

***Catalysts for a Miracle***  
 Sacred Conversations on Race, Solitary Confinement  
 Trinity Episcopal, Princeton New Jersey

Rev. Laura Markle Downton  
 Sunday, January 17, 2016

**Opening Prayer -**

Oh God in whom nothing is wasted,  
 Give us courage to expect the impossible.  
 Draw our attention to places of injustice,  
 And remind us again that your feast of love  
 Always has room for another chair.  
 We pray that your liberating Spirit,  
 Might stir in us afresh this hour, this day.  
 Amen.

**It takes a lot of nerve to ask for a miracle. In the second chapter of the gospel of John, the mother of Jesus has a lot of nerve.**

On this Dr. King weekend, as we continue in sacred conversations on race, exposing the roots of white supremacy, and moving from talk to action here at Trinity Church, we focus on our call as followers of Christ to protect and guard human rights and the sacred human dignity inherent in all God's precious people. With that vision we pause to consider the moral necessity of ending a prison industrial complex in which torture, racism, and the destruction of families, human spirits and human lives persists. Our lectionary gospel passage confronts us with **a lesson in what it means to ask for, and boldly expect, a miracle.**

So this morning, we ponder what it means to prompt miracles in 2016, to live out of imaginations that are, like Mary, open to the miraculous even as "the giant triplets of racism, extreme materialism, and militarism"<sup>1</sup> that Dr. King and those in the civil rights movement organized to transform, persist in violent and insidious ways on our streets and in our institutions. As we are challenged by the death-dealing system of mass incarceration and the criminalization of communities of color in the United States today, we are propelled by the revolutionary witness of Dr. King and 'Black Lives Matter'

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<sup>1</sup> [http://kingencyclopedia.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/documentsentry/doc\\_beyond\\_vietnam/](http://kingencyclopedia.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/documentsentry/doc_beyond_vietnam/)

resistance movements of history and of today, **to ask for and audaciously expect the miraculous, the signs and symbols of God's activity, even in the face of death.**

***Phase 1: Mary mother of Jesus then, Dolores now:***

Our lectionary gospel passage marks the opening event in Jesus' public ministry. Here, we encounter Jesus, and his disciples, with his mother Mary, all guests at a wedding in Cana. When the wine at the wedding runs out, Mary, referred to only as "the mother of Jesus" in this gospel, says to her son: "They have no wine." With these four words, **she prompts the first sign in Jesus' ministry.** A simple and direct exchange follows between Jesus and Mary, one marked by freedom and trust -- a trust in abundance. Mary is paying attention - she is plugged into the needs around her. And from that attention, she speaks. From that awareness, she voices what is needed.

With confidence in Jesus' ability to act, Mary says to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you." Jesus instructs the servants to take six stone jars and fill them with water. After each of the large jars are filled to the brim with water, Jesus tells them to draw a glass of the water to share with the chief steward. The steward, tasting from the glass, reprimands the bridegroom -- saying "you have kept the good wine until now." 'You've been holding out on your guests; why reserve the finest wine for the end of the evening?'

As the best wine at the Cana wedding now flows freely, Jesus performs the first of what will be **seven signs**, the last of which will take place in chapter 11, when he calls Lazarus forth from the tomb. With each sign, **Jesus reveals something about God. And the catalysts for these miracles, beginning with Mary the mother of Jesus, have something important to teach us about who we are called to be as followers of Jesus: Catalysts for the impossible. Catalysts for a miracle.**

There is another mother with a lot of nerve that I want to introduce you to this morning, a mother with the nerve of Mary, *to ask for a miracle.* In 2011, Dolores Canales received a letter from her son Johnny, who had been held in solitary confinement in the infamous "SHU" or Security Housing Unit of the Pelican Bay State Prison in California *for more than a decade.* Johnny was writing to alert his mother that he and the men in solitary at the Pelican Bay state prison, many of whom had been held in isolation for over a decade and in some instances decades, intended to go on an indefinite hunger strike to protest their conditions of long term and indefinite solitary confinement, and the gang validation process used to trap mostly people of color in the SHU.

