

The Unitarian Church of Montpelier  
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Rev. Mara J. Dowdall

“The Days of Miracle and Wonder”<sup>1</sup>

The winter holiday season has arrived. The question is: Are you in the holiday spirit?

Well, if our new dusting of snow and the greening of the light posts in town weren't enough to get you psyched for the season, I hope that yesterday's Holiday Fair did the trick.

Yes, the holidays have arrived bringing with them the smell of the greens and the sounds of carols, both lingering in the air. And of course, the holidays also bring with them a plethora of lights: the Hanukkah menorah, the Christmas tree, the Yule log, and the Kwanzaa candles.

It makes sense that this time between Thanksgiving and the New Year has come to be called the Season of Lights. And I think there is something very powerful in considering how all of this season's celebrations share the kindling of light amid the darkness. But at the same time, I think we lose something when we don't stop to consider each holiday for itself.

So this December, as we celebrate the Season of Lights, I invite you to go on a parallel journey of exploring the particular sacred celebrations within it.

Our voyage starts with Hanukkah, which our Jewish brothers and sisters will observe for eight days starting this Friday at sundown. Some of you in our congregation may take part in this celebration. As the daughter of a Jewish UU mother, I grew up lighting the menorah each December.

Even if you don't have a Jewish background, I bet the story of the holiday is familiar to you. Still, I think it's worth telling again.

It began more than two millennia ago, in the late years of the BC era. The people of Judea were living in Jerusalem under an empire led by a Syrian King. As the story goes, the empire's Hellenistic rulers had taken over and defiled the Jewish temple. The Jewish people, led by a band of brothers known as the Maccabees, rose up in revolt and after many battles, they beat back the empire's armies and reclaimed the temple. The Jewish leaders ordered that it be cleansed and rededicated.

But there was a problem. In the Jewish temple, there was an oil lamp required to be burning at all times. Yet, when they set about rededicating the temple, the leaders discovered there was only enough olive oil left for a single day.

And unfortunately, there was no Hunger Mountain Coop or Shaws nearby to run to for some more. No, in those days, they had to make the oil themselves, a process that took about eight days.

But meanwhile, back on the temple altar, something extraordinary was happening: the oil lamp, filled with only enough fuel for a single day, continued to burn. One day passed, then another, and the lamp did not go out. For eight whole days, the oil burned. The light lasted until the new supply was prepared. Inconceivable perhaps. But, the light lasted.

Now, there are different historical accounts of the Maccabee wars. Modern scholars suggest that they were actually an internal struggle between traditional and Hellenizing forces in the Jewish community. But no matter what your take on the historical context, there is only one word for the show-stopping, jaw-dropping, awe-inspiring event that happened there when the light continued to burn for eight days.

Yes, my friends, it was a miracle.

There is a song that is sung at Hanukkah which goes like this.<sup>ii</sup>

*We light these lights for the miracles and the wonders, for the redemption and the battles that you made for our forefathers, in those days at this season, through your [holy priests](#).*

*During all eight days of Hanukkah these lights are sacred, and we are not permitted to make ordinary use of them except for to look at them in order to express thanks and praise to Your great Name for your miracles, Your wonders and Your salvations.*

We light these lights for the miracles and the wonders. We look at them to express our praise and thanks. So Hanukkah is a festival of lights alright – but, more specifically, it is an expression of thanks for a miracle that happened many thousands of years ago.

Miracle – it's a tricky word for us rational-minded Unitarian Universalists, isn't it? After all, the Unitarian side of our family tree—from which our congregation's branch grew—made a name for itself by refuting the very existence of miracles.

To be more specific, the early American Unitarians disregarded the New Testament miracles, preferring instead to focus on Jesus' moral teachings. For the early Unitarians, in were parables and the prophetic preaching of the Sermon on the Mount. Out were the loaves and the fishes, the walking on water and the healing the sick.

This view of the Bible, which was rather heretical for New England Christianity at the time, is much more common place now. But that outlook has stayed with us – here in our faith.

