

Exodus 16: 2-4, 9-15
Sermon at First Congregational Church, San Rafael, August 22, 2021
"Freefall and 'Big M' Miracles"

I used to live in Austin, Texas where I worked for an interfaith spirituality center called Seton Cove, which recently closed its doors. I remember it as a place of grace. The grace of a community and work where I could bring my whole self. The grace of learning, creativity, and a lived knowing of the divine. And the grace of relationships with amazing people with whom I shared awe, caring, tears and laughter.

The stories about such graced relationships are innumerable, but one example is a dear man named Dan, a retired middle school social studies teacher, who came to see me for spiritual direction at the center. Shortly after we started meeting, he was diagnosed with Multiple Systems Atrophy, a condition similar to ALS. When he could no longer manage stairs up to my office, we met downstairs in the classroom. Eventually walking became too difficult, and I would go to his home to offer spiritual direction. Toward the end, when even his speech was fading, I'd would just hold his hand, pray, and read to him, especially poetry, as tears trickled down his cheeks.

Dan's favorite poem gets to the heart of the grace I experienced at the center and that I experience when I surrender into the ever-present divine love. The poem is called "The Avowal" by Denise Levertov.

*As swimmers dare
to lie face to the sky
and water bears them,
as hawks rest upon air
and air sustains them,
so would I learn to attain
free fall, and float
into Creator Spirit's deep embrace,
knowing no effort earns
that all-surrounding grace.*

When life is hard or uncertain, how do we actually respond? Do we allow ourselves to freefall into a love beyond earning, into Spirit's deep embrace? For most of us, free fall and surrender are unfamiliar, even scary. We prefer a sense of certainty where our actions yield predictable results. Grace sounds good, but we feel more comfortable with control, something tangible that we can grasp and direct.

Our Bible story for today portrays a very human response to uncertain times. The Israelites have been set free from bondage in Egypt. They have been travelling through the desert for a couple of months, and the Promised Land is still just a promise, a mirage, like a glistening pool of water always just beyond reach on the road ahead.

They are grumpy and resentful. They take out their frustration on their leaders, Moses and Aaron, and by extension on God, saying: "You should have just left us in Egypt. Why have you lead us into this quagmire? We'd be better off as slaves who at least got three square meals a day. In fact, we'd be better off dead!"

Whew! That's a lot of drama! Yet, how do we feel...When the caregiving is exhausting? The diagnosis frightening? The pandemic lingering? The unjust politics overwhelming? Climate in chaos? Is our response any less dramatic, any less human?

So, Moses goes to God, who replies with a plan that has a deeper agenda. The plan includes quail coming in droves each twilight, and at dawn a flaky substance appearing with which they could make bread. This mysterious morning gift elicited a question, "What is it?" or in their language: "Manna?"

Of course, there are different interpretations of what happened. Was it coincidence, just a fortunate happenstance that can be easily explained? Or was it a loving blessing provided by the Holy? Or both?

Through us the Holy performs tiny miracles each day through our acts of kindness and justice. For example, at the Marin Interfaith Council, our Network of Accompaniment Congregations provides support to local immigrant families. We have a group focused on racial justice and two groups focused on climate change, one addressing mitigation efforts, the other offering a holistic, spiritual approach in which we adapt through resilience, relinquishing what is harmful, and learning to relate in life-giving ways to each other and the Earth. We work with the Marin Organizing Committee to address renters' rights, homelessness and affordable housing, the mental health of youth, and the needs of older adults. These are a few ways in which the Holy is working small miracles through ordinary people. How is the Holy working through you on behalf of others? What miracles are you receiving through others?

Recently at Marin Interfaith Council, our monthly online meditation was led by Rabbi Henry Shreibman. He said that prayer, spiritual practice, is about noticing the small miracles each day and taking them in with gratitude. Drink the cold water, and as you do, receive it with joy. Notice the hummingbird sucking nectar from the flower, and let yourself hover with it in a timeless delight. Savor hugging a friend or relative whom you have not been able to embrace for so long. Rabbi Schreibman calls these moments, small "m" miracles. They happen over and over again, yet we often do not recognize, appreciate and fully receive them.

