"What About Miracles, Mystery, and Faith?" September 27, 2026
Luke 7:1-10; Mark 10:46-52 Westminster, Greenville
18th Sunday after Pentecost Ben Dorr
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Thirty years ago, back when I was in seminary, I took a course from a professor named Dr. James Loder. Dr. Loder was a Christian Education professor, but I don't remember a thing that he taught me about Christian Education.

What I remember is the story of his car accident.

Some 25 years earlier, he had been traveling with his family when he noticed someone who needed assistance with a flat tire on the side of the road. He pulled off the road to help this stranger, and as he was changing that car's tire, and had the car lifted up with the jack, another car drove by, and accidentally hit the car that he was working on…and the jack that was holding up the car flew away, and THAT car…fell on Dr. Loder's chest.

I have this vivid memory of sitting in class, and hearing Dr. Loder talk about what happened next. How his wife, whom he described as a "very small woman," said a prayer and somehow LIFTED the car off his chest, so that her husband could get out…

When Dr. Loder wrote about this experience some years later, he described it as nothing less than an experience of the living God!

"Walking from the car to the embankment, I never felt more conscious of the life that poured through me…the gracious nature of the life I was experiencing…[a] life [that] was not my own."[1]

It was an event that transformed his life.

[1] James Edwin Loder, Jr - Database: Christian Educators of the 20th Century - Biola University

It changed how he thought about God.
How he talked with his students about God.

So what do you think?

Would you describe what happened to James Loder that day…
as a stroke of luck,
easily explained by a surge of adrenaline in his wife…
or was it the intervention of the Almighty,
a miraculous gift of God?

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Our question for this morning is this:
What about miracles, mystery, and faith?

I ask the question because I'm assuming that many of you, somewhere along the way, have also asked this question.

And one of the things that I greatly appreciate about our Presbyterian tradition and theology is that you can land in different places when it comes to this particular question.

For example, all four Gospels describe Jesus as a wonder-worker, as a healer, as someone who could do that which others could not do. Healing the centurion's slave, bringing sight to those who were blind…within our tradition—these are NOT simply random and isolated events in which Jesus impulsively thinks himself, "Yeah, I'm going to break the laws of nature here and heal this person."

They are not small, one-off events.
They are central to his identity.
Our tradition teaches us that they are part of a much larger event.
Harbingers, if you will, of God's Promised Day.

Now…let's pause right here.
Does everybody know what a harbinger is?
Yes, it's the name of your bulletin, but that's not what I'm talking about.

I mean the dictionary definition—a harbinger is a sign, an event, or a person that foreshadows a much larger event, someone who signals that something else is on the way.

Miracles in our Presbyterian tradition are often understood as harbingers of the Day when God will come to make all things right, the Promised Day of God—the Day when, as the prophet Isaiah puts it, "the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces."

The miracles of Jesus, in Presbyterian theology, can be seen and understood as glimpses of this promise, and are intended, by the Gospel writers, to give us hope.

Telling us that the way things are right now is NOT the way they'll always be.

That's one landing spot for today's question.
But it's not the only one.

You can ALSO hear our texts for today, and say to yourself:
I'm not sure what to make of this.
I have some questions, some doubts.
Even if I don't take it literally, can I still take it seriously?

In our tradition, the answer to that question is yes as well.
Take our second story, from Mark.

This story actually appears in three Gospels—
Matthew and Luke tell the story too—
but each of the three Gospel writers tells it

in a slightly different way.

Matthew says there were two blind beggars.
Luke, like Mark, says that there was only one.
But only Mark NAMES this man.

Do you remember his name?
Bartimaeus.
Bartimaeus, son of Timaeus.

Now stop right there.

This a curious detail…why would Mark not only tell us the name of the blind beggar, Bartimaeus, but also tell us the name of his dad?

Do you remember what language Jesus spoke?
Please don't say, "English."
Jesus spoke Aramaic.
And in Aramaic, the word for "son," to be someone's son, is "bar".

So the name Bartimaeus actually means "son of Timaeus."
Which means that Mark is repeating himself.
"Bartimaeus, son of Timaeus" is like saying "son of Timaeus, son of Timaeus…"

As if Mark really wants us to pay close attention to this name.
Why would he do that?

Well…if you were to Google "Timaeus," you would see that's not just a Greek name.

It was a well-known work by Plato.
One of Plato's discourses.
And Plato's *Timaeus* presents a cosmology.

A world-view, if you will.

In the *Timaeus*, Plato offers a specific understanding of how the world was created—not by a loving God, but by a less powerful demi-urge. And he describes our place in this world, what our purpose is.

According to the *Timaeus*, the goal of life is to restore the soul by THINKING the right way. Because when you do, you will be closer to the divine. In the *Timaeus*, there are different categories of people, and those who are highest, closest to the divine, are the people who practice philosophy.

And wouldn't you know it, Plato just happens to be a philosopher!

Not like other categories of people.
Not like servants.
Not like slaves.
Not like women, according to the *Timaeus*.[2]

Now…why does all this matter?
Because the person being healed in this story is Bartimaeus.
Son of Timaeus.

You see, I believe Mark is doing something very intentional in this miracle story. He's presenting a contrast between what it means to live a life like Plato described—to be a son of Timaeus, categorizing people as higher and lower on the totem pole of life—
and what it means to follow Jesus.

Because according to Jesus, life is not just about thinking the right way. It's about loving the right way. It's NOT about creating social hierarchies with our wisdom. It's about being more generous and sacrificial with our love.

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[2] I am indebted to Tom Are's sermon at the 2015 Mo Ranch conference for some of the content here about Plato's *Timaeus*.

Before today's miracle in Mark, Jesus tells his disciples:

"…whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all."

