

“It’s a Miracle!”

A Sermon for Every Sunday
Transfiguration Sunday, Year A
Matthew 17:1-9

I’ve got a friend, a preacher who was with me in seminary, who got a grant that enabled him to take a few months of Sabbatical. For his time away from his church responsibilities, this preacher decided to travel around and listen to other preachers. For a dozen Sundays he traveled from church-to-church and heard others preach.

Saw him at the end of his Sabbatical and I asked him, “In listening to so many sermons from others, what did you learn?”

He replied, “I learned that if anyone hears anything from a sermon, it’s a miracle.”

On the one hand my friend’s remark could be taken as a commentary on the sorry state of preaching in North American churches.

On the other hand, the observation “If anyone hears anything from a sermon, it’s a miracle,” could be taken as a basic insight into the inherently miraculous (miraculous = God produced) quality of Christian hearing.

Let’s assume the later. I preach on Sundays hoping that you’ll listen and, in listening, hear some revelation from God. Yet a revelation from God is not self-produced. No matter how hard I work on my sermons, I can’t command God to speak to you. Nor can you order God to make you to hear. Only God can speak for God. Thus preaching and hearing is miraculous, all the way down.

It’s understandable that we should have the miraculous on our minds this Sunday when Jesus leads a few of his disciples up a high mountain. There, on the mountaintop, in the night, he is dazzlingly transfigured before their eyes. His garments glisten. He shines like the sun. Moses and Elijah, the great heroes of Israel’s faith return from the dead and converse with Jesus. It’s a miraculous site up on the mountain, an epiphany of epiphanies.

Of course, the disciples are dumbfounded, amazed and don’t know what to make of this mystical experience. But just then the heavens open and there’s a voice, “This is my Son in whom I delight. Listen to him!”

And then there is darkness and they go back down the mountain with Jesus but I’m sure they were not the same after this miraculous, heaven-sent word.

My claim, in today’s sermon, is that something akin to what happened on the Mount of Transfiguration happens here on Sunday morning as you listen to sermons. Usually not with the lights, clouds and glistening garments, and rarely is there a distinct voice from heaven, but still, whenever you listen to a sermon there’s always the possibility of miraculous revelation,

epiphany. The curtain between you and God is pulled back for just a moment. And though you can't explain it, it's more real than you can say. You hear.

Hearing is a complex process by which humans listen for and then assimilate sounds. However, *hear God* is not an exclusively human work. The New Testament frequently stresses that it's impossible to hear God without the God-given gift of "faith," God's gift, grace (Acts 4:4; Rom 10:17; 1 Thess 2:13). In other words, we're not supposed to listen for God unassisted. Jesus told a parable awhile before he led his disciples up the Mount of Transfiguration that speaks to the miraculous quality of hearing God's word. A crazy farmer—without carefully preparing good, receptive soil—just started slinging seed. Though most of the seed was wasted -- choked by weeds, trampled along the way, eaten by birds -- what we might judge to be a farming failure, Jesus celebrates as miraculous harvest (Matt 13:1-9).

At a church conference I once heard a bishop preach on the parable of the Sower urging us to be "good soil, well cultivated to hear the word of God." We were directed to engage in more serious Bible study, do homework before coming to church, stir up sympathy with the plight of preachers, get a better attitude, sit up straight, pay attention, and keep our hands to ourselves.

While I'm all in favor of your doing homework before you show up on church on Sunday morning, and while it's fun to ponder the bishop's comparison of Methodists to mud, the sermon was a misrepresentation of the parable. Surely Jesus's story about the sower, the seed, and the harvest is a parable about the miraculous fruitfulness of God's word, not a moralistic exhortation for us to become a better class of dirt.

We so want to believe that the God-human colloquy is up to us, that we're in control of the communication that occurs between God and us. Self-salvation is always a more popular than falling into the hands of a dying, rising, and revealing, that is, miraculous God.

Be advised that in even the worst of sermons badly delivered by the crummiest of preachers, God may speak. Though we are only receptors, receivers in the divine-human colloquy, never the initiators or sustainers, scripture says that God will figure out a way to address us and enable us to hear: "What do you have that you didn't receive? And if you received it, then why are you bragging as if you didn't receive it?" (1 Cor 4:7). Gift—unsought, unearned, undeserved.

"The word of God is heard by making itself heard," says the great theologian, Karl Barth. "The possibility of knowing the word of God is God's miracle on us," which we can receive but never produce. What did Moses do to be addressed from the burning bush (Exodus 3)? How did the Israelites earn life-sustaining manna in the wilderness (Exodus 16)? What did those disciples do on the Mount of Transfiguration to earn themselves such a wondrous, bright, vision of Christ? Nothing. They did nothing to merit or earn a hearing. It was a gift.

In fact, when Peter exclaimed that they ought to build a tabernacle there on the mountain to maintain the vision Peter is told just to be quiet, do nothing, and listen.

Divine/human conversation is at God's instigation, God's initiative, that is, grace: unmerited, unearned, the gift of testimony of the saints both living and dead, a God-breathed ancient book that speaks today, a Sunday sermon that the Holy Spirit commandeered to speak to you especially.

Just like those disciples, if you emerge from church this morning and are able to say, "I heard something today that I hadn't heard before," or "I felt particularly close to God today," it's more than a testimony to my preaching or the musicians' singing. It's an ordinary Sunday experience of the miraculous work of God. This time, not on a mountaintop but in our congregation.

Good news: When it comes to receiving a sermon, it's not all up to you. The bad news (particularly for people like us who enjoy being in charge of things)? It's not up to you. Still, I think this story of the miraculous epiphany on the mountain is meant to say to us that Christ will give us what we need to believe, to keep going, to sustain faith even when the going gets rough. All we've got to do is listen.

The odds of your receiving revelation through even one of my sermons are good because of the God we've got. Jesus was crucified in a vain attempt to shut him up. Yet in every culture, in all times and places, Christ has risen up and spoken for himself and had his say. Nobody has ever created a culture so hostile, an intellectual defense so solid, a political system so godless, clergy so corrupt and doltish, a sermon so narcotic that it keeps God from opening the heavens, speaking from above, turning on the lights and speaking up, and speaking out as God pleases. From the first, Jesus went where he was not sought and showed up to people who didn't ask to meet him, engaging in conversation those who would have been happy left alone.

Knowing the miraculous, gifted, nature of listening for God, I have a suggestion. Before you listen to a sermon, pray. Begin contact with God before your preacher makes contact with you. Knowing that you can't really hear God without God's help, pray the Prayer for Illumination, "Open our hearts and minds by the power of your Holy Spirit so that as the word is read and proclaimed we might hear what you say to us this day" with particular fervor. Beseeching God to "Open my ears," auto-suggestion whereby you put yourself in a teachable frame of mind or miraculous work of the Holy Spirit?

Yes.

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