

Grace to you this morning, and peace, from God, the Creator, and from Jesus, God's life and light in the world. Amen.

Today's message, as I indicated at the outset of today's service, is titled "A Miracle Story."

Last week, we heard about what people can do as Christians in the face of chronic pain, in the face of uncertainty or fear, and in the face of grief and loss. We talked about how, instead of praying for *things*, we can pray for *dispositions*, for strength in the face of pain, for courage in the face of uncertainty and for life in the face of grief and loss.

Today, also, as I mentioned at the beginning of our service, the important thing will be to remember, not necessarily the theological details, (although if you do remember those, I will be very happy). Instead, I simply invite you to focus on the story itself and see if you can answer the question I'm about to ask:

Do you believe in miracles?

Do you believe in miracles? If so, or if at least, you are open to the idea, I have a story for you. I experienced a miracle on Tuesday afternoon. Now, before I share the miracle I experienced, let me give you a little back-story. Most of you know that I have a "PDF" which stands not for "Pastor Dan's finances," but "Pastor's Discretionary Fund." The Pastor's Discretionary Fund is not an item on our church budget. It exists because of individual donors; members and friends of Queen Anne Lutheran like you, who have given generously so that we can continue to provide financial assistance to people in need.

All of this, I think, is amazing. We are one of the few churches, at least among Lutherans, to be able to provide some financial relief to people who are in need, in and across the Seattle area and beyond.

So again, I find all of this amazing. Indeed, as the Apostle Paul says in Galatians 5, "Acts of generosity confirm the Spirit is working among us," – is working among you, motivating you to give, so that other people may simply live.

There is, however, or rather, was, one problem on Tuesday. I only had \$355 in the Pastor's Discretionary Fund. That's right, \$355. Now, that may not seem like a problem initially; after all, a few \$100 can make a big difference, can go a long way in a person's life, especially one who suffers from need.

Unfortunately, by mid-Tuesday afternoon, I had multiple requests from people in need totaling approximately \$700. In one day. The largest of these requests was for \$450 for rental assistance, that came from a woman I will call here, Joanne. Now, Joanne initially contacted me by email. She was a single parent of a daughter with special needs, who had fallen behind in her rent. Joanne's landlord was accordingly

threatening her with eviction. What could I do, on behalf of you, as members and friends of Queen Anne Lutheran Church? On the one hand, I wanted to help her as much as I could. That's really our mission statement. It's not just about "proclaiming the love of God in Christ," it's about *sharing* that love, by finding ways to give to others.

So, on the one hand, I did want to help her as much as I could. On the other hand, I needed to leave some money in the pastor's discretionary fund for other people who are also in need. And so, I faced a very difficult choice. I decided to call Joanne, and offer her \$200 as a compromise.

When Joanne answered the phone, she reiterated her situation and why she needed assistance, which is pretty standard. Things changed however, when I learned that she had an additional problem, one that she did not disclose in her email.

You see, Joanne couldn't figure out why God was silent when it came to her daughter's problems and special needs.

"I've prayed often," she said to me. "Why won't God make her better? Why won't God fix this?"

"Why won't God fix this?" That's a question many of us ask, as people of faith, right? We find ourselves in the face of difficult situations, and we wonder why God doesn't seem to do anything. Why won't God fix this? After all, if God is all-good and all-powerful, why doesn't God cure cancer? Why doesn't God stop war? Why doesn't God end hunger? ...Why doesn't God heal a child with special needs?

Now, the most popular answer to this question, at least in my experience, is that – you know the phrase – "The Lord works in mysterious ways." Which is to say, there must be purpose in these examples of suffering. God must be up to something, something that will be revealed at the end of days, but something that for us in the present remains a mystery.

But that is not what I believe. I believe, even if God is trying to teach us lessons, that to say God is responsible for everything from cancer to genocide, is not the God of the Christian faith. And so, I offered Joanne an alternative.

"You may not agree with my answer," I said, (which is something I find myself often saying to you in this congregation). "You may not agree with my answer," I said, "but for me, the question is not why God won't fix our problems, but why God sometimes *can't* fix our problems."

Consider Mark 6 – and now I'm speaking with you, not talking about the story of what happened on Tuesday – consider Mark 6, a passage we'll be hearing in a few weeks. There we learn that the lack of faith Jesus experienced in his hometown *prevented him* from healing all except a few people. The text is very clear: he could not perform miracles or deeds of power, except the healing of a relative few.

God, who is the healing power in nature and human history, who became personal for us in Jesus Christ, must likewise work within a given framework that places *limits* on what God can and cannot do.

Why? Because God, whose nature, as the theologian Tom Oord puts it, is “Uncontrolling Love” – God, whose nature is Uncontrolling Love, accepts and abides by the limitations that come with creating a free and separate world. This means God *can't* simply wave God's magic wand and cure people. Instead, God works *through* people, *through* us, to help and heal those in need, like Joanne and her daughter. That's why our denomination has the slogan, “God's work. Our hands.”

As Christians, therefore, we have an enormous responsibility. God, again, whose nature is Uncontrolling Love, depends on and works through *people like us* to fulfill God's loving purposes in and for the world. In other words, the manifestation of God's Kingdom depends on acts of service we perform, inspired by the Spirit.

Our gospel reading for today confirms this. According to Mark 3, people, including scribes, challenged Jesus's ministry of reconciliation and healing by claiming that he was an agent of Satan. Jesus responds with characteristic brilliance.