These noticings of the blessings of daily life *are* a form of prayer. Life is inherently a miracle, innately sacred. Our prayerful attention, however, awakens us to the miraculous and blessed in a world that is so often difficult, uncertain, and unjust. Even after the Israelites had food, even after arriving in the Promised land, life was still hard.

In our recognition of the Holy throughout the day, we do not negate nor avoid the painful. We still must feel and experience all that life is. But our prayerful and mindful

attention reattunes us to the divine presence that is in, with, and underneath our every moment. Rabbi Shreibman said that when we live life attuned to that Presence, when we appreciate those small “m” miracles, especially in difficult times, that is the Big “M” Miracle.

How about you? What small “m” miracles are showing up in your life? Whether you chock them up to happenstance or providence, do you receive them with gratitude? Do you allow yourself to be nourished, opened up, and made more alive by them? Do you experience ordinary moments like breakfast or the smell of jasmine as the Holy loving on you? If so, that is a Big “M” Miracle.

In the text, the Holy shows up as a cloud, hanging out on the edge of camp, wooing the Israelites forward, not just toward food or a promised land, but also into intimate knowing. That was God’s deeper agenda. Yes, they needed bread and meat, but God wanted to be more than their Amazon Prime account where they could have anything delivered to them on demand.

God said to Moses: “I’m testing the people. I’m seeing if y’all will **know** that I am the Lord your God.” This is an in your bones, beyond words, expansive and intimate knowing. We see this Hebrew word for “knowing” also used as a way to describe sexual intimacy. Adam *knew* Eve. Abram *knew* Sara. It’s a body, mind and soul knowing. This is the kind of knowing we have with the Holy when the Big M “miracle” happens in us, when we allow and surrender to awe.

Of course, mere words are inadequate to describe this knowing love, this miracle. So, we turn to art, music and poetry to express the longing of the Holy One for us, and us for the Holy. In his poem, “We Should Talk About This Problem”, the Sufi poet Hafez portrays God talking directly to each of us. In the poem, God says:

*There is a Beautiful Creature
Living in a hole you have dug.
So at night I set fruit and grains
And little pots of wine and milk
Beside your soft earthen mounds,*

*And I often sing.
But still, my dear, you do not come out.*

*I have fallen in love with Someone
Who hides inside you.*

*We should talk about this problem –
Otherwise, I will never leave you alone.*

The Sacred, Cloudy Mystery will never leave us alone. That is both a blessing and a test, an edgy invitation. We are never alone in our desert wonderings, the hard times

of life where uncertainty is the only certainty. And until we really get, really KNOW, that the Holy Mystery has fallen in love with us, we will be pursued and wooed. This is the divine yearning, and the ultimate source and destination of all our yearnings. Life itself longs for us, and we long for union with all Life.

God prods us to awaken to God's Presence, which is our true identity and constant destination. The Mysterious Divine Essence overlays our every moment, pleasant or painful. The God Reality or Realm holds it all. Attuned to that Reality, we know ourselves to be the same Love that God is, which transforms how we hold every experience, how we hold ourselves, and how we hold each other.

This is our journey toward truly knowing God, which is another way of saying truly knowing union with all that is, which is another way of saying truly knowing love and grace. They are all one and the same. In that knowing, we are always at home, even while still on the Way, even while roaming through uncertainty or injustice or our own imperfections. The Way is to notice, receive, trust, know and freefall...to allow the Big "M" Miracle. This is God's invitation to the Israelites, to my friend Dan, and to all of us:

*As swimmers dare
to lie face to the sky
and water bears them,
as hawks rest upon air
and air sustains them,
so would I learn to attain
free fall, and float
into Creator Spirit's deep embrace,
knowing no effort earns
that all-surrounding grace.*

Amen.