However, I don't think our critique of miracles stems only from our reason-based biblical criticism. Nowadays, I think it has a lot to do with our liberal theological outlook that refuses to buy into the notion of a God who would bestow life-saving miracles on some, but intentionally withhold them from others.

In her memoir of life as a chaplain for the Maine Warden Service, the UU minister Kate Braestrup takes up this notion of miracles. In Braestrup's line of work, she often encounters distraught people who are praying for a miracle – parents who are waiting on word of their missing child, family members worrying about their loved ones who didn't return from a hike.

In chapter sixteen of *Here If You Need Me*, Braestrup offers a compelling theological reflection about the nature of miracles. I'd like to share with you, as best as I can, where Braestrup's reflections take her.

Her chapter begins with one of the very Bible stories that the early Unitarians cut out – the story in the Gospel of Luke where Jesus heals the ten lepers. Braestrup read that story for her New Testament theology class in seminary and identifies it, at first, as a defining example of miracle as “an extraordinary event that cannot be explained by any plausible explanation of natural laws or principles.”<sup>iii</sup>

She goes on to suggest that in our contemporary context, when we say “miracle” what we really mean is an outcome that defies the odds – like the Hail Mary pass in a football game that allows the underdog to defeat the reigning champion.<sup>iv</sup>

Braestrup gives the related example of a state trooper's son she knows who was born extremely prematurely. Given very slim odds of survival, Michael was thankfully taken care of at a top hospital by a premiere neonatologist. Thanks to the amazing care he received, Michael pulled through – a “miracle baby” is what his mother called him. He was a baby who beat the odds.

But then, and here's where we get back to the theological quandary of miracles, Braestrup wonders about all those extra-ordinary events that beat the odds, but in a terribly bad way. She offers the counter example of a young woman who was kidnapped in a parking lot one morning and killed in the Maine woods.

Kate points out that this horrific and sad death was an event that, like the survival of the premature baby, was extremely unlikely. But we know with all our hearts that it is different somehow than the story of the Michael. So what it is that sets them apart? And here, I'm going to quote Braestrup at length because there is no substitute for how she puts it. She starts by going back to the story of Jesus and the lepers:<sup>v</sup>

*“From Jesus, ten lepers receive a cure. ‘And one of them, when he saw he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. He prostrated himself at Jesus’ feet and thanked him.’ Were not ten made clean? Yes. Ten were made clean. But only one received a miracle.”*

*A miracle is not defined by an event. A miracle is defined by gratitude. A string of coincidences stretching far back in human history converge to place a young woman in a parking lot at the very moment when a murderer happens by. A similar string of coincidences place a premature infant named Michael in a high-tech teaching hospital where a gifted doctor works to save him. Why? Why not?*

*Anything could happen, but only one thing will. If it is what we desire, what we long for so badly we feel it burning in our bones, if by chance this is given, we will fall on our grateful knees, praise God and call it a miracle. And we will not be wrong.”<sup>vi</sup>*

A miracle is not defined by an event, but rather, by gratitude, says Braestrup.

*We light these lights for the miracles and the wonders. We look at them to express our praise and thanks.*

You know, for all of our criticism of miracles, Unitarian Universalists actually have a miracle story of our own. It comes from other side of our family tree and is considered the founding tale of American Universalism.<sup>vii</sup>

In the late 1700's in what is now New Jersey, a man named Thomas Potter heard about a theology called universalism, which refuted the predominant notion that some people were predestined for salvation while others were not.

Taken with this gospel, Potter built a meeting house near his home, for which he hoped to find a Universalist preacher. But for ten years, he was out of luck. He couldn't find someone to preach in his sanctuary. Everyone thought he was crazy.

Meanwhile, across the Atlantic in the British Isles, a young preacher named John Murray also was won over to the ideas of universalism. But tragedy soon struck. First, his theology cost him his position in a Methodist church. Then his wife and infant son died. In debt and distraught, Murray decided to abandon religion and the land of his birth and seek his fortune in America. Ill fate seemed to follow Murray. When the ship he was on arrived at the North American coast, its got stuck on a sand bar.