(I wonder why we never consider Jesus's teachings miraculous. You know, of course, that he was the first in human history, at least as far as we have on record, to claim not only that you should love your neighbor as yourself, something we find in Leviticus, but that you should love your enemies. Why don't we consider his *teachings* miraculous?)

Jesus responds, again, with characteristic brilliance, by pointing out the flaw in the thinking of the scribes. If Satan and his minions are responsible for sickness and death, then why would Jesus, acting on their behalf, heal people? In very simple terms, that is a contradiction. In other words, Jesus says, if the kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand.

So, what's Jesus's point? Well, in Mark 3, as well as in the 13th chapter of Luke, it is clear, according to Jesus, that Satan, not God, is responsible for all the ills and afflictions of this world. Let me repeat that: It is clear that Satan, not God, is responsible for all the ills and afflictions of this world. That's why the gospel of John refers to Satan as the “prince of this world.” That's why Paul refers to the “god of this age” in Second Corinthians 4, or to the “principalities and powers of this world” that temporarily have control, as he says in Romans 8.

All of these, Jesus, John, and Paul, recognize that God has partially and temporarily ceded total control to apocalyptic powers of this present age, of the interim, more broadly, between Creation and its final consummation on what the Orthodox Christians call “the eighth day.”

Otherwise, if God is the source of our ills and woes, then God would be divided against Himself, because the nature of God is Uncontrolling Love. This is why it's so

important that Jesus attributes suffering to Satan, instead of God and God's mysterious plan.

That language comes much later. We see it, for example, in the man I like to call "Darth Calvin," John Calvin of the 16th century, who, in some cases, has only one thing in common with Christ: they share the same initials.

Satan personifies these powers of death, disintegration and destruction, which are inimical to God, whose nature, once more, is Uncontrolling Love.

In other words, when I talk about an apocalyptic worldview, I'm talking about the period between around 200 BC and 200 AD, where people believed there was a battle going on, between the power and force of Good, and the power and force of Evil; between God, who has temporarily ceded control of this world, and Satan, who, for the moment, has some control.

Now, if God has accepted and abides by self-limitation as the price for our freedom, and if Satan is responsible for evil and suffering, according to the New Testament, two consequences follow. Listen closely:

First, God is not the source and cause of our suffering – of your suffering, of my suffering, of Joanne's suffering, or her daughter's suffering – and that is good news!

I remember years ago, the first memorial I performed here at Queen Anne Lutheran Church was a relative of Georganne, and I remember telling her kids, who were sitting in the front row, "God did not take your mother. Cancer took your mother."

That's a big difference. The reason I said that, is because when we attribute suffering to God, we often make suffering worse. We turn God from our friend and companion into an enemy, or even an abusive tyrant who punishes us for our own good. Bad theology makes suffering worse.

The second consequence is this: Denying that God presently is in total control, places an enormous responsibility on each one of us gathered here. We become agents, ambassadors, or emissaries of God's healing and love in the world, a world that is often cold, dark, broken, self-centered, full of greed. We might even say that God *depends* on us.

Which brings me back to my story about Joanne. You remember how Joanne needed \$450 for rent, and I only had \$355? And you remember how I determined, before speaking with her, that I would give her \$200, a calculated attempt to preserve at least some money in my discretionary fund for other people in need?

Well, (and I'm going to get in trouble for this...) Well, as I was speaking to Joanne about how God doesn't wave a magic wand to cure people, but works through people to help and heal others, I felt a nudge. And then it hit me. In that moment, God was depending on *me*, and more broadly on *you*, to be the answer to Joanne's prayer.

And so, even though I was nearly \$100 short, I did the unthinkable, may God forgive me. “Joanne,” I said, “we’ll cover everything.” (There’s supposed to be gasps at this point. Let me try that again.)

“Joanne, I said, we’ll cover everything.” [*gasps*] – Nice. You do that almost as well as Amens, I’m impressed.

Now here is where I experienced a miracle on Tuesday. Knowing I would be short almost \$100, I emailed our treasurer to explain the situation. You know the old phrase, “Better to ask forgiveness than to seek permission.” I explained to her that I had decided to give Joanne \$450, even though I only had \$355 in my discretionary fund. I then saw her that night at our Executive council meeting, where I confided to the group that my Pastor’s Discretionary Fund was about to be overdrawn.

Afterward, I invited our treasurer aside to see what we could do. “Oh,” she said, “You don’t have to worry about that now. An anonymous donor just contributed \$500 to your discretionary fund.”

Wow. Now, if that isn’t a miracle, I don’t know what is! \$500 plus the \$355 that I already had, would cover *all* the requests for financial assistance I received on Tuesday, including Joanne’s!

But it gets even better! The next day, another anonymous donor contributed \$10,000 to the Pastor’s Discretionary Fund! Now, if that isn’t a miracle, I don’t know what is. Imagine all the people, like Joanne and her daughter, whose prayers will be answered by the assistance *we* can provide as a people of God and followers of the Way – to feed them, to clothe them, to keep them housed, and off the street.

And so I return to my original question: Do you believe in miracles?

Well, I have to tell you, before Tuesday, I was on the fence. But now, having seen such incredible generosity on the part of our members, and having truly felt we are doing God’s work, *I* certainly do.

The question is, do you?

Amen. [*Amen!*] Yes, you can say Amen; you can clap! That’s great. Any, any and all Yes – and all God’s people said, “Amen!”