

Miracles – What Should I Make of Them?

1. Warm up: When you were a kid, what was your most coveted Halloween candy?
2. On Sunday Pastor Jeff paused our study of Moses for one week because he felt compelled to share his grave concern about where we find ourselves as a nation at this moment in time. How did you feel about the sermon? Did it feel too political? Did it make you a bit nervous? Did you love it or hate it? Or some combination of the foregoing?
3. Jeff began by inviting us to consider what it means to be both: (a) a justice seeking church, and (b) a church that values diversity and inclusion, including of diversity of political perspectives. Sometimes it feels like these two core values are at odds with each other because when we take a position on justice issues, that inevitably has significant political implications. To navigate this delicate balance, Jeff suggested we must recognize that the Bible lays down certain core justice values that we *all* must embrace to be faithful to Scripture. For example, the Bible says we should defend and care for the poor. That's a core justice value that's non-negotiable. But within that framework, there can be legitimate debate (among conservatives, liberals, and moderates) about what specific policies and programs will best achieve our mutual goal of helping the poor.
 - a. Does that seem like the right way to balance respect for justice and with respect for political diversity? Why or why not?
 - b. Do you believe it's important for our church to continue to strive to welcome both conservatives and liberals and all those in between? Why or why not?
4. With the foregoing as background, the next question becomes: how should a justice seeking church should respond when we see core biblical justice values being trampled in our nation? Jeff described what he called “the Biblical Prophetic Imperative” to stand up and speak out against injustice, pointing to the example of Isaiah (and all the other Biblical prophets). Let's read together Isaiah 1:10-23, as printed on p. 3.
 - a. What were the core spiritual values that Isaiah felt the rulers of his nation were trampling?
 - b. Isaiah said, “Your princes are rebels and companions of thieves. Everyone loves a bride and runs after gifts. They do not defend the orphan, and the widow's cause does not come before them.” When Isaiah said this, how do you think the rulers and the supporters of the rulers felt about him? Why do you think he did it?
5. Jeff gave examples of core Biblical justice values he feels are being trampled in our current political climate. He began with immigration. The Bible says, “When a foreigner resides among you in your land, do not mistreat them. The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself.” Leviticus 19:33.

- a. What are the implications of that verse for how we should respond to immigrants in our nation? What does it mean to treat them as “native-born” and to love them as ourselves?
 - b. Jeff reminded us that baby Jesus and his parents were undocumented immigrants in Egypt. Should that affect our thinking about immigrants? If so, how?
 - c. Read the excerpt from Anna’s story on p. 3. What thoughts or feelings does this stir within you?
6. The Bible also has a lot to say about helping and defending the poor and disadvantaged. Zechariah 7:8 sums it up like this, “The word of the Lord came again to [me]. This is what the Lord Almighty said: ‘Administer true justice; show mercy and compassion to one another. Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the foreigner, or the poor.’”
- a. What are the implications of that verse for how we should respond to the poor in our nation and abroad?
 - b. Read the excerpt from the reporting of Nicholas Kristoff on pp. 3-4 describing the impact on Africa of the termination of virtually all America’s humanitarian aid. What thoughts or feelings does this stir within you?
7. The Bible also champions diversity, inclusion, and equity, as illustrated in Jesus’ famous parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10). There Jesus challenges the prejudices of his own people and teaches that despised minorities are our neighbors whom we should love as much as ourselves.
- a. What are the implications of Jesus’ parable for how we should respond to discrimination based on race, gender, sexual orientation, etc.?
 - b. Two of the main targets of the current Administration and its supporters are DEI and transgender people. Why is that? And how should we respond?
8. Jeff also expressed alarm about the erosion of the checks-and-balances of our Constitutional system and the threat that presents to our democracy. Given our sinful human nature, our forefathers recognized the danger of putting too much power in the hands of any one person given and deliberately created a system of checks and balances. With our government entirely now in the hands of one party that is ceding all power to the President, Jeff said he believes we’re in a period of high danger that he compared to Germany in the 1930s when German voters and churches underreacted and didn’t wake up till it was too late. What are your thoughts? Is our democracy in genuine danger?
9. Jeff challenged us, both as individuals and a congregation, to rise up as modern-day prophets of God and be powerful advocates. Take a look at the action items listed on p. 4. Which of these items call to you? Which are you ready to embrace?

Isaiah 1:10-25, selected verses

10 Hear the word of the LORD, you rulers! Listen to the teaching of our God, you people! 12 Trample my courts no more; bringing offerings is futile; your incense is an abomination to me. 13 I cannot endure your solemn assemblies with iniquity.

15 When you stretch out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood. 16 **Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil,** 17 **learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.**

21 How the faithful city has become a whore. She that was full of justice, righteousness lodged in her – but now murderers! 23 Your princes are rebels and companions of thieves. Everyone loves a bribe and runs after gifts. They do not defend the orphan, and the widow's cause does not come before them. 25 Therefore, I will turn my hand against you.

Anna's Story

“I brought my son from Guatemala to the United States so he could have a better life. He was being threatened by gangs where we lived. They showed up at our house with weapons looking for him. They threatened to hurt him and kill me if he would not join. My nephew had already been killed by one of the gangs, so we believed their threats. I was especially vulnerable as a woman and knew I could be killed by the gangs who wanted my son. I could not let my son be hurt or forced to join the gang, so we fled. Coming to the United States was a very hard journey that took one month. We traveled through Mexico. Sometimes we ate; sometimes we didn't. When we crossed into the United States and were in the desert, we saw the headlights of the immigration agents. They asked us what we were doing, and we said that we wanted asylum. They sent us to a detention facility, which was a terrible place. They separated me from my son. I was in a cell with other women, and my son was with young kids. I couldn't see him, and I was so sad and worried. It was so sad that there were so many children there, all closed in. It just fills me with sadness to remember hearing them cry.”

Nicholas Kristoff (New York Times), writing about Evan

“Meet Evan Anzoo, the five-year-old face of America's cuts in humanitarian aid. Evan, who lives in South Sudan, was infected with H.I.V. from his mother during childbirth. But American aid kept Evan and his mother Jennifer alive. A program started by President George W. Bush

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called PEPFAR saved 26 million lives from AIDS, and two of those were Evan and his mom. Under PEPFAR, an outreach health worker ensured that they and other AIDS widows and orphans got their medicines. Then in January, Trump and Musk [unilaterally cut off U.S aid] and the PEPFAR outreach program ended. Widows and orphans were on their own.

Evan and his mom could no longer get their meds. His mom got an opportunistic infection and died. Evan passed a week later. The cost of the meds keeping them alive was just 12 cents a day. When you meet those dying children and look into their eyes and hold their hands and feel faint heartbeats flutter, you can't bear the [thought of what we're doing]. You see children just like your own and hang your head in shame.”

Practical Ways We Can Be Prophetic Advocates

1. Sponsor a “Jesus Was Undocumented” billboard for \$1,000 or partner with others to do so. Each billboard will reach thousands of people each day for 30 days!
2. Fill out postcards to your Senators and House member once a month at the table in the Social Hall.
3. Subscribe to receive LifeJourney Justice Action Alerts and respond when you are so moved.
4. Share the social media posts the church will be generating on justice issues.
5. Vote, vote, vote in every election, national and local.
6. Use your voice to speak out, not in hate, not calling names or spreading snark, but lovingly, passionately sharing information and expressing your concerns.