

Why and how I believe in miracles

I don't struggle with their plausibility. I do struggle with their consequences.

by [Debie Thomas](#) in the [June 2023](#) issue



(Century illustration)

*Do you believe in miracles?*

I've been asked this question many times since leaving the faith tradition of my childhood, but I have yet to answer it in a way that feels honest and complete. This is partly because the question isn't a straightforward one; it contains a host of questions within it: Do you believe that Jesus literally walked on water and turned water into wine and cured the sick and raised the dead? Do you believe that miracles happen now? Do you pray for them? Have you ever experienced one?

The charismatic evangelical communities that raised me would have answered each with an emphatic and unswerving yes. In fact, they would have insisted that a Christianity stripped of the miraculous isn't Christianity at all. I agree. But my yes is much quieter these days, more tender and searching.

This isn't because I have trouble believing in things I can't explain or understand. I know that even my most sophisticated theologies won't contain or exhaust God's actions in the world. In fact, part of what drew me toward a more progressive and liturgical expression of faith was my desire to honor mystery, to relate to God with my whole self and not just my intellect. I want to live in an enchanted world—a world shimmering with God's presence, one I can't possibly flatten with my doubt and cynicism.

I'd rather believe that miracles are always possible—perhaps even imminent—than live in a universe devoid of such mystical richness. I'd rather believe, in Gerard Manley Hopkins's words, that "the world is charged with the grandeur of God."

I respect the challenge of affirming the miraculous in our 21st-century context. I know that Christians can encounter serious credibility issues when we try to make a case for miracles. And I know that there's something frightening about a world we can't control or quantify, a world that's truly open, organic, and strange rather than closed, unvarying, and mechanistic.

On the other hand, to approach the Creator of our unspeakably vast, wild, and elegant cosmos with anything other than deep epistemic humility strikes me as foolish. C. S. Lewis puts it this way in *Miracles*: "It is a profound mistake to imagine that Christianity ever intended to dissipate the bewilderment and even the terror, the sense of our own nothingness, which come upon us when we think about the nature of things. It comes to intensify them. Without such sensations there is no religion."

So my struggle with the Gospels' cures, exorcisms, angelic visitations, and resurrections isn't with their plausibility. It's with their consequences. "The problem with miracles," writes Barbara Brown Taylor in *Bread of Angels*, "is that it is hard to witness them without wanting one of your own."

Wil Gafney makes the point with greater urgency, suggesting that we can't talk about God's supernatural intervention in our world without remembering those who desperately needed a miracle and didn't get it. Otherwise we "make mockery of their suffering and death as we try to make meaning of the miraculous stories that are our scriptural heritage. Because, if it is not good news—salvation and liberation—for the least of these . . . then, it's not good news."

As much as I love and trust the miracle stories in scripture, I'm afraid of the harm we do when we read them glibly. I'm wary of reducing them to something formulaic or predictable—or of assuming that we're entitled to them or capable of peddling them. Most of all, I'm wary of appropriating and idolizing them to create dangerous caricatures of God—God as Santa Claus, as a giant gumball machine in the sky.

There is a way of believing in miracles that wounds the brokenhearted. That promotes a toxic positivity which leaves no room for holy lament. That encourages passivity and apathy. There is a way of believing in miracles that is fraudulent and cruel.

I think we're on far more solid ground when we respond to miracles as our biblical ancestors did: with awe, silence, and wonder. With the reverent bewilderment of Mary: "How can this be?" With the penitent humility of Peter: "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" With the honest curiosity of the storm-shocked disciples: "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?" With the adoration of Thomas: "My Lord and my God!"

I'm also learning to approach miracles not as ends in themselves but as opportunities to discern the heart and character of God. What kind of God multiplies loaves and fishes for the poorest of the poor? What matters most to a God who stops in his tracks to heal a woman ravaged by a hemorrhage? What kind of joyous, celebratory laughter resides in a God who makes the wine flow at a wedding? What kind of tender heart beats in the chest of a God who raises a dead son and restores him to his widowed mother?

If I'm called as a Christian to walk in the footsteps of this loving, liberating, healing, resurrecting God, then how should I live? If Jesus' miracles are about rupture and resistance, if they are subversive acts of defiance against the world's sin, suffering, and brokenness, then what will my resistance look like? How will my belief in such miracles translate into Christlike action?

In the Christian tradition, belief is more about trust than intellectual assent. So yes, I believe in miracles. Which is to say, I surrender in trust to a God who will stop at nothing to bring about our salvation. A God who is intimately close, present, and involved. A God who is in all things, interacting with all things, restoring all things in the name of love.