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On an ABC News Special, “In the Name of God,” Peter Jennings interviewed John Wimber the founder of Vineyard Christian Fellowship. Wimber said the first time he went to church, he expected dramatic things to happen. After attending three Sundays, he felt frustrated. Following worship, he asked an official looking man, “When do they do it?” “Do what?” he replied. “Do the stuff,” Wimber said. “What stuff?” “The stuff in the Bible.” “Like what?” “You know, loaves and fishes, feeding the hungry, healing the sick, giving sight to the blind. That kind of stuff.”

“Oh,” the man replied, abashed. “We don’t do that. We believe in it and we pray about it, but we don’t *do* it.” I wonder how we’d answer the same question here. As for me, something about that usher’s answer strikes me as lacking and wrong. Of course, at First Congregational we aren’t impressed by the reckless spectacle of quasi-magical religious stunts calculatedly done to wow the unsuspecting. But still, failing to make room for miracles at all feels like giving up and giving in to the flattened, don’t-expect-much, forget-about-awe-and-wonder of the secular world.

Last Sunday we discussed this at Confirmation. Our brief video asked: “do I have to believe Jesus performed miracles in order to be a Christian?” Jesus performed many different nature-defying miracles, we heard. They were not magic tricks to make him look cool. Their point was to announce Jesus as the real deal, God’s Messiah. His miracles show what God’s kingdom is like: no blindness, disability, suffering or death. His miracles are a glimpse of the world as God will have it be.

I pushed them harder still. “Are there miracles in your life? Start with the little ones. I once fell off a 50 foot cliff in Mexico, did a forward roll, and landed on a ledge 10 feet below. Not a scratch. I hated gymnastics. No explanation...I prayed over a lady named Frances before her surgery to remove a grapefruit-sized tumor. When they opened her up, they could find nothing. When she profusely thanked her surgeon, he told her he deserved zero credit. He asked who she had praying for her. I am sure I was not the only one. No explanation.” I quoted Antoine St Exupery in *The Little Prince*: “Don’t fail to believe in what you can’t understand, the world is full of wonders.” How much awe and wonder do you bring?

People see you differently when the miracles thing is not merely hypothetical, but something personal. Our confirmands told of little miracles in their lives. And the point of our dialogue was to expand our spiritual imaginations beyond cause and effect. Can’t the God who created the laws of physics also break those laws, if he chooses? I say, why not. And if we have no room for miracles-great and small-what shall we do at Easter, the miracle around which every miracle is arranged?

As we form young faith and let ours be formed, we do well to ask such questions. All of this and more is in play and at issue in today’s Gospel lesson from John, a wonderfully crafted story. Jesus notices this man born blind, utterly without sight.

Tragic, isn't it? But tragedy quickly turns toward theology, just as we tend to do as something painful or unfortunate befalls us. We ask, "What did I do to deserve this?" or "Why me, God?" The Pharisees descend on him with a bevy of questions.

Who sinned, Jesus, this man or his parents, that this man was born blind? But if we are asking the wrong questions, we will find no good answers. Jesus will have none of this dormitory bull-session, this cool abstract detachment from the aching of others. Jesus instead declares his healing as the occasion to see God's glory. Improvising a poultice, applying it, then telling him to wash it out, he is healed. The bandages come off, he squints at the light, blinks, and praise God, he sees.

So they threw a big party, right? Not exactly. The Pharisees stage inquests bordering on inquisitions meant to explain away what happened, to discredit the act. The man thought he had problems being blind. Now he is beset by attacks as the religious sharpies work him over, back and forth, then grill his trembling parents. No party?! We complain about how relentlessly, unrelievedly tragic life is. But as God reverses things, we get more upset when our world is no longer a familiar, predictable, patterned, reliable world, explained only by surface cause and effect.

