



ST BART'S

A Sermon by

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Magic and the Spirit

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, July 26, 2015

The Ninth Sunday after Pentecost—Based on John 6:1-21

When we're young, we do stupid things. I'm told by the scientists that we can't help it. Our brains don't fully develop until at least our mid-twenties. We also have these urges to do risky things without much care for the consequences. I feel bad for all the young ones growing up under the self-imposed mass surveillance of social media, just waiting to record something stupid that they do or say, crystallizing their stupidity in the cloud to be referenced even years later by anyone willing to look. God may forgive them, but will the internet? I, personally, thank God every day that I was born before Mark Zuckerberg. Otherwise, the whole world might know about one of the most embarrassing periods in my life, a time I don't talk about much. Lord knows I wasn't easy to be around. Yes, it was the time in my life when I—and I can't believe I'm telling you this—when I took on the hobby of magic. Yes, magic. I really got into doing magic tricks. You name it. Cards, coins, mind reading, squishy balls. I read more and more books, advancing to things like flash paper, levitation, and boy the things you can do with invisible thread! And, you know, it got to the point where I had a whole show put together. I bought my first three-piece suit for the occasion, a black, chalk-striped number. The big finale was setting a dollar bill on fire and having it appear in a lemon. I'm grateful for all the people who stuck by me. For it took me a few years to wake up to see that that was not what I wanted to be when I grew up. I've been magic-free going on twelve years now.

One of the things that was the most troubling is how you are treated if people know you are a magician. They will always be asking you to show them a trick. Some wanted so badly to believe in miracles. So much so that they would exaggerate the tricks that I would do. If I pulled a dime out of their ear, they would say it was a quarter. If I pulled a rabbit out of a hat, they would say I pulled two. People couldn't help but embellish. And I wonder sometimes how that dynamic manifests itself in our Scriptures. Others wanted to catch you at a mistake, to show, with glee, that magic and miracles don't exist, after all. You were either the incarnation of Enchantment, or the incarnation of Disillusionment. It's troubling to be a miracle worker these days, and so I left it behind.

Today, in our Gospel reading, we are honoring two of the miracles for which Jesus is renowned, the multiplication of the loaves and fishes and his walking on water. Before I address the meaning of these events, I want to help us around a certain roadblock. How can we take these stories seriously? There are natural laws that we have learned since the Enlightenment. Bread and fish don't magically multiply. People are not as buoyant as the Gospels suggest. Do we have to believe in magic to believe in God?

Some Christian traditions say yes. In their reading of the Bible and of reality, they say that the laws of the Universe can be countermanded by the Creator of the Universe. God can say, "Poof!" and it will happen. For them, Jesus has this power, too. And so, if you believe in the God of the Bible, you must believe in magic. And the flip side of this literal reading includes all the people who have concluded that since there is obviously no magic in the world, that must mean that you can't possibly believe in the God of the Bible, which seems to contain magic all over the place.

But the more I learn and grow, the more I become convinced that this whole sphere of literalism is one great roadblock that is stopping some of us from getting to the heart of the matter that the Bible is trying to approach. I'll admit it: I don't believe in magic. And yet I still believe in God. I don't believe in magic, and yet I still believe in Jesus' power. I don't believe in magic, and I still gain cataclysmically important things from the Gospel reading today which seems to contain two magic tricks.

How can I say this? Well, to put it simply, I don't believe in the natural and the supernatural. For me, I just can't go there. For me, the world is one, and it can be known and understood with the tools of science. Truth is one, and the laws of that one truth are not broken. But, there is something that is very important to recognize in the One Nature: in the natural world there are dynamics that are physical and there are dynamics that are spiritual. The physical includes things you can taste and see and test with repeatable studies. But then there are spiritual things. Things you can't see. Things you can't touch. Things that are unique and unrepeatable. Things like trust and love and justice. Value, economies, dreams, and desire. These spiritual things are just as real as the physical things. In fact, if you stopped to think about it, they are all tangled up together. Physical actions can lift the spirit or break the spirit. Spiritual convictions can transform the physical world. These transformations can be horrible or sublime.

It is pivotal that we recognize that the spiritual is not the supernatural. The spiritual is not magic. The spiritual is very much a part of reality. And you don't have to believe in magic to believe in the spiritual things that a life of faith helps you to perceive, with tools like sacraments and Scriptures.

But parsing this out, especially when it comes to the Scriptures, is no simple matter. It seems that every single verse has different considerations, both historical and artistic. And if we had a more magical view as a child, it can be disappointing to see these Scriptures in the full light. In the case of the account of the multiplication of the loaves and the fishes, for me, I insist that something like this actually happened. But not by the power of magic. But by the power of the Spirit. The loaves of bread and the fish did multiply, by the power of trust and generosity descending upon everyone on that grassy field. Jesus showed them the carefree little boy giving away what little he had, inspiring the whole crowd to give what they had. And what do you know, there was enough for all! This is the power of the Spirit, to turn hearts around, to make those who hoard into those who share, changing the physical world such that every belly is filled.

The power of the Spirit was even stronger than it seems from our perspective that day, because it would have been scandalous for these religious people to eat with so many other people. They were putting their souls at risk, according to the spirit of the time. There were many purity laws that declared you unclean if you ate with people who had sinned or people who were unclean for whatever reason. These purity laws were negative spiritual walls that divided them from each other. But Jesus broke down all those spiritual walls, presiding over a common meal where clean and unclean, sinners and saints, were all one. Not just a full belly, but a full united heart that served as a brief instance of heaven on earth. Not just a vision, but actually happening. It must have been exhilarating.

And then there is Jesus walking on the water. Would it be so bad if we treasured this as a portrait of the peace that comes when we encounter Jesus when our lives are tossed with trouble? Perhaps Jesus was on the shore, or on submerged rock, or perhaps not. We can't know how much of this is showmanship or legend. But this doesn't let us off the hook. We have to consider if we connect with this story spiritually. Jesus comes his disciples in the rough sea and says, "It is I." or "I am. Do not be afraid." Can we receive him into our ships, into our hearts, and open ourselves to the inner calm that comes with trust and friendship with God? Can we know, deeply know, that God doesn't aim to fill us with dread, condemnation, and guilt, but to help us? To help us make it to the other side without having our hearts swamped.

I may not believe in a magical view of these readings, but I do hold to a deep conviction when it comes to the spiritual life of this Gospel of John, perhaps the most sophisticated of the four. Most surprisingly, this Gospel shows Jesus' frustration when it comes to the miracles. For, later, he is bitterly aware how much the transitory, physical glory of the miracles is distracting the people from the eternal, spiritual realities that he is trying to show them. Jesus wants to teach them how to love one another, and they just want to see him perform another trick. However the miracles happened, Jesus doesn't want to stop there. They are a shallow means to a much deeper end. And, unfortunately, some like the shallow end of the pool just fine.

The purpose of our faith is not to believe six impossible things before breakfast, as the Queen said to Alice in Wonderland. Our faith helps us to see things that only seem impossible. In reality, they just happen to be invisible, rare, and often untried. Our faith and our common life are meant to guide our hearts to the one Truth of the Universe, to God, who is found in things both seen and unseen, meeting us in the rough seas to come aboard our hearts, and

feeding us with heavenly bread and fish that ends our hunger. Like the writer to the Ephesians, “I pray that, according to the riches of God’s glory, God may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth (of things both seen and unseen), and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge (and science), so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.”

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