

Sermon for Christ & Grace Church Petersburg, VA
Third Sunday of Advent, Year A, December 11, 2016
The Rev. Bill Queen
“Miracle and Ministry”
Isaiah 35:1-10, Psalm 146:4-9, Matthew 11:2-11

- one of the things that is important for us to do in worship is to look for ways to take what we hear in the Bible readings of the day and explore how those actions and promises of the then and there are applicable to our lives in the here and now; three of today’s readings present basically the same idea as it gets restated in three different places in the Bible—in a way that connects directly with our lives today
- first, through the words of the prophet Isaiah, God promises that one day he will come to be with his people in a new and powerful way, and that when he does “the eyes of the blind shall be opened, the ears of the deaf unstopped ... the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy”
- next, the Psalmist describes the work of God using many of those same words: God gives “justice to those who are oppressed and food to those who hunger”; God “sets the prisoners free” and “opens the eyes of the blind”; God “lifts up those who are bowed down” and “sustains the orphan and widow”
- finally, Matthew gives us Jesus’ own words summarizing his work, which is a fulfillment of both Isaiah’s and the Psalmist’s promises: “the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them”

- the idea in most of these is a promise of miracles: things that cannot be explained other than by God’s intervention; and we might be tempted to think that miracles were something that only happened back in Biblical times, and that they don’t happen any more; or at least, that they don’t happen to us; but I believe that is a mistake to think that
- what brings these Biblical actions into the present and into our lives is that the miracles that Jesus performed were his ministry; and in his ministry, Jesus not only fulfilled the prophecies spoken before his time, he also gave the charge to his disciples to continue carrying on those same ministries; well, since you and I are Jesus’ current day disciples, we have received that same charge and it is our job to keep carrying on those same ministries that he began
- and here’s how I like to think of this; God does the miracles, we do the ministries; but our ministries are only successful to the extent that we invite and allow God’s miraculous power—God’s intervention—to work through us and through our ministries; so this same idea that is restated in three different places in

our Bible readings today is very much still a part of our lives today; keep thinking of miracle and ministry as being tied together; and here are some examples...

- think of someone who is confused and hopeless about their life; maybe they have made mistakes, done things they shouldn't have done, or hurt people who loved them; and they don't know where to turn for answers, or where to look for people who will accept them despite their faults

- if they come to a church like this one, they can meet people with whom they can talk and pray and worship, and they can learn to see themselves and the world through God's eyes; they can begin to see how God is already at work in their lives; and they are given hope; their eyes are opened to new possibilities: the blind receive their sight

- think of a parishioner offering a ride to someone who can no longer drive, or who has difficulty walking, to a doctor's appointment, or to do some shopping, or even to go out to lunch

- that parishioner, acting on behalf of the church community, is not just providing transportation, but also sharing God's presence and love with them; the person does not leave their wheelchair or walker behind: and yet the lame walk

- think of someone who is living with an illness who remains after the service here on the first Sunday of the month, and receives the anointing with oil and hands laid upon them in healing prayer

- it may not be that their illness is cured, but they may find a renewed faith which relieves them of their anxiety: and the lepers are cleansed

- think of someone who has not attended church who begins coming and begins learning what the Bible says and hears about Christians' experiences firsthand

- they begin to hear God speaking to them; their ears are opened to God's voice for the first time in their lives: and the deaf hear

- think of someone who has been given a diagnosis of a terminal disease; in their remaining months of life, through prayer and Bible reading, they discover a new life in Christ

- they find a faith and a strength that carries them through their illness; they find a faith and a strength that carries them through their death, into a continuation of new life in the presence of Christ: and the dead are raised

- think of a refugee family barely scraping by from one day to the next; they are surprised to receive donations of money, food, clothing, and furniture from concerned Christians
- these are not just gifts, again because they come from the church community, but expressions of the kind of love that God has for all of us: and the poor have good news brought to them

- finally, think of men and women in prison, whose lives have been scarred by crime and drugs; through chaplains and Christian ministries they are led to study the Bible, and pray, and worship, build relationships with people who care about them, and build a relationship with God
- they discover a new way to live their lives, and new reasons for which to live: and even if they cannot leave incarceration, the prisoners are set free

- maybe you have seen such ministries going on; maybe you have participated in them; maybe you have been a part of such ministries without realizing that you too were a part of God's miracle-working
- the way these kinds of things that I've cited as examples happen today are truly no less miraculous than the kinds of things we read about in the Bible; that they are continuing to happen now is an indication that God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit are still at work powerfully among us; so my invitation to everyone is to join in any of the kinds of ministries that Christ has passed on for us to do; within them you will experience the miraculous: the blind do receive their sight, the lame do walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf do hear, the dead are raised, the poor do have good news brought to them, and the prisoners are set free; participate in God's ministries and you will see and experience the miraculous for yourself