

***Incarnation: A Miracle of “Grace Upon Grace”***  
***Miracles Series: Stories of God's Generosity***  
**Sermon on John 1:1-18 (8/29 & 8/30/15)**  
**Jennifer M. Hallenbeck**

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Several years ago I encountered an essay online that burrowed into my mind and heart. For a host of reasons, this particular essay emerged in my thoughts this past week and I haven't been able to stop thinking about it...so I'm going to read it to you. The essay is called “Always Go to the Funeral” and it's by a writer and attorney whose name is Deirdre Sullivan. She wrote this:

“I believe in always going to the funeral. My father taught me that. The first time he said it directly to me, I was 16 and trying to get out of going to [the funeral visitation] for Miss Emerson, my old fifth grade math teacher. I did not want to go. My father was unequivocal. 'Dee,' he said, 'you're going. Always go to the funeral. Do it for the family.'

“So my dad waited outside while I went in. It was worse than I thought it would be: I was the only kid there. When the condolence line deposited me in front of Miss Emerson's shell-shocked parents, I stammered out, 'Sorry about all this,' and stalked away. But, for that deeply weird expression of sympathy delivered 20 years ago, Miss Emerson's mother still remembers my name and always says hello with tearing eyes.

“That was the first time I went un-chaperoned, but my parents had been taking us kids to funerals and [visitations] as a matter of course for years. By the time I was 16, I had been to five or six funerals ... 'Always go to the funeral,' [my father said.]

“Sounds simple — when someone dies, get in your car and go to [the visitation] or the funeral. That, I can do. But I think a personal philosophy of going to funerals means more than that. 'Always go to the funeral' means that I have to do the right thing when I really, really don't feel like it. I have to remind myself of it when I could make some small gesture, but I don't really have to and I definitely don't want to.

“I'm talking about those things that represent only inconvenience to me, but [mean] the world to the other guy. You know, the painfully under-attended birthday party. The hospital visit during happy hour ... In my humdrum life, the daily battle hasn't been good versus evil. It's hardly so epic. Most days, my real battle is doing good versus doing nothing.

“In going to funerals, I've come to believe that while I wait to make a grand heroic gesture, I should just stick to the small inconveniences that let me share in life's inevitable, occasional calamity.”

In closing, Ms. Sullivan wrote this: “On a cold April night [several] years ago, my father died a quiet death from cancer. His funeral was on a Wednesday, middle of the workweek.

“I had been numb for days when, for some reason, during the funeral, I turned and looked back at the folks in the church. The memory of it still takes my breath away. The most human, powerful and humbling thing I've ever seen was a church at 3:00 on a Wednesday full of inconvenienced people who believe in going to the funeral.”<sup>1</sup> //

This essay was originally published in 2005, but its message is so timeless. I wanted to read it to you today because, in addition to it being timeless, it's also quite relevant to the message of today's Scripture reading from chapter 1 of John's Gospel.

While Deirdre Sullivan called her essay “Always Go to the Funeral” she just as easily could have called it “Show-Up for People.” And the message of John 1 is all about the miracle of “showing up.”

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My mother is someone who almost always shows-up for people. She will go to the funeral...she will plan a niece's bridal shower and then drive across the country to make it happen...she will make a meal...she will go to a game...she will make the phone call or pop by for the visit.

My dad jokes that, no matter how much she may already be planning to do, if something additional comes up my mom deems important, and it's “mathematically possible” for her to do it, she will make it happen.

My mom *shows-up*. It means the world to people. And, in fact, it's something she learned from her own mother. //

When my mom's mother passed away late last December, my mom was quite convinced the funeral would be attended mostly by our immediate family and perhaps by some members of our extended family. My grandmother was 97 when she died, so most of her close friends and her generation of the family were already gone.

In the days before my grandmother's funeral, my mom said multiple times how she didn't imagine there would be more than 50 or 60 people in attendance. But, every time she said something like that, I responded with, “Mom, you'll be surprised. People show-up for funerals. And they will show-up for *you* because *you* show-up for them. Trust me.” Thankfully, I was right.

