

Welcome

There's a story in the Gospel of John.¹ Jesus is suffering. He knows he's going to die. He wants it to be meaningful, so he calls out to his father, "Father, glorify your name."

Then a voice comes from heaven, "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again."

What gets me about this story is not the content of what God said, but the next part--the part about what the crowd heard. Apparently, only some of those present believed they had heard the voice of God. To others, that rumble in the sky was simply "thunder."

Jesus' response? "This voice has come for your sake, not for mine."

When something miraculous happens in your life, is your first instinct to look for God's voice, or is your first instinct to dismiss it as thunder? Our scripture today invites us to wrestle with the question of miracles.

No matter who you are, or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome to join us as we look for answers here.

Please rise as you are able for the Call to Worship.

Sermon

In my work as a hospital chaplain intern, I am asked to confront miracles fairly regularly. Someone is supposed to die, and they don't. Someone does die, but their spouse still feels them present. Someone is cured when they shouldn't be. Someone is pregnant when the odds said it was impossible. Someone has an impossible decision to make, and an "angel" helps them decide.

In today's Gospel, there was a man in the synagogue with an unclean spirit. He was acting out, speaking out. Jesus spoke to the spirit, the man convulsed, and the spirit left him.

¹ John 12:27-30

How many of you have already solved this mystery in your heads? The man convulsed. He must have epilepsy. The man said some strange things. Clearly mental health was involved. Although it is my ethical duty to caution you against diagnosing someone you haven't met from a culture you don't know--you are still probably right. These things likely have a medical explanation. But there is another truth here too, one that I'd like to explore.

“Interleukin-6 is a soluble mediator with a pleiotropic effect on inflammation, immune response, and hematopoiesis.”²

I don't know what that means either, but it sure sounds sciency. What I do know is that healthy levels of IL-6 in your body makes you better. It helps you fight disease, fuel your metabolism, sleep a good night's sleep, and live a little bit longer. But here's the kicker--studies show that regular church attendance can actually affect your IL-6 levels in measurable ways.³

And IL-6 isn't all. Heart transplant patients who participate in religious activities and say their beliefs are important have improved physical function, decreased anxiety, and fewer health worries.⁴ Your spirituality can decrease your risk of coronary heart disease.⁵ It can get you to a healthier weight.⁶ It can lower your blood pressure, mitigate dementia, reduce the risk of cancer, and yes, it can improve all sorts of mental health conditions.⁷ And all through worship, practice, prayer, meditation and beloved community.

In today's welcome, I brought up the story from the Gospel of John, where some of the people heard God and some of them heard thunder. When I see that church attendance can affect Interleukin-6, or that meditation can improve psychosis, or that your ability to see God in the world can change just about every health outcome you are likely to face--well, it is then that I

² Toshio Tanaka, Masashi Narazaki and Tadimitsu Kishimoto, “IL-6 in Inflammation, Immunity, and Disease,” *Cold Spring Harbor Perspectives in Biology*, 2014 Oct; 6(10), doi: 10.1101/cshperspect.a016295, retrieved 28 January 2021 at <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4176007/>.

³ Christina M. Puchalski, “The role of spirituality in health care,” *BUMC Proceedings* 2001;14:352-357.

⁴ Id.

⁵ Harold G. Koenig, “Religion, Spirituality and Health: the Research and Clinical Implications,” *ISRN Psychiatry*, Vol. 2012, doi:10.5402/2012/278730: 9.

⁶ Id.

⁷ Id., p. 1-33.

start to believe in miracles. Is there a clear medical explanation for all of these things?
Absolutely, and that explanation is that God works in mysterious biochemical ways.

We are whole people. Body, mind, heart and spirit. You cannot separate one from the other. As a healer, a student, and a person of faith, when I am faced with the choice between God and thunder, I say that our Universe is made of both, and I am grateful.

“This voice has come for your sake, and not for mine.”

Amen.