What a piece of work are we. Fortunately, the simple eloquence of the blind man, now healed, carries the day. He cuts through bickering. "I don't know who Jesus is. But he did heal me." In the words of our last hymn, "I once was blind, but now I see." The Pharisees eject him. Jesus finds him to round out his circle of healing.

"I am the light of the world," Jesus affirms in the darkness of the silly squabbling. Fine, everybody is in favor of light, right? Not so fast. Only as the light fits within the familiar categories and preconceived channels by which we regulate the light.

But the thing about light is it spills in all directions. That reminds me, Cecile. With the longer days, please pull your blind all the way down. The sunrise is disturbing my sleep. Or rather is light invading what Immanuel Kant called "dogmatic slumbers"? Light is invasive, uncontainable, isn't it? Light is powerful. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it, reads John ch. one. And what is it about light, asks John, that we love darkness more rather than the light.

So I ask the Al Michaels question at the finish of the 1980 US vs. Russia hockey: "do you believe in miracles?" Do we expect God to bring forth dramatic things? Or must light always shine in controlled, incremental, and only reasonable ways?

In the 1980s, at the end of my term on the United Church Board for World Ministries, I recall a panel discussion of missionary leaders. Still in the thick of the Cold War, someone asked about East and West Germany, the politics and hopes for reconciliation. I was my mid-30s. An old guy answered, which means he was exactly my age right now. His name was Manfred Laun. As he ventured to respond, he refused to concede the division between East and West Germany, their

split. He stubbornly spoke of the German people as always one, ever undivided.

What an old fool. Wake up and smell the coffee, bub. So what if you're an MD who has lived on four continents, speaks four languages. Who cares if you built hospitals and churches in Africa and India. You're blind if can't see what we see.

Manfred Laun died last August. I wish I had written him to confess that I was the blind one. Dr. Laun somehow saw by a light that no diplomat, political scientist or ambassador had in their visual spectrum. For the Berlin wall crumbled within one year of that panel talk. No East and West Germany anymore, just one Germany. We didn't have the categories for an event like this to happen. Manfred Laun did.

Let's ask ourselves, what's it like to be born into one experience of the world that never changes? What is it like to live and move among others whose experience of the world radically differs to let themselves dream dreams or see new visions? Do you believe in miracles? Do we still expect God to bring forth dramatic things?

We can be so blinded by the light that we can't even see ourselves participating in miracles. We also talked about this in confirmation. Most confirmands vividly recalled working at Feed My Starving Children last autumn. How did FMSC come into existence? A Minnesota man led a team of a 100 nurses and doctors to Honduras to heal children. But those medical personnel could only hand many of the children back to parents. They were so emaciated they would perish within days.

"The Lord brought me to my knees," said founder Richard Proudfoot. "And he broke my heart." Feed My Starving Children was born as they perfected formulas to feed children. Initially, it was soup and crackers. That didn't work. A retired Cargill researcher created a balanced food pack of rice, soy, veggies, and vitamins. But even simple packaging cost more than the food itself. Can't we do this ourselves? In '94 they invited church groups to process and package the meals.

Meals went out to Haiti, Paraguay, and Belarus. Soon they had more church packers than they could handle. Darien was the first such site in New England. Growing FMSC proved challenging. As they realized this is truly God's work, it was about serving Jesus, they found their way forward, and things improved. By the way, on FMSC website, they've entitled their history: "25 Years of Miracles."

The mentality that starvation will always be with us is deep and entrenched. Some 18,000 children die every day. But over 600,000,000 meals have gone out. All we need do is give and work *a little*—22 cents per meal—to eliminate hunger. It is within our reach. What if every church built four homes for the poor--as you did last year? We could eliminate poverty housing. Do you believe in miracles?

Miracles will make us different. Actually, following Jesus makes us different. The miracles come along in his wake. And they leave behind gifts of awe and wonder.

Awe and wonder ready us for the world to be remade in light of life resurrected. It's striking how expecting dramatic things from God, he gives them to us. Amen.

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