

Ted Lasso, Maccabees and the Miracle of Hope

December 5, 2021

Beacon UU Congregation

Rev. Robin Landerman Zucker

"Oh dreidel, dreidel , dreidel, I made it out of clay. And when it's dry and ready, my dreidel I will play." Growing up Jewish, I loved the Hanukkah dreidel game, and I *especially* loved ending up with more chocolate coins or pennies or pistachio nuts than my brother did. We concocted little rhymes to remember the meaning of the Hebrew letters printed on each of the four sides of the spinning top: "*Shin*, shin, put one in. *Nun* means none, now I'm done. *Hay*, *hay*, half if I may. *Gimel*, gimel, gimme all of your coins!"

The significance of those letters on a religious level rarely crossed our minds as we counted and hoarded our winnings. They represent the phrase, "Nes Gadol Hayah Sham – a great miracle happened there," a reference to how one day's worth of oil lasted for eight days after a small band of Maccabees reclaimed the Temple from an evil King named Antiochus. One pundit this week called it "an ancient supply chain issue." Sure, we knew the story of Hanukkah. But, to be honest - what did we care about miracles? We had milk chocolate!

The theme of miracles, the memory of miracles, the promise of miracles to come flicker around us at this time of year like so many Menorahs, solstice bonfires, and Christmas candles. It is December and we yearn for the miraculous to pierce through the veil of the ordinary and inspire us, lift us, ground us, renew us.

"Miracle" -- from the Latin word *mirari*, that which evokes wonder or awe. We hunger for miracles, for wonder and awe, even as we struggle to define what might qualify as *miraculous* in our modern, disconnected world and in our rational religion. Is it magical oil? a blessed babe born in a manger? the mysteries of nature with its ebbing moons and tides? a parking space at the Mall? Miracle Whip or the Course in Miracles? Is it the very fact of our millions-of-years-old existence with our evolutionary ears and our opposable thumbs? the very reality of our enduring aliveness in all of its splendor and all its drudgery after 20 months of pandemic living? Well, yes.

If we were to define a "miracle" in classical terms we'd call it is an event which cannot be explained by the laws of nature that some would attribute to divine intervention. Or, a breach of regularity in the functioning of the world. On the other hand, the Christian theologian Augustine remarked that "Miracles do not happen in contradiction *to* nature, but in contradiction to what *we know* about nature."

We've unlocked many of nature's mysteries over the centuries since Augustine, and yet, miracles remain as much a modern preoccupation as they were an ancient one. Humorist Frank Gannon quips: Consider the Miracle Mets of 1969. Did God really suspend the laws of physical matter 42 years ago? Was that, in the words of Aquinas and my insurance agent, an act of God??" Well, probably not. Miracles are heralded and hyped with increasing frequency in the media and on a plethora of websites, including one called (I kid you not) "MiraclesRUs (they take paypal and venmo).

Many of these modern miracles are the slightly suspect stepchildren of the incident at Lourdes in 1858, when a young girl with healing powers named Bernadette was declared a saint. Thousands still travel to Lourdes and the Ganges River India, the shrine of Fatima, golly – even the vortex at the peak of the Boynton Canyon trail in Sedona, and other well-known "miraculous" sites around the world in a quest for healing.

The more recent tabloid miracle Meccas send up some troubling red flags for me, though, as they replace the sense of awe that miracles once embodied with a bizarre banality. For example, an image of the Virgin Mary supposedly appeared on the rear fender of a Mr. Dario Mendoza's 1981 Chevrolet Camaro in Elsa, Texas. Even after washing his car, the image grew larger, causing people to flock there to pray at the blessed bumper. With his car engulfed by round-the-clock supplicants, Senor M had to resort to hitchhiking to work! Hundreds of people made a pilgrimage to a "hotel art" landscape painting purchased at an Oregon yard sale that was believed to harbor a living image of Our Lady of Guadeloupe.

Holy apparitions are said to appear in flour tortillas, forkfuls of spaghetti, in the bark of a New Jersey blue spruce tree, and on the anterior fur of a dog named Mr. Frisky. The popular TV show, "Glee," focused on this phenomenon in a witty episode called "Grilled Cheesus."

My personal favorite, though, is the so-called *Nun Bun*, a cinnamon roll allegedly bearing the likeness of Mother Teresa discovered in a Nashville Bongo Java coffee shop. "I was horrified because I almost ate this religious piece of dough," confessed Ryan Finney, the employee who discovered it. The bun has been the subject of a nine-minute documentary film, showed up on Leno and Letterman, and was eventually purchased for a mid-boggling sum of money! The pious pastry now resides in a freezer.

