This morning is part two of two of our sermon series, “When Pigs Fly: Are Miracles Possible?” and it is quite clear from common English parlance, that people, both Christians and non-Christians, think that miracles happen all the time! The phrase, “It’s a miracle!”, has become quite ubiquitous in our society. We are quick to assign miracle status to occurrences ranging from finding an open parking space close to the grocery store during winter—it’s a miracle!—to the ability to get to work, or school, or church on time—it’s a miracle!—and I know for some of you it really is quite miraculous, to those days when everything seems to go perfectly and the kids go to bed without any fuss—it’s a miracle!—to those moments that actually seem divine: a beautiful sunrise, the birth of a new baby, a good health diagnosis; we sigh with relief, “It’s a miracle.”

Last week our discussion centered on answering the overarching philosophical question of whether or not miracles were in fact even possible. We started by defining a miracle as, “An interference with nature by a supernatural power,” and then we made a distinction between naturalism and supernaturalism. If you remember, naturalism says that nothing exists outside of nature, everything is a byproduct of nature’s persistent march forward with no intervention, and subsequently miracles are impossible since there is nothing outside of nature. Supernaturalism on the other hand says that something else exists outside of nature, and therefore miracles might be possible. I argued, and again this was simply my own opinion, that human reason, the ability to determine what is true and false, and morality, the ability to determine what is right and wrong, have to be something more than nature telling us what to think, and that there has to be something outside of nature that created those abilities. So in the end, I argued that nature cannot be all there is, there must be something supernatural, God for instance, and that it is possible for
God to intervene in nature without even having to breaking the laws of nature. But since it is historically impossible to prove that any one occurrence was in fact a miracle, I said that the more important question is not whether or not miracles occur, but what are we doing, equipped with the divine qualities of human reason and morality to intervene to shape nature ourselves and make this world a better place? If you missed last week and would like a copy of the manuscript, let me know, but our starting point today is that miracles, defined as an interference with nature by a supernatural power, are in fact possible.

And in Scripture, the greatest miracle worker of all was of course Jesus. The Gospels are full of stories of the miracles that Jesus performed: changing water into wine, feeding thousands with just a few fish and loaves of bread, healing the blind and the paralyzed and the sick, performing exorcisms, calming storms, and in our passage for today, raising Lazarus from the dead just before his own resurrection. And so today, I want to turn our attention to whether the miracles that Jesus performed are still possible today. Are we capable of performing the same kinds of miracles, of being conduits for God to intervene in nature? Jesus himself said in the Gospel of John, Chapter 14, just before his crucifixion, “12 Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. 13 I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. 14 If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.” And, again, in Mark 11, Jesus says, “23 Truly I tell you, if you say to this mountain, ‘Be taken up and thrown into the sea,’ and if you do not doubt in your heart, but believe that what you say will come to pass, it will be done for you. 24 So I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.” Are we truly capable of performing miracles greater than
Jesus himself? These verses have influenced many to believe that if only we have enough faith, we too are capable of miracles.

And there have been plenty of televangelists in America who have made those very claims. The idea of modern-day miracle workers quickly brings to mind the likes of Peter Popoff and Benny Hinn who led healing crusades in stadiums full of thousands of people who came to witness the miraculous, and of course make a few million in donations, where the healer would put his hand on the forehead of the infirm, and push them backward and they would be healed. But the supernatural power of these televangelists was quickly disproven when it was discovered in the 1980s that Peter Popoff who claimed to hear the voice of God telling him the ailments and home addresses of people in his audience was simply wearing a radio transmitter in his ear connected to his wife on the other end who was feeding him information from prayer cards that the audience had filled out prior to the event. And there are hundreds of accounts of people who went to Benny Hinn crusades with very visible disabilities like cerebral palsy and muscular dystrophy hoping to be healed, only to be told by event staff to get out of the line and return to their seats while people with ailments that couldn’t be seen like tumors and chronic pain were “healed”. There is a really fascinating documentary from 1972 titled Marjoe, named after Marjoe Gortner who at age four was ordained as a preacher by his parents and was put on the Pentecostal revival preaching circuit where he reaped millions of dollars that were confiscated by his parents. Bitter and disillusioned with religion by the time he became an adult, Marjoe made a behind-the-scenes documentary aimed at discrediting revival preaching where he showed how easy it was to preach a false charismatic revival, and pretend to heal people, and get them to hand over all their money. But, despite these charlatans being unmasked, healing revivals still take place all over
the world, and many Christians, based on these very words of Christ, believe that if only they pray hard enough, or have enough faith, than miracles like those Jesus performed can still happen today.

