

These are challenging times
*May we remember that, not only viruses **but fear** is contagious*
As is hope
In the name of Jesus, we pray.

Last week we began at the beginning, the beginning of the gospel of Luke. An old priest is lighting incense in the temple when he is visited by an angel who tells him that his elderly wife is about to become pregnant: the old fashioned way. It's still a miracle, mind you. She's like 80 or something. But wait, actually from our point of view that is already two miracles with the first miracle ostensibly bigger than the second. If an angel showed up at my house: a beautiful monstrosity with wings that by all accounts would not fit easily in my living room, I wouldn't quibble with their announcement, whatever it was: I'd bow. And maybe afterwards ask my husband to call 911, convinced I'd blown a gasket. So, we need to acknowledge that things have either changed a whole lot since the ancient world or that this is a story. Or both. What then is the generative core of this story for any age? The miraculous enter my home and blessed me. I bowed down. The miraculous entered my homes and blessed me and I refused to listen. I would say both these things happen all the time.

There are those miracles we are blessed to experience and that we know are happening as they are happening: a teenager's sudden hug, a depressed friend's genuine smile after a years long depression has lifted, that incredible, I mean impossible catch at the end of the 4th quarter, a vaccine made in less than a year that is saving millions of lives. That human agency played a part in these miracles does not negate them. As I preached last week, even Mary needed to pull up her sandal straps and hike into the hill country and talk to her 80 year old pregnant cousin Elizabeth before she could truly own the miracle that had happened to her and have the confidence to SING about it. Human connection is a miracle too. Especially in these days when we face so many obstacles to it. That I am here at all, this oddball *me* is a miracle, born on this bit of earth ball in this moment among all the eons of time, a combination of just these strands of DNA and not those, so similar and yet so different from my closest relatives. That I am here *with you* is...astounding: a bigger mix of chance encounters and choices and near extinction experiences and improbabilities and genetic whiplashes than I could fit in my living room. If I read the universe right, with all that empty space expanding out there, it is simply so much more likely that neither of us would be here at all.

To capture the feeling of this, here is a poem by Willaim meredith. It captures the thoughts running through the mind of a precocious 10year old as he takes his bath. It's called Willaim Jenks' Bath.

Walter Jenks' Bath

These are my legs. I don't have to tell them, legs,

Move up and down or which leg. They are black.
They are made of atoms like everything else,
Miss Berman says. That's the green ceiling
Which on top is the Robinsons' brown floor.
This is Beloit, this is my family's bathroom on the world.
The ceiling is atoms, too, little parts running
Too fast to see. But through them running fast,
Through Audrey Robinson's floor and tub
And the roof and the air, if I lived on an atom
Instead of on the world, I would see space.
Through all the little parts, I would see into space.

Outside the air it is all black.
The far-apart stars run and shine, no one has to tell them,
Stars, run and shine, or the same who tells my atoms
Run and knock so Walter Jenks, me, will stay hard and real.
And when I stop the atoms go on knocking,
Even if I died the parts would go on spinning,
Alone, like the far stars, not knowing it,
Not knowing they are far apart, or running,
Or minding the black distances between.
This is me knowing, this is what I know.

And there are other miracles we forget because they are so commonplace. Or as my babysitter's grandfather put it, on coming to after a heart attack: *The thing that amazes me, Sarah, is that all these years she beat and she beat and she beat without me even being aware of it!*

And then there are my own personal miracles that I may chose to look away from:

I have been forgiven for doing things that I thought were unforgivable. I have survived things that I didn't think were survivable. I am loved, even though...a lot of the time...I really kind of ...(suck) stink.

The church balances us between these two worlds: the world of human agency and choice on the one hand and the miraculous, the unconscious, indecipherable, the mysterious on the other. It's an uncomfortable place to be at times and increasingly counter-cultural. And it is particularly counter-cultural to live and think in these two languages at the same time. One of the few places that pushes back against this separation and against all the various versions of siloing that we are doing IS the church, and in particular our Episcoapl church. This is a time to be with a group of people who I can guarantee you do not believe the same thing about politics or about Christ or even about the Nicene Creed. And if numbers are any indicator, coming to church is about the most counter cultural thing you can do at the moment. And so it's good practice for the complex compassionate nuanced thinking we need out there.

It's a big stretch from one hand to the other: from what we know on the one hand to what is beyond our understanding. And to hold both hands open at the same time, is a stretch! A

stretch that often hurts. What we can know and think we must do to save the world including what we want to tell everybody else they should do on the one hand and what we don't know or can't do alone or may never be able to grasp on the other. Sometimes it feels like the tension will rip us apart.

But maybe it can save us too. Maybe this posture, pulled in two directions, up on a cross, so important to the church, has a new meaning for us who feel pulled in two directions. Maybe it's a call to open our hearts.

And maybe that is what God wants for Christmas, as we lean in, looking for moments of peace and hope and respite in a world gone nuts with uncertainty and fear, as we lean in to see that new baby, to smell that snap of pine tree, hear that rustle in the hay, and listen for angels and the world's children singing on an air cloud...Let's remember that vulnerability is the human condition, shared by the Lord of all, Jesus Christ whose arms stretched open on the cross. Let's practice making peace with that stretching and try a little tenderness.

May we be sanctuaries, living sanctuaries , human sanctuaries suspended with hearts open between what we know and what we don't know and allow something new and vulnerable and powerful to be born within us.