Of course, unlike my mother, I've literally been to dozens of funerals in the last many years. So I've seen this principle in action time and time again.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.npr.org/2005/08/08/4785079/always-go-to-the-funeral>

I've seen how family members respond with joyful shock when a dear one they weren't expecting shows-up for a funeral or for a visitation. "I can't believe you came," they always say – usually through tears, and often as they move in for a grateful hug.

*Always go to the funeral.* It's a metaphor that encourages us to "show-up" for people when life gets sad or messy or scary. This metaphor also encourages us to show-up for people in the midst of life's joys...but, showing up to join in the joy is always easier than showing up to be present in the midst of sadness, mess, or fear.

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Earlier this week I posted the "Always Go to the Funeral" essay to my Facebook page and my mom sent me a private message in response. In her message she told me what an impression it had made on her when I told her people would "show-up" for Grandma's funeral because *she* – my mom – "shows-up" – for other people.

Then my mom said, "I don't know where [the concept of] 'showing up' is in the gospels, but it's [got to be] there!"

I responded by telling her that the concept of "showing up" is in the Gospel of John chapter 1, verse 14: "*And the Word became flesh and lived among us...*" God showing up in this world as Jesus Christ.

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As many of you are aware, this summer at McCabe, we began a year-long worship- and sermon-related focus on *generosity*.

We began this focus on generosity earlier in the summer and it's my prayer that, through this focus on generosity, we'll be ever more aware of how *God* is generous toward us and how we, in turn, are called to be generous toward others – generous with our thoughts and words... generous with our actions...generous with our resources of time, talent, energy, and money.

Since *miracles* are a way God expresses generosity – often in a big, extraordinary way – it seemed fitting that we spend some time this summer exploring a handful of miracle stories in the Bible. And this weekend marks the last weekend of a 4-week series on *miracles*.

Though there are stories of miracles throughout the Bible, we've focused on miracles in the Gospel of John. The first week of this series we looked at the story of Jesus miraculously feeding thousands of people with barely any food. That day, our reading also included the story of Jesus miraculously walking on water in the midst of a great windstorm.

These are miracles of how God provides for us and how God *shows-up* to be a calming presence in the midst of life's storms.

The second week of this *miracles* series, we continued with a story of God's miraculous *healing* through Jesus. As I said last week, healing is complicated and we don't always experience it the way we want to or the way we pray for...but God *does* heal in many and varied ways. And it's always a miracle however it happens.

Last week, our *miracle* story was from John chapter 2: the miracle of Jesus turning simple water into amazing wine at a wedding feast in Cana of Galilee. This one was a miracle of abundant joy – a sign that God will bring what's needed...and that God will bring it with extravagance.

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It's so easy to miss the ways God is at work in our lives – especially when life gets crowded with busyness or with overwhelming challenges or even with simple apathy. Remembering the miracles Jesus performed in the Bible can help “wake us up” to the extraordinary ways God is real and is at work all around us, all the time.

Which brings us to today's particular miracle...one of my favorite miracles of all: the miracle of the Incarnation, as told in verses 1-18 of John chapter 1.

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Today's Scripture is one often reserved for Christmas because it's John's story about Jesus' birth. In the Gospel of John, there are no angels, no shepherds, there's no innkeeper...in the Gospel of John, we don't even have Mary and Joseph.

There's really no *story* about Jesus' birth in the Gospel of John. Instead of *story*, John used poetry to talk about how Jesus entered into this world:

“In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it...”

“And the Word became flesh and lived among us and we have seen his glory...full of grace and truth ... [and] from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.”

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*“In the beginning was the Word...”*

These words of John are meant to remind us of the Creation story in Genesis chapter 1 where it says, “In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.

“Then God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light.” God used *words* to create.

*“In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it...”*

*“And the Word became flesh and lived among us and we have seen his glory...full of grace and truth ... [and] from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.”*

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*“In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God ... And the Word became flesh and lived among us.”*

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It's John's Christmas story: John's way of telling us that Jesus has been part of who God is from the very beginning – from the time when God used words to *speak* the universe into being. And God loved the world so much that Jesus – God's holy Word – became *incarnate* among us here on earth.

