

“What have you against me, O man of God?”

I hear the widow’s words from our first reading and I hear the bitterness in them. After all, when Elijah first encountered her, she was gathering a few sticks so she could go home and prepare a last meal for herself and her son, that they would eat it and die, because it was the very last of her food. You know, though, how the story goes. How Elijah told her to go ahead and do that, but to make him a little cake first. And then her flour and her oil never failed and they were able to eat many meals.

So, after surviving starvation by God’s intervention through Elijah, now her son is going to die from an illness that has taken his breath away. She may well wonder what good this “man of God” has been to her. Did he save her and her son only to leave her to watch her son die in front of her?

Well, Elijah had no command of God preceding this incident, as he did in the two first stories we hear of him. In this situation, it appears that God has not provided any guidance.

So Elijah takes her son and carries him up to his own room. Then he prays in some distress to God, “Oh Lord my God, have you brought calamity even upon the widow with whom I am staying, by killing her son?”

Then he lies on top of the child three times praying to God that the child’s life come back into him. And indeed the child’s life comes back into him.

So is it a miracle? Or is it an early form of CPR with this laying down on the boy and getting up three times. Did Elijah, through the power of God, bring this boy back from the dead, or did he merely, by the weight of his physical presence, kick start his heart and trigger his breathing?

Listen to a similar story from 2 Kings. This time our hero is Elisha, the man of God who came after Elijah.

In this instance a woman who had given up on the notion that she might have a child, did finally bear a child after Elisha had told her that it would be so. But sadly, one day when the child was older he became ill and died. The mother summoned Elisha, who came. Then he goes into the room with the child and closes the door prayed and:

“... got up on the bed and lay upon the child, putting his mouth upon his mouth, his eyes upon his eyes, and his hands upon his hands; and while he lay bent over him, the flesh of the child became warm. He got down, walked once to and fro in the room, then got up again and bent over him; the child sneezed seven times, and the child opened his eyes.”

Miracle, or early CPR? The miraculous, or merely standard Red Cross first-aid?

And then we hear of Jesus raising the widow's son from the dead. But he doesn't have any of the physical activities of Elijah and Elisha. He just touches the funeral bier and the man begins to speak.

It can be hard for us to accept these miracles stories in scripture. I know the Saturday bible study group hashed over a recent passage that told of Peter raising Tabitha from the dead—wondering if it truly were a miracle, or maybe just some ancient Israel miscommunication and she wasn't really dead after all.

A story is told of a teacher who was doing her best to discredit the miracles of the Bible. She said, "Take, for instance, the crossing of the Red Sea. We know this body of water was only 6 inches deep." Immediately from the back of the room came the remark, "Praise God for the miracle!" Annoyed, the teacher asked, "What miracle?" "Well," explained the boy, "the Lord must have drowned the whole Egyptian army in just 6 inches of water!"

Why is it so hard to accept these miracle stories? Why do we work so hard to bring our rational, enlightenment, modernist mind-set to bear on them—working through complex scenarios that show that there must be some sensible explanation for what has happened?

Frederick Buechner, in his book *Wishful Thinking: A Seekers ABC*” suggests the following reasons:

1. The idea of miracles is an offense both to our reason and to our dignity. Thus, a priori, miracles don't happen.
2. Unless there is objective medical evidence to substantiate the claim that a miraculous healing has happened, you can assume it hasn't.
3. If the medical authorities agree that a healing is inexplicable in terms of present scientific knowledge, you can simply ascribe this to the deficiencies of present scientific knowledge.
4. If otherwise intelligent and honest human beings are convinced, despite all arguments to the contrary, that it is God who has healed them, you can assume that their sickness, like its cure, was purely psychological. Whatever that means.
5. The crutches piled high at Lourdes and elsewhere are a monument to human humbug and credulity.

But I think there's another reason too. I think at some point in our lives, maybe several points, we've asked God for help—maybe even gone so far as to ask for a miracle. And that miracle that we wanted, or hoped for, or dreamed of was not for us even. It was for someone else, someone who needed it badly. But it didn't happen, at least not the way we wanted or expected it to happen. And certainly not when we wanted it to happen. And so if that miracle that we wanted so badly, for the sake of someone else, even, didn't happen... If God didn't listen... If God didn't care. Then miracles don't happen, God doesn't listen and God doesn't care.