To lighten the boat's load, Murray and some other passengers got into a smaller vessel. Well, this helped the main ship dislodge and head back to the open sea. But then the smaller boat Murray was on got trapped by misdirected winds in a small bay – a small bay that happened to be—of all places—quite near Thomas Potter's chapel.

Talk about a string of coincidences!

When Murray and others went swam ashore, they met Potter – who reportedly greeted the young British preacher with these words:

“I have longed to see you. I have been expecting you a long time!”

When he learned more about Murray, Potter believed this was the preacher he had been waiting for. To make a long story short, Murray ended up staying and preaching at Potter's chapel. He later traveled to New England, where he helped to found the Universalist church in America.

The string of events that brought Murray to Potter led him through some of the darkest valleys of the human experience—the sad events of Murray's life in England and the losses he experienced were surely not miracles. And it surely seems a stretch to call a boat beaching on a sandbar a miracle.

But for Potter, for Thomas Potter who had waited all those many years, Murray's strange arrival was something he had longed for in his bones. He would call it a miracle. And I don't think he was wrong.

And when it came to fruition, this very human miracle also, unexpectedly, gave Murray back his life, his hope, and his faith.

This started out as a sermon on the December holidays which became a sermon about Hanukkah, which if you've been paying attention, has become a sermon about miracles.

And here's what my theological reflections on all of the above have left me with:

Our life on this earth is often mundane. And sometimes, as I have said in other sermons before, it is also incredibly hard. Tragedy strikes; wars are fought; more troops are sent; we learn there's no cure; someone or something is lost.

But there's also this. Sometimes, every once in a while, a miracle occurs. Something happens for the good and it beats the odds. The inconceivable occurs before our very eyes. What we never thought was possible comes to pass.

An lamp with oil for one day only burns for eight.

A baby born at less than two pounds survives.

The one we have been waiting for finally arrives.

Maybe you can think of more examples to add to the list. They might in fact sound mundane, but they are amazing events that beat the odds in your life.

They don't happen every day. And when they do, they're not signs that a God up there favors us over someone else.

No, what they are is simply an occasion for gratitude and wonder – a sign that, for all we know, the universe is still able to offer us a surprise from time to time – something that makes our jaw hit the floor and our spirits soar – something that makes our heart beat faster. Something awesome in the true meaning of the word.

And when they happen – these miracles – I hope that we fall to our knees and kiss the ground. I hope we sing songs of grateful praise. I hope we light candles in the darkness to remember them by.

*We light these lights for the miracles and the wonders. We look at them to express our praise and thanks.*

Kate Braestrup ends her chapter on miracles with a prayer for her children. I am going to leave you with it now – as my Hanukkah prayer for all of us:

She writes:

*A grateful heart beats in the world of miracles. If I could speak only one prayer for you it would be that your hearts would not only beat but grow ever greater in gratitude, that your lives, however long they prove to be and no matter how they end, continue to bring you miracles in abundance.*<sup>viii</sup>

So may it be with us - now and in the days to come.

Amen.

Notes:

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<sup>i</sup> This sermon title was inspired by the refrain in Paul Simon's song "Boy in the Bubble."

<sup>ii</sup> See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hanukkah>, to which I also referred, in addition to my own experience, for background information on the story and meaning of Hanukkah.

<sup>iii</sup> Kate Braestrup, *Here If You Need Me: A True Story*, (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2007), 172.

<sup>iv</sup> *Ibid.*, 173.

<sup>v</sup> I use italics in the following stanzas to emphasize that these are Braestrup's words, not mine.

<sup>vi</sup> *Ibid.*, 180-181.

<sup>vii</sup> See the Murray Grove website: <http://www.murraygrove.org/heritage/pottermurray.html>. I was inspired to use this story as a sermon example by Rev. Claire Feingold Thoryn, who used it in a miracle-themed sermon in the Billings Preaching Competition at Harvard Divinity School in the spring of 2006.

<sup>viii</sup> Braestrup, 182.