s purposes, that the proper response is the praise God, and the final response is to tell others. I hope you will. Because the greatest miracle of all, the coming and the saving resurrection of Jesus, is still worth telling about. It is a miracle that in time happened in the past, but it is a miracle that happens daily for people that come to know Jesus and that through his miracles we can be forgiven and saved. Don’t keep the miracle to yourself. Share it. And be on the look for what God’s power will do next in your life. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, amen.