

Date Preached	07-Feb-2021	Date Initiated	25-Jan-2021
Where Preached	SAK	Appointed Readings	Epiph 5, Yr B

" [Jesus] came and took her by the hand and lifted her up.
Then the fever left her "



Toward the end of his life, after his two-term presidency, Thomas Jefferson re-wrote the Bible. Well, perhaps it is more accurate to say that Jefferson edited—we might even say *redacted*—a version of the four Gospels, according to his own way of thinking. Deism ... the belief that God exists and created the world, but does not interact with or have any ongoing interest in it or its inhabitants ... was very much in vogue, and Jefferson's personal religious philosophy was influenced by deistic beliefs.

To this end, in 1820, Jefferson sat down with several editions of the Bible and cut and pasted together—literally: with a razor and a pot of glue—a single unified account of Jesus' life, by selecting various passages from the four Gospels and arranging them in rough chronological order. The Jesus Whom Jefferson chose to lift up is an exemplar of personal purity, charity and selflessness.* Entirely eliminated, however, is anything that Jefferson found contrary to the laws of nature.† He excised the Virgin Birth and the Resurrection—his gospel ends with Jesus lying in the tomb on Good Friday—as well as *all* of the miracles Jesus performs. Thus, what remains is a portrait of Jesus as a moral philosopher: a proponent of an ethic that is laudable and aspirational—a selflessness and concern for others that run contrary to the values of just about every human instinct; but *also* an ethic shorn of its divine origin ... and its divine purpose.

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What brought the *Jefferson Bible* to mind was my realization, as I sat with today's Gospel reading, that Jesus basically *says* nothing in this passage from St Mark. He announces an itinerary to His disciples and makes a cryptic reference to His earthly mission, but He doesn't teach; doesn't preach; doesn't converse with His followers; doesn't argue with His adversaries. This morning we experience a silent but nevertheless highly active Jesus. He heals Peter's mother-in-law, but wordlessly. Throngs gather around Him, as He cures or exorcises demons from one pitiable person after another, but He says nothing about it.

It will not surprise you that this passage did not survive Jefferson's razor,‡ and his omission of it raises an issue clergy grapple with frequently in discussions concerning faith and Scripture. You see, this passage ... indeed, *all* of the passages in the Gospels in which Jesus performs miracles—whether healing the sick, exorcising demons, calming the seas or feeding thousands—make us, with Jefferson, *uncomfortable*. They make us roll our eyes ... or skip ahead to Jesus' next

* One modern student of the *Jefferson Bible* said Jefferson emphasized Jesus' sublime nature, purity and guilelessness (Wikipedia entry [Jefferson Bible](#), citing the critique of M Andrew Holowchak (2019)).

† Jefferson also left out any episodes that tend to cast Jesus in an unflattering light: anger, impatience, etc.

‡ See the *Jefferson Bible* at https://uuhouston.org/files/The_Jefferson_Bible.pdf (images 14ff).

pithy saying ... or marvel at the gullibility or ignorance of an age that could have believed any of these things actually happened. And so, people ask: Must we believe in Jesus' miracles in order to be Christians?

The pastorally correct answer is, of course, no, we don't. Jesus has still forgiven and saved us ... and loves us no less ... if there are elements of Scripture ... or of doctrine or liturgy, for that matter ... that are not consonant with our personal conception of creation and its Creator. Faith is, after all, genuine, personal belief ... and not some acid test of orthodoxy.

But at the same time, I have to tell you ... and as your priest, I very much *want* to tell you: I *do* believe in the miracles Jesus works throughout the Gospels.[§] And for three reasons:

