

September 5, 2021 – Small Wonder, sermon at St Benedict's Episcopal by Rev Mike Eggleston

This sermon is a bit unusual coming from me in three ways. First, it mostly ignores today's scriptures. Second, it's not about great wonders in the cosmos, more about small wonders in life; and third, the central part of this sermon is not quite from me. The heart of it draws from a chapter in a book called Nothing Much Happens, by Kathryn Nicolai. Just to say a word more about that, Kathryn Nicolai's book is set in the fictional town of Nothing Much. It felt to me like it was set in Wisconsin. Possibly it's on the other side of the big lake in Michigan where Nothing Much Happens. Heartland. Anyway, a warning; the episodes in this book are written to be read just before going to bed to help people sleep. And it's not bedtime yet. It's not my intent to put anyone to sleep now. But if that happens, well, that's OK. Because you Episcopalians have a little sanctus bell you ring as the elements for eucharist are consecrated. So maybe, if Nothing Much is as wonderful as purported, maybe it will put a whole congregation to sleep, and we'll wake up refreshed just in time to share the encharist.

Though that's not my intent. My intent, on Wonder Sunday, is to increase our awareness, our mindfulness, of the ever-flowing stream of small wonders that unfold around us and within us. I once heard a Reiki instructor tell us that miracles and wonders come in three sizes. There are **Bible-sized wonders**, like the ones God calls out to Job in today's verses. Then there are **you and me-sized wonders**, the kind that when they happen, we sit up and take notice and tell our friends and bookmark in our memories. Then there's the kind the instructor called "**nickel miracles**." I think he cited a currency way too large. For if I see something as large as a nickel laying in my path, I'll pick that puppy up, even in these days of arthritis and covid. So I downsized his nickel miracles because what I think he was talking about is the kind of treasures that are everywhere but usually don't cross our threshold of consciousness. Subliminal miracles. Some of you may remember a line from The Flower Drum Song. "A hundred million miracles. . . drum drumalumulumadrum. A hundred million miracles. . . drum drumalumulumadrum. . . are happening every day. Go home singing that little ditty and you'll feel happier and sillier for it. "And those who say they don't agree, are those who do not hear or see, a hundred million miracles, drum drumalumulumadrum that's the flower Drum playing, are happening every day." Well, Flower Drum Song is rarely produced these days, because it's way culturally insensitive. But a hundred million miracles are still being produced every day, and more. So this sermon on Wonder Sunday is cheerleading for you and me to notice Small Wonders. Thank you, Rodgers and Hammerstein, and thank you, creator of all wonders great and small.

And thank you, Kathryn Nicolai. Here's my summary of her story called The Asparagus Patch. And if we do drift off and fall asleep in the telling, well, that little bell for eucharist should wake us up to thanksgiving, for after all, eucharistos in Greek means thanksgiving.

On a spring day the author was driving from Nothing Much to visit her grandfather out in the country. Henceforth I'm just going to use the pronouns she and her to refer to the story-teller. It was that time of spring that those who've lived in the east or Midwest may remember when the bare limbs of trees were just beginning to show green haze. Then after cresting a ridge, something unexpected appeared: a hot air balloon. Now hot air balloons are a common enough sight where we live in the west, but maybe not so much near Nothing Happens. The balloon was close enough to see riders in the basket. It brought back a delightful memory to her except, not quite a memory of an

experience that had actually happened. Our story-teller found herself recalling a time when she'd seen a whole flotilla of hot air balloons of all colors scudding along. She imagined that perhaps a rope might dangle from one, and maybe come close enough for her to take hold and be lifted up on an adventure. But no, wait a minute, she was driving a car, earthbound. And there never was an actual time when she had seen a whole armada of balloons sailing along. Keep your eyes on the road. The single hot air balloon that was real passed out of sight even as the ones her imagination had created also left her with a lingering delight.