To become *incarnate* is to take on flesh: *“And the Word became flesh and lived among us.”* This is the miracle of the Incarnation – that God's holy Word, Jesus Christ, took on human flesh and physically lived among us for a time. In Jesus, God literally walked around on earth, bringing light, blessing, and grace.

In many ways, this is the ultimate miracle. And it's a miracle of God “showing up.” When others “show-up” for us, God is working through them to make the Incarnation real in our everyday lives. That's why I love the reminder to “always go to the funeral” – to always show-up for people – because, when we “show-up” for others, we are helping the *Incarnation* to happen in our everyday lives.

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*“In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God ... The Word became flesh and lived among us and we have seen his glory ... full of grace and truth ... and from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.”*

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Every time God shows-up in our lives, it is *grace*.

But, in the Gospel of John, Jesus likes to do things abundantly and extravagantly. So, nothing is ever just “grace” in the Gospel of John: it's “grace upon grace.” It's Incarnation in extravagant abundance.

Jesus feeding thousands with five loaves of bread and two fish. Jesus walking on water in the midst of a windstorm, calming fears and bringing control to chaos. Jesus healing the sick. Jesus turning six jars of simple water into 180 gallons of the world's best wine.

God showing up with extravagant abundance. *Grace upon grace*. The Incarnation made real in our lives and in this world.

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About a month ago – just prior to the start of this “miracles” series – I popped-into one of our local pharmacies to pick-up my monthly thyroid-related prescription. While I was there I chatted for a bit with the pharmacist – a young woman named Julie – who I happen to know from the three years I spent in Wahpeton.

Julie grew up going to the church in Wahpeton but now lives in Bismarck...and she occasionally worships here at McCabe! It's a fun connection and, on this particular trip of mine to the pharmacy, Julie had an amazing story to share – which she gave me permission to tell in a sermon, by the way.

Before I paid for my prescription, she told me she and her family had been at a church service in Minnesota the Sunday before...and, during the service, a gentleman in the congregation went into cardiac arrest right there in his pew.

As a pharmacist, Julie, of course, has a level of medical knowledge and training, so she sprang to action and performed CPR on the man. And it worked! He was revived – and extremely grateful. I saw Julie just a few days after this had happened and she was still a bit shaky from the adrenaline rush of the experience.

She also told me that, that particular morning, the pastor had been talking about finding ways to put your God-given gifts and skills to work.

Well, Julie certainly got the opportunity to put her God-given gifts and skills to work on that Sunday morning! It was a miracle in action – on display for that congregation to witness.

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Now, I sometimes go back-and-forth on whether I think miracles have to be big, extraordinary happenings...or whether they can be smaller, more ordinary occurrences – but that *feel* like something big and extraordinary.

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Again, Jesus made five barley loaves and two fish enough food to feed thousands of people...he healed countless others in an instant...and he turned water into almost 200 gallons of wine at a wedding feast. Those were big, extraordinary happenings. They were *obvious* miracles. God clearly showed-up in the midst of those events.

But God shows-up in smaller, more ordinary ways, too: like *any time* we can put our talents and skills to work to bless those around us...or when a diagnosis that at first seemed extreme suddenly has a simpler explanation...or when a way forward opens up in the midst of a difficult situation...or when someone brings us laughter at a time we seem desperately to need it...or when a damaged relationship begins to heal.

Over the weeks of this series I've heard many of you tell me about just these kinds of things happening in your lives. Most of the things I heard about weren't dramatic, extraordinary events...but I'm not sure that doesn't make them miracles just the same. Because, even in events that are more quiet and simple, God shows-up in ways that were obvious – and desperately needed.

Perhaps that alone makes something a miracle: God *showing up* in an obvious way. When such things happen, it's the Word becoming flesh in our very midst.

It's the good news of the Incarnation. It's truly grace upon grace. And, whenever it happens, it's an absolute miracle. Thanks be to God. Amen.