Can you hear the contrast between the kind of life that the *Timaeus* teaches…and the kind of life that Jesus teaches?

So, when Bartimaeus, son of Timaeus, calls out to Jesus, Jesus asks him: "What do you want me to do for you?"

"My teacher," says Bartimaeus, "let me see again."
And Jesus restores his sight.
And Bartimaeus…follows Jesus on his way.

It's not just a physical healing.
It's a spiritual healing.

It's a second way to hear today's text, where Mark is working in multiple ways, asking us what a modern-day *Timaeus* might be.

A cosmology that we all are tempted to live by…
What ways are we spiritually blind?
In what ways do we need Jesus to help us truly see?

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Our question for today is about miracles, mystery, and faith.

And whether you hear our two miracle stories today as a harbinger of hope, a sign of God's Promised Day…or whether you hear them as teachable moments, inviting us to live a more faithful life today…no matter how you hear them, I need to come clean.

There's one part of each of these stories that truly baffles me.
It's not the miracle part.
It's the part where Jesus talks about faith.

- In our passage from Luke, he says of the centurion, "…not even in Israel have I found such faith."

- In our passage from Mark, Jesus says, "Go; your faith has made you well."

And far too many Christians, through the years, have turned those words into the WRONG RELATIONSHIP between God, miracles, and faith.

Have you ever heard someone explain that the reason this person did NOT receive the miracle that they prayed for…was because they did not have enough faith?

Please, do not hear those words from Jesus that way today.

If there's anything about miracle stories that are NOT a part of Presbyterian theology, that would be it.

Sometimes, we pray for healing and healing happens.
Sometimes, we pray for a miracle…and nothing happens.
Or at least, the miracle we prayed for doesn't happen.

I'm reminded of something that the retired professor, Richard Lischer, once wrote.

Lischer is professor emeritus at Duke Divinity School. A little over 20 years ago now, his son Adam, who was in his 30s at the time, died from an aggressive form of cancer.

Lischer wrote a memoir of what that experience was like.
The memoir was published 8 years after his son died.

And in the book, he recounts how, during that awful time in his life, he prayed, as any father would pray, for healing—and for God to intervene!

At the end of the memoir, he says this:

"…now [all these years later] we know it is a different miracle [we experienced] than the one we dreamed about in the summer of 2005. Not the supernatural escape from illness, but the faithful companion in the Valley. Not the restored flesh we had hoped for, but God in the flesh of those who suffer."[3]

And how did God show up?
In community.
In other people.

Lischer writes:

"I remember…our dining [room] table, covered with the signature dishes of friends and strangers, in a room so filled with love you could taste it…

"I think about Adam a lot when I am alone, but I most often meet him at a table with others. That's where Jesus met his friends too, at a table…

"By faith, I sense another room, another table, another source of light…[That] table is always dressed in white or gold as if for Easter. It

[3] Richard Lischer, *Stations of the Heart: Parting with a Son*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013.

reflects the glory of the Host who presides in our midst…Adam is there too…He is no longer the man of dust we baptized and buried, but a child of perpetual light."[4]

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I wonder how long it took Lischer to come to that kind of faith.
Because that's a miracle too, right?

You see, not all miracles happen immediately.
We like to think a miracle happens—POOF—right away!
But not all miracles happen right away.
Some miracles—they just take time.

Anne Tyler once wrote a marvelous novel about this kind of thing.
It's about a young man named Ian Bedloe.
Ian is about to graduate from high school.

He's got a good-looking girlfriend who loves him.
He's footloose and fancy-free, and plans to go to college.
But then tragedy strikes the family.

Ian's older brother dies, and his brother's wife dies soon after that, and there are suddenly three young children (from his brother's family) to take care of.

Ian's sister-in-law had no family.
Ian's family—they have become the only family for those 3 kids.

But Ian's parents—they're too old to take care of the children.
And Ian's sister—she's got a family of her own.

[4] Ibid.

By default, the job of raising these three children falls to 18-year-old Ian.

He decides that raising those kids is what God really wants him to do, what God has called him to do…even though it means giving up his plans for college, losing his girlfriend, losing the future that all his friends are going to get.

And although he believes he's doing what God wants him to do, that doesn't mean he enjoys it all the time.

One day, he picks up the youngest of the kids, not even two—
and she just feels so heavy—like a weight.

This calling that God has placed on Ian's life feels like a BURDEN.

But Ian raises the kids.
The years go by.

At the end of the novel, Ian is a 42-year-old man who has raised those three kids to adulthood. And he finally decides that the time is right to get married. And he's hesitant about having more kids with his wife—after all, he's been through it once before.

But they do end up having a baby.

When he picks up that child, the child feels…light.
Not heavy at all.
Not a burden at all.

What's the difference between the child he picks up at the beginning of the novel and the child at the end?

It's not the children.

The difference is in Ian Beloe's heart.
He now sees his life not as drudgery…but as a gift.[5]

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Saint Maybe is the name of the novel.
It's a wonderful novel.
But Ian Bedloe…is not the person I'm most curious about today.
The person who interests me today…is you.

For over 8 years now, I've seen so many of you be the presence of Christ for someone else.

Helping someone in this church carry their burden.
Placing a meal on someone else's table.
Checking in on a friend who is walking through corridors of grief.

What does that sound like to you?

When your hands become God's hands,
when your heart becomes God's heart…
what does it sound like?

Does it sound like just your everyday course of events,
nothing much to pay attention to…

Or it something to wonder at, to be astonished by…
because it's nothing less than the miracle of the risen Christ,
at work inside of you?

(Amen.)

[5] Anne Tyler, *Saint Maybe*, New York: Random House, 1991.