But I believe that our very real grief at losing someone we care for, or seeing someone we love struggle, along with our disappointment when things don't happen the way we want, when we want—all combined with our scientific, enlightenment, modernist mind set can keep us from seeing the miracles that are happening all the time, all around us.

*And perhaps more importantly, all those things keep us from admitting God's power in the world and in our own lives. And I wonder why, why would we ever want to limit God's power?*

Our readings today are shot through with miracles, and more than the obvious, dead-person-brought-to-life kind of miracles.

As I mentioned, in our first reading, unlike the two previous miracle stories for Elijah, it seems like this particular tragic moment has arrived unexpectedly. God has not forewarned Elijah, nor has God given him any instruction in what to do.

But when Elijah calls for help, when Elijah asks God to act. God does act. God listens to Elijah. And as the widow says to Elijah, "Now I know that you are a man of God, and that the world of the Lord in your mouth is true." Truth has come through a dialogue between God and humanity.

Clearly the psalmist has experienced the miraculous. This one who was as good as dead, who was going down to the grave... this one has been healed and restored. Weeping spent the night, but joy has come in the morning. And now the psalmist's heart sings without ceasing, giving thanks to God forever.

And what about Paul? How miraculous is it that God; first, would reveal God's self to one so very unlikely. A persecutor of the church, so zealous about destroying this fledgling following of Jesus. And second, on this same one, God would build the church, and especially spread the church beyond the Jewish community. God works a miraculous proclamation of the gospel through one of history's most *unlikely* characters!

And Jesus. Yes, there's the raising of the widow's son. But this is a contact that should not have happened in the first place. An upstanding Jewish man would not approach a widow—would not reach out to help a person with so little social standing. And then, to touch the funeral bier would make him ritually unclean. No one asked for his help, she didn't request it. But Jesus saw her, recognized her need and acted with compassion- completely disregarding social convention and temple law.

Jesus not only restores the woman's son to her, but he also restores the woman to community. A miracle that could be easily missed if we're not paying attention.

God is at work all around us, in the world and in our own lives. And when we limit God's actions to our rigid and all-too-narrow expectations, we can miss seeing what God has done, is doing and seeks to do in our lives.

Rod told me recently about his uncle who lost his wife a couple of years ago. They had been married a long time, close to 60 years. And her death was hard for him, and he surely still grieves for her. But Rod told me that his uncle, a man who is almost 90, has taken to making homemade bread. In fact, he hasn't bought a loaf of store-bought bread in over two years. In the midst of his sadness and grief, new life is happening.

Thinking about that story reminded me of another story of Rod's other uncle. We've been praying for this uncle, Bob Erickson, because he has cancer in his bladder and is going to have surgery for it. Well, sometimes I see email messages to the two of us before Rod does, and one day recently I called him to read him a message that came from his aunt before I had even read it all the way through myself, because I knew he would want to know. So I'm reading this message to say the date of the surgery, oh, and by the way, daughter Anita is going to be coming down from Appleton for several days before and after the surgery. And, by the way, son Charles is going to be coming from Austin, Texas to be there for the surgery. At this point I'm getting

teary. And then I read that daughter Beth, who has been living and working in France, is going to be flying in to be there as well.

We hope that a miracle happens, and that the surgery successfully gets all the cancer. But other miracles are already happening in the life of this family as they gather to support Bob, and to give him all their love and care.

As your pastor I am privileged to see all variety of miracles that are happening right in our midst. Miracles of new life in places where there was the death of despair. Miracles of new life in places where there was the death of grief and struggle. Miracles of new life where there was the death of doubt and denial and self-destruction.

God is bringing new life into our midst all the time. God's power is at work among us. God's miraculous hand is bringing hope into each of our lives.

And chances are, God's not at work in the way we expect, or in a time frame that we set.

So my prayer for each of us is that we can see anew God's hand of power, reaching into our lives and our worlds in unlikely, unexpected places—bringing the miraculous into our world of rational limited expectation, bringing power to the powerless, bringing new life in the midst of death and despair. Bringing us all the hope of God's promise. Thanks be to God.