- First, Jesus' miracles *convince* us. I believe the Gospel miracles are part-and-parcel of God's decision to reveal Godself to us, in order to redeem us. Like us, the ancients did not lack for philosophers, gurus and charlatans who claimed to hold the answer to the mysteries of life. The miracles Jesus performs, however, reveal His *divine* provenance—His being fully God while also being fully human, in our creedal language—in a way that is intended to inspire and support our faith in Him *as God Incarnate* ... and not as just as someone who gives good life-advice.
- Second, Jesus' miracles *comfort* us. They manifest—telegraph, really—God's imminence: the presence of God right here with us. A Jeffersonian deistic God has no concern for human sickness or grief or hunger. In this view of God, God endowed us with intelligence and reason to either overcome or endure those things *on our own*. But my—which is to say, the Church's—*theistic* God is a personal God, both willingly and inextricably linked ... *right along with us* ... to the weals and woes of this world. Jesus' numerous reversals of disease, affliction, hunger and death are intended to assure us that our day-to-day confrontations with these obstacles are valid—indeed *core*—parts

[§] The preaching of this sermon is not the right forum in which to go into this, but I'll note here the following amplification: While I do believe that the miracles of Jesus, as recorded in the Gospels, are literally true—they really happened, in history, as the evangelists recorded them—believing this does *not* equate to being a biblical literalist, which I am not. The miracles performed by the Second Person of Trinity, as embodied in Jesus, are, as I preach today, an essential aspect of God's plan of revelation to and, ultimately, salvation of humanity.

Other 'super-natural' (*i.e.*, beyond explanation through resort to the laws of nature as we comprehend them today) events that occur in the Bible may or may not be instances of God's direct action. I personally believe God really did appear to, intervene for and lead Moses and the Israelites in their liberation from Egypt and journey to the Promised Land; likewise, God's appearance to and communication with the prophets of the Old Testament. On the other hand, I believe some events in the Old Testament—particularly those in the primeval history (*i.e.*, what takes place before the story of Abraham), such as the two accounts of creation in Genesis 1 and 2, the tower of Babel and the Great Flood—are metaphorical and theological explanations of questions (how did we come to exist? speak different languages? look different?) that puzzled ancient believers. They are probably not historically true and thus cannot be—and *were not intended to be*—taken literally. Nevertheless, they are (i) thoughtful, insightful accounts of God developed by our ancestors-in-faith that (ii) are deeply engrained in the Judeo-Christian tradition ... and thus, are instructive for us *regardless* of their historicity.

Finally, a caution regarding biblical literalism more generally: All received Scripture is a product of its context. Though both its writing and its transmission through time have been, to a greater or lesser degree, divinely inspired, these events took place via human beings who spoke specific languages, lived at specific times, adopted specific ways-of-life and cultural customs, faced specific issues and had specific biases (both 'for' and 'against' certain things) ... just as *we* do (!). Therefore, for example, we cannot simply pluck a certain requirement or proscription from the Levitical Code and apply it literally to our twenty-first century context. A great deal of hidden nuance—beginning, of course, with the very act of verbal translation—has recorded and transmitted these words to us in, say, the NRSV edition of the Bible. It is a grave mistake to think we can understand them without a modicum of nuance on our own part, as well.

of our faith journey ... because they are part of Jesus' journey, too.

- Third, Jesus' miracles *convict* us. My disagreements with Thomas Jefferson's approach to Scripture are myriad, and some of them—the omission of the Resurrection, for example!—are insurmountable. But his deletion of all accounts of Jesus' marshalling the *full* extent of His powers to combat the injustices and sufferings of this world is a bit more insidious. Yes, Jefferson's Jesus is a pious, respectable philosopher ... but without the miracles, we never see Jesus' translating His own teachings into *deeds*. So dedicated is Jefferson's Jesus to teaching and preaching the right *way* to be ... that He never gets around to actually *being* it.

God could have published more commandments on stone tablets or dictates more laws to human prophets. But, instead, God chose to *enter* this world and *engage* it—start fixing it. Thus, Jesus' miracles are *integral* and *essential* to His earthly ministry: Not only are we to speak as Jesus speaks, but we are also to *do* as Jesus *does*: to use all the powers at our disposal to make this world a better place for all.

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Jesus' words are important. We are verbal beings whom God designed to learn through language. But long before we learned to speak, we learned to *do*: by imitating those who loved us; interacting with those around us; and reaching out to touch the world as we encountered it. Jesus' words have much to teach us ... but perhaps what we learn from Jesus' miraculous *actions* is even more fundamental ... both to our faith and to God.



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