The Rev. James Gill, a priest and psychiatrist who helps the Catholic church investigate reported folk miracles, views the majority of these claims as "either outright hoaxes or a pathetic bid for attention by the religiously confused."

So, what's all of this about anyway? The phenomenon seems to point to a collective yearning for the sacred that is so great, a hunger for meaning that is so

unmet, and a disenchantment with mere rationalism that is so profound that some folks resort to exalting pastries and paintings.

It suggests to me that while we keep busy trying to locate the miraculous outside of nature, separate from ourselves and our most intimate relationships, and beyond our everyday existence, we end up missing evidence of the sacred and the magical in "every cubic inch of space" as Walt Whitman put it. And it begs the question: Is life (the very life of life) itself the miracle we overlook or undervalue while we're gazing hopefully into fenders? Maybe so.

"I know of nothing else *but* miracles," Whitman proclaimed with his liberal sensibilities. Many of us UU- mystical humanist types may readily agree. The ancients believed differently, as we can see in the miracle stories found in nearly all of the world religions. Ancients believed these miracles to be factual events, the hand of God intervening on behalf of his chosen people.

This reminds me of the Bible reader and the skeptic waiting for the bus together, and every now and then the Bible reader would exclaim, "Alleluia, Praise the Lord, Amen."

The skeptic asked what he was reading. He answered "I am reading how God parted the Red Sea and let the Israelites go through— that is a miracle!"

The skeptic quipped, "Do not believe everything the Bible tells you. The truth of the matter is that that body of water was only really 6 inches deep— so it was not miracle."

The convert nodded but kept on reading and all of a sudden let out a big "Alleluia, Praise the Lord!" "What is it this time?" asked the skeptic. The Bible reader said excitedly in one breath, "This one is a real miracle, God drowned the whole Egyptian army in 6 inches of water!!!"

What can I say? - perception and faith.

Where do we come in to all of this as Unitarian Universalists? With the rise of natural sciences in the 17th and 18th centuries and a new view of nature as a machine operating according to immutable laws, the traditional idea of miracles came under sharp attack. Liberals rejected the idea that faith needed miraculous proofs.

This skepticism about miracles was one of the defining marks in 19th century Unitarianism, landing us in hot water, yet again, with our orthodox brethren. In his famed and radical Divinity School address of 1838, Ralph Waldo Emerson suggested that "miracle" as pronounced by Christian churches sounded like the word "monster" to him, inciting the so-called "Miracles Controversy." Emerson, being a Transcendentalist, perceived revelation as on-going and the self in *continuous* communion with the Divine. He embodied the inward search for the

sacred and promoted the now-popular notion that the Universe is infused throughout with spirit, with Divinity, with miracles.

One could argue that you'd require a good dose of faith and hope to believe in this understanding of miracles in our weary world. And If we're looking for a role model in today's popular culture, we might not do better than Ted Lasso, the folksy protagonist of the hit television series. He's a midwestern football coach who has landed in London as the hapless coach of an English football club.

Ted, portrayed exquisitely by Jason Sudeikis, is a modern day Yoda/Will Rogers mash up who offers pep talks like: I don't see the word "impossible." I see "I'm possible." Or, this one: "I do love a locker room. It smells like potential." He tells his struggling team – "Be a goldfish. It has a 10 second memory and is the happiest creature on earth."

When the internet has pages with titles like "The 65 best inspirational quotes from Ted Lasso," you'd be apt to think he is the poster boy for toxic positivity. But once you watch the series, you learn that he has had as many hard knocks as anyone. There are some dark passages in his life – suicides and divorces. He has panic attacks and unprocessed grief. Yes, he hates tea which he calls "brown water" and still doesn't understand the English football rule of "offsides," but he cheerfully and faithfully bakes fantastic shortbreads and delivers them in a pink box for his daily "Biscuits with the Boss."

Ted has faith in others – even, and especially, when they have little faith in themselves. He is endearing and it turns out, not a pie-in-the-sky buffoon at all, but rather a real person who inspires his team, by hanging "Believe" signs over their lockers, and by asking them: "Do you believe in miracles? Hope is a miracle. I believe in hope," he tells them. "I believe in believe."