And many of us in this room have our own experiences that we would attribute to the miraculous. Occurrences for which we have no other explanation, that seem too good to be true, that we believe couldn’t have happened on their own, incidents where something inside us tells us that these events must have been the work of God in our lives. I confess that I have had my own experiences that seem to have divine origins—when I moved to Lincoln for my wife’s job, I had no idea what my next ministry position would be. Nine days after I moved, I received an email from our senior pastor, Jim Keck, asking me to interview for this position. I never could have imagined that I would get connected to a church that I loved this much with such amazing people that are invested in the community of Lincoln. I thank God for this opportunity every day.

But then again, everything that we attribute to the work of God can always be explained in natural terms. Connecting to First-Plymouth could have just been a fortuitous coincidence. Remember from last week, that historically there is no way to prove that an event from the past was indeed a miracle. In fact, all of the miracles of the Bible and even of Christ can be explained in completely natural terms. The splitting of the Red Sea is not an unheard of phenomenon when caused by changes in the tide. When Jesus exorcized demons or cured the paralyzed, he may have just been acting as a psychologist and using suggestion to help cure people of their struggles with mental health. When Jesus walked on water, perhaps there were patches of the Sea of Galilee that were frozen underneath. And so even though we might have no other explanation
for the experiences in our lives that seem providential, perhaps there is no reason to attribute
them to the miraculous.

But why would Jesus tell us that we are capable of moving mountains and of
accomplishing works greater than his if we weren’t able to perform miracles ourselves. Last
week I mentioned that the primary miracle of history was the incarnation of God. God came
down to earth to live among us, and it was the work of Christ in this world that accomplished the
redemption of all people. And subsequently, we have to understand the world and everything that
happens through this lens, that this life is not the end. And just before Jesus’ arrest and
crucifixion, he keeps telling the disciples that he is about to die, and that he is going to leave
them and return to God, and that it is in fact better for them that he leaves, because when he does
so, he is going to send the Spirit of God into the world. The disciples don’t understand yet what
Jesus could possibly mean by saying that it’s better that he leaves, because they want him to
remain on earth as long as possible. But Jesus reminds them again and again, that he is only one
person, and that his ministry on earth is not focused on healing the infirm, that he could not heal
everyone even if he were to focus every waking moment on that one task, and so, he assures him,
he is here for the redemption of all humankind, but afterward he will leave this earth, where he is
only one person, and he will send his Spirit to believers everywhere.

And I think that is how we are able to do works in this world that are greater than Jesus
himself and how we are able to move mountains. Because Jesus was only one person, but the
Spirit of God is at work to call all of us to continue the ministry of Christ in this world to preach
God’s love and redemption for all people, and in the words of Christ, to bring good news to the
poor, and proclaim release to the captives, and to let the oppressed go free. I don’t think that any
of us are capable of moving a mountain on our own accord, but by golly, we are capable of scooping up and moving a pile of dirt, and our cumulative efforts can accomplish much more than Christ ever did and we can touch more lives, beginning with the people right here around us.

When an author writes a book, the author doesn’t just write into the story a completely bizarre miraculous occurrence or unreasonable event just to get a character out of plot bind, the author has to weave together a coherent story that revolves around the main plot point. If miracles happen, miracles aren’t like that either. They are not exceptions or irrelevancies that don’t make sense, but they are precisely the chapters in the great story of our lives on which the plot turns—they point us to what the universal story is all about. Death and resurrection, God’s love for all humanity, is what the story is all about, and if we had the eyes to see it, it is hinted on every page of our lives. So when we ask ourselves whether or not modern-day miracles occur, I think they very well do. Maybe all of those events you can think of in your life that seem so divine, that have no other explanation, the medical healings, the saved marriage, surviving an accident, the new job, maybe those were in fact miracles, times when God intervened in the course of nature. They do happen to us! But maybe they weren’t, maybe there are perfectly reasonable natural explanations. We have no way of knowing.

But modern-day miracles don’t mean that if you have enough faith, you will be healed. It doesn’t mean that whatever you ask for in God’s name, even great wealth, it will come to you so long as you believe. God doesn’t miraculously intervene in one situation and not another because one life is more worth saving than another or because God has some ultimate plan about who should pass when. It doesn’t work like that. That’s not what the story is about! The story’s not
about everything going perfectly well for us. Right after Jesus tells us that we will be able to do works greater than him, Jesus says, “In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.” The story is that death and deceit and violence and starvation and oppression do not have the final word. Instead, every miracle, every movement of the Spirit of God in this world is caught up in the ultimate miracle that every life has value, and every person is loved by God, and that Christ died for everyone, and the Spirit of God is moving inside us in miraculous ways to make that a reality in our world if we will open our eyes and take part, if we will love those around us and be loved in return. It’s that simple, but if we do, then we can move mountains.