Which soon brought to her mind an older memory of something subliminal, did it happen when she was a girl? As a child she'd been sure that she could visit a grotto in the cliffs along an ocean beach. There was an opening in a wall of rock just large enough that a child could slip through. Inside was a large space with waterfalls and stalactites and stalagmites and side chambers. In a cave with a little light entering from outside, one's eyes of course refocus so that one can see more and more. She explored, and as a child was sure that somewhere there had to be a treasure nearby that she could discover. But wait. This childhood memory must have been woven from a dream or maybe a storybook. Because it was freshwater lakes never oceans where she grew up, and they had sandy shores with forests, not bluffs with mussels and seastars. So come back to driving to Grandpa's, and to some words at the center of her story that I will now quote because they're at the center of this sermon too. She writes:

I guess it's a mark of getting older that I don't mind so much now knowing that these vibrant and seemingly real scraps of memory are very likely fiction. When I was young they seemed proof of something extraordinary and magical that existed and I fiercely wanted them to be real, **but now ordinary things seemed more magical to me than fantasies of flying or discovering long-forgotten treasure.**

That's this heart and hope of this sermon. **"Now ordinary things seem more magical to me than fantasies of flying or discovering long-forgotten treasure."** So back to that road to see her grandfather. A turn up a smaller road, another up a driveway, and park. She found Grandfather out behind his house where he was picking up brush that had fallen over the winter from the orchard. He would store it in the small shed where he kept firewood for the next winters.

She joined Grandpa in the work of picking up kindling. He struggled a bit with his arthritis that made bending over and picking up harder than it used to be. But grandfather was a patient, and there's no doubt that having a grown granddaughter to share a task made it less painful and more joyful for both. At one point Grandpa plucked up a horse chestnut and handed it to her with these words: "Carry a horse chestnut in your pocket, and no elephant will ever step on you." Rare words of wisdom, such as are rarely heard. Who can argue with that?

When they'd gathered enough sticks and stored them away, they headed for the house, but paused to stand by the patch where Grandpa planted a garden every spring. He pointed out where the corn and squash and zucchini would go. He was always trying something new too. This year he pointed to a new rows with something green already crowning through. It was an asparagus patch.

"Amazing, grandpa", she said. "When will those be ready to harvest?"

"Oh, in about three years," he said, with a wink. She watched him open the door and into his house. She slid her hand into her pocket and felt the chestnut he'd given her. *This, she said to herself, isn't a dream. This is what's happening now. Remember it.*"

Small wonders. Happening now. There are many details in the story I've left out. As there always countless details that our senses take in that our consciousness skips over. For marvelous though our human consciousness is, we can only take notice of less than one percent of all the information that our senses receive. And as wonderful and finely tuned as our sensory cells are, one small human being can only take in oh, less than one percent of one percent of one gezillionth of all the wonders that surround us. I love science that always seeks to measure and quantify things. But it can never count and quantify the small wonders. I happened to be looking at a toy frog the other day in the Spooner Ranch House store almost at the same time that I was reading this quote from George Wald, a Nobel Prize winning biologist. Synchronicity. "Does a frog see?" asks Wald. "Is it aware of visual images, does it know that it is responding? There is nothing whatsoever that I can do as a scientist to answer that question. That is the problem of consciousness. It is altogether impervious to scientific approach."

George Wald surely writes the truth. Except I'd change just one little word in his quote. Consciousness is not a problem. Consciousness is s a treasure. Your consciousness, mine, hers, theirs is an inheritance from our grandfathers and grandmothers of all the generations and lifeforms that passed this treasure along to us. Our consciousness is a legacy from countless lifeforms and from the creator who forms us all. But now I'm preaching my way into Bible-sized wonders, things that Psalm 131 says are too great and wondrous for us. When what I wanted to do was simply to call us to give a wee bit more attention to the small wonders happening day by day. Try doing this sometime today before you sleep tonight. Take one minute, or five may be even better, to witness one miracle. Yes. Sit or stand still in one place, turn your eyes or ears or your upraised hands to one wonder: maybe a bee on the Tuscan rosemary up close, or a shadow on Hollister Peak in the distance, or a star really distant in the sky, or a photo of a loved one on your mantle. Whatever engages your attention, just pay attention to it for one minute, or five; some of us see wonders faster and some see them slower. Simply linger with some wonder happening in your sight and try not to think about what you're thinking about it. Just soak it in and enjoy as you witness one of God's wonders. Then just before you go to bed, you might want to write it down too, or even draw it, maybe start a journal of wonders. What wonder did I meet today? It's OK if you have more than one. Amen.