When the barmaid Mae warns Ted that "It's the hope that kills you," he replies earnestly: No, Mae, it's the lack of hope that comes and gets you." Ted knows that regardless of whether hope kills you in the end, to give up hope is to die early, and by one's own hand. That makes Ted the epitome of something else entirely – "tragic optimism."

What does this mean – tragic optimism? It sounds like an oxymoron. But it isn't. The term was first coined by the renowned psychologist and Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl, who may have secretly commemorated Hanukkah with his fellow prisoners at Auschwitz. Tragic optimism is the opposite of toxic positivity. It involves the search for meaning amid the inevitable tragedies of human existence.

Researchers who have studied post traumatic growth have found that people have the opportunity to grow from challenges – including having a greater appreciation of relationships, increased compassion and purpose, utilization of one's personal strengths and a greater sense of self determination. In the words

of writer G.K. Chesterton, "Until we realize that things might not be, we cannot realize that things are."

One could argue that the Maccabees in the Hanukkah story were tragic optimists, too. There they were – under the thumb of an invading ruler, exiled from their religious practices, greatly outnumbered and ill equipped and charging down from the hills to retake and rededicate their Temple. They had a purpose. They believed in believe.

And what about us? During this challenging time of coping with COVID and its fall out, we've had to decide whether we will believe in believe, whether we will embrace the miracle of hope, together and separately. We've had to find within us the resolve and faith to see the truth of "I'm possible". Or "We're possible," and not "Impossible" when it come to rebounding from the pandemic. Perhaps, just being here together in this Sanctuary is what Annie Lamott would call a "little dusty red wagon miracle."

How does that sit with us as we sit this morning, masked, shoulder to shoulder and heart to heart in this very room, celebrating Hanukkah and Advent, still digesting the turkey and the pie, anticipating the Solstice and Christmas; perhaps awaiting union with loved ones, with humanity, with Creation itself? Do we buy it? Perhaps, we are awaiting many different miracles, large and small...reconciliation or peaceful parting, forgiveness, a favorable medical diagnosis, new employment, a new awareness or path, the end to this pandemic.

This week, in our homes, some of us have clustered in intimate circles around the menorah candles. We may gather around a Solstice bonfire on the 21st, drawing together in what Dylan Thomas called "the close and Holy darkness." Who knows what evidence of the sacred, what sense of union, what window into Paradise, what moments of genuine feeling or insight, what jingle bells and fresh evergreen scents might be glimpsed or felt or heard if we keep our eyes and our minds and our ears and our hearts and our spirits open to the miraculous?

"Nes Gadol Hayah Sham - A great miracle happened there," in that Temple of old. And it happens *here*, too. And who know where? We just need to look to this day, get out the way, and allow these miraculous moments to emerge like three-dimensional images popping out at us from one of those Magic Eye books. For us to be deeply touched by this wonder, to experience the miraculous, we'll need to loosen our grip on presumed control over the Universe and accept a humble place within the matrix that connects all life in an interdependent web of reason

and mystery. It's a tricky balance. One that Ted Lasso seems to comprehend when he asks if we believe in miracles. If we believe in believe.

We can be open to the miraculous and also make some things happen, but we can't special order our miracles and demand express shipping! Perhaps the miracle will come in a form we don't expect (and I'm not talking fenders and pasta bowls here). Perhaps it will not save us or fix us, although it may redeem us or transform us in some healing or liberating way. A miracle may come to us in the form of greater acceptance of what is unpleasant about ourselves or others, and hold us in the tragic optimism that activates hope.

Perceiving our lives as miracles, for better or ill, calls us back - out of hubris and pride and into balance. It calls us back into the miraculous-ness of Whitman's "honey bees busy around the hive, the wonderfulness of the sundown, the exquisite delicate curve of the new Spring moon, every cubic inch of space." It pulls us into co-creation with the sacred on this disenchanting planet where people are hungry for inspiration and for meaning that can not be given to them by science or the material world.

Miracles are for anyone who chooses to believe. That is the heart of Hannukah and the soul of Christmas. So, abide with us in hope, oh Mysterious Presence, oh amazing Universe, oh Spirit of life. You be the potter, we'll be the clay. Fashion us into little dreidels and set us spinning amidst the miracles and the chocolate coins and pistachio nuts and candy canes and manger hay.

Spinning and bumping up against exquisite delight and abject brokenness; spinning along an axis of hope in a star-filled night; spinning ourselves open in wider and wider circles of connection; spinning and spinning and spinning, as we are borne forward on a wintery wind and born into wonder.

Blessed be. Blessed we. Shalom and Amen.

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