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I traded in my car this past Monday, but I am still driving a convertible. I considered getting a sedan, but somehow, I felt I wanted to cling to the sins of my youth: driving with the top down in a reasonably fast car.

“Reasonably fast”; well actually fast, rather, but unlike some of the cars of my contemporaries when I was younger (I never owned a car until I graduated from college), and unlike some of those younger drivers of “reasonably fast” cars today, my car does not have any of those noise making accoutrements, those “growl” or “zoom” sound effects that cause one to look at some cars.

*Accoutrements*, that’s a fancy word, but my point is, I do not try to use devices or gimmicks to draw attention to my car or to me, but guess what? *Jesus did!* Jesus used gimmicks to draw attention . . . well, to draw attention to what he had to say and to whom he really was.

“Gimmicks,” of course, is not the correct label to apply to a device Jesus used to draw attention to himself. The writer of the Gospel of John called them “signs,” but we call them — and I know my friend and Elder at Florence, Laura Hoffman, is smiling and biting her tongue as I say this — “*miracles*.”

*Miracles*. Please understand that I am uncomfortable whenever a *miracle* story is one of our Scripture readings — and today we have three! but more on that in a moment. And while I am not saying I do not believe these stories, at least most of them, they make me uncomfortable. In real life, I studied physics, which is not the same as saying I studied medicine, but the point is that I can not avoid a touch of doubt when I read them.

But they are there, in our Bible, for a reason, though for today I want to confine myself *primarily* to how they are used in the Gospels. Laura — I am most definitely *not* picking on her — Laura will tell you that my opinion is that the miracle story is usually used to set up a teaching by Jesus, including teachings about himself.

And I believe we readily see that in the juxtaposition of our first reading from the Gospel of Luke — and, “yes,” part of today’s passage was part of last Sunday’s passage, as well, — in the juxtaposition of our first reading from the Gospel of Luke with our reading about the first of the great prophets we encounter in the Hebrew Bible, *Elijah*. (This is actually the second Sunday this year’s Lectionary would have had us encounter Elijah, but with last week’s featuring the Memorial Day holiday I wanted to focus on a different Old Testament theme.) The stories of Elijah are fun to read, although I did escape some *miracle* problems by not using last week’s Lectionary reading, and we shall read more about him in the coming weeks.

Elijah is and was *very* well known among the Jews. You may recall that in the story of The Transfiguration, it is Elijah who appears with Moses when Jesus is on the mountain, and that people took John the Baptist as a second coming of Elijah, and Jesus is asked whether *he* was Elijah come again, and at another place Jesus says that “Elijah has come.” The Jews of Jesus’ time knew who Elijah was and knew the stories such as that we read earlier.

And no one since Elijah had brought one presumed to be dead back to life! No one since Elijah had done that, yet Jesus did so. The message the writer of Luke is trying to impress upon his readers, including upon us, is that this Jesus fellow is at least as great as Elijah . . . and he tells us that this was the reaction of the crowd witnessing the raising of the young man:

*Fear seized all of them; and they glorified God, saying, "A great prophet has risen among us!" and "God has looked favorably on his people!"*<sup>1</sup>

So the purpose of the miracle as presented by the writer of Luke is to say something about Jesus (and about how to understand him); not to glory in the miracle itself.

And I think Jesus would agree with my assessment about the purpose of miracles when I refer to the two “miracles” in our reading about Elijah — in our second Gospel reading Jesus refers to that passage when he indicates that miracles are not frequent by referring to the drought in that story, — our reading about Elijah which ends with the woman’s comment:

*"Now I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the LORD in your mouth is truth."*<sup>2</sup>

There are other Gospel miracle stories to support my claim that the miracles serve a function of drawing us to the unique nature of Jesus, the only one of which I want to point is the incident early in Mark where Jesus tells the cripple lowered through the roof of a house, “Your sins are forgiven,” which astounds all until Jesus asks, “What is easier to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or ‘take up your bed and walk?’” The point of the story being to say, “Jesus forgives sins,” which in the context of the Hebrew traditions was not something an ordinary human could conceivably do.

Now, my point this summer Sunday is not to pooh-pooh the miracle stories, but rather to ask that we look to whether there is something more important that they are saying, something more important to which

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 7:16 (NRSV)

<sup>2</sup> 1 Kings 17:24b (NRSV)

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they direct us: to Jesus himself as more than just a human, *more than a prophet*, and that, in a real sense, *miracles* takes me to the Sacrament we are about to celebrate, where even in the most orthodox of interpretations of the Lord's Supper, *symbolism* abounds, but we too readily focus on the symbols rather than to what I believe they are pointing us.

But I will say, with all due reverence toward our Roman Catholic friends, that I am not critical, but only fear that the literalism they apply to the elements in the Sacrament may impede a fuller understanding of the significance of the Sacrament. (Sounds weird coming from one who is considered a "Sacramental minimalist," which I am.)

For I believe this; the *message* of the Sacrament is that Christ is here; that Christ is here with us as we use our ritual to remember that he died, and to remember the unique nature of who he is and what he offers us. He is our *symbolic bread of life*, the very *bread of life* in that he can sustain us daily through the ups and downs of our earthly lives, and he offers us a *symbolic drink* from the *cup of salvation*, because of his promise that we need not fear what comes at the ends of those earthly lives.

We live daily through and in him and he lives in us, and he grants us salvation — salvation through the forgiveness of our sins, which I believe matters more in the here and now than in the world to come, because he grants us salvation from the permanency of earthly death.

Those are *two miracles* he wants us to know, and they draw our attention to him because they could come from no earthly being.

It is a miracle as well that we have been gifted to believe in him, whether we are still engaged in a struggle to understand, or firmly convinced, we have been blessed because he is here for us.

And in his name, Amen,