The day the first hunger strike began, Dolores attended a rally in Los Angeles. She initially “had no intention of getting involved in organizing.” She said, she “just wanted to find out what was going on.” She was asked to speak, so she read a letter from her son. She later told a reporter, “We [family members] started meeting every other day. More and more family members were coming out, sharing stories of their loved ones in different prisons and jails who were on hunger strike.”<sup>2</sup>

Just as Mary said to Jesus, ‘*they have no wine*’ and thus prompted a miracle, Dolores Canales and the families said: ‘*Our loved ones are facing a living death. This torture must be brought to an end.*’ Dolores, like Mary, boldly asked for a miracle. And she and the families set about acting and organizing with audacious faith that ***the impossible will be possible.***

Following two hunger strikes in 2011, an Agreement to End Hostilities - a peace agreement amongst people of different racial ethnic groups in the prisons, on July 8, 2013, more than 30,000 incarcerated people throughout California prisons began a peaceful hunger strike to protest the torture of solitary confinement. On the 60th day, the strike was suspended, having garnered national and international media attention.

As a result of the historic hunger strikes and subsequent organizing by families and survivors of solitary on the outside, last fall, a landmark settlement was reached in the *Ashker v. Brown* class action suit, which has resulted in an end to indefinite SHU terms in California, and an end to the gang validation process in California prisons, and dramatically reducing the number of people in isolation. Plaintiffs in the lawsuit, who are ten incarcerated people who have been isolated in the Pelican Bay SHU for periods ranging **from eleven to twenty-two years**, challenged the constitutionality of their solitary confinement at the Pelican Bay Prison Security Housing Unit. When the case was filed in 2012, more than 500 incarcerated people had been isolated in the Security Housing Unit (SHU) at Pelican Bay **for over 10 years**, and **78 had been there for more than 20 years**. They spent 22 ½ to 24 hours every day in a cramped, concrete, windowless cell, where they were denied telephone calls, physical contact with visitors, and vocational, recreational, and educational programming. Hundreds of others throughout California have been held in similar SHU conditions. In response to the settlement, the plaintiffs said: (quote) “From this foundation, the prisoners’ human rights movement is awakening the conscience of the nation to recognize that we are fellow human beings. As the recent statements of President Obama and of Justice Kennedy illustrate, the nation is turning against solitary confinement. We celebrate this victory

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.thenation.com/article/tens-thousands-california-prisoners-launch-mass-hunger-strike/>

while, at the same time, we recognize that achieving our goal of fundamentally transforming the criminal justice system and stopping the practice of warehousing people in prison will be a protracted struggle.”<sup>3</sup> (end quote)

Yet despite these and other legal victories, and legislative proposals advancing in state houses from New York to Nebraska to confront solitary, thousands of incarcerated adults and youth in California, here in New Jersey, and nationwide continue to languish there, and continue to face retaliation when they challenge such conditions.

**To confront solitary confinement in U.S. prisons is to come face to face with the depths of the inhumanity of white supremacy made manifest in concrete and steel. It is a lynching in slow motion.** More black people are under correctional control today -- in prison or jail, on probation or parole, than were enslaved in 1850.

Three strikes laws, mandatory minimum sentencing, youth sentenced to life without the possibility of parole, the school to prison pipeline, the criminalization of poverty, mental disability, addiction -- have led the U.S. to incarcerate more of its own people than any other nation on the planet.

On any given day in the U.S., it is estimated that 80,000- 100,000 people, disproportionately people of color, are held in solitary in United States prisons. That number does not include people in local jails, juvenile facilities, or in military and immigration detention. That number does not tell you their names nor their stories, but it tells us the story of a moral crisis. The United Nations Special Rapporteur on Torture has called for a prohibition on the use of solitary confinement beyond 15 days, considering it a form of torture. He also called for a total ban on placing those most vulnerable to the effects of solitary from placement there ---including youth, people with mental disabilities, LGBT persons held in protective custody, and pregnant women. Yet people remain there for months, years, and decades. In the context of a ‘tough on crime’ political environment and the war on drugs in which African American, Latino and Native communities have been targeted for the past 4 decades, solitary has become commonplace in prisons and jails nationwide. In the early 1980s, there was one supermax prison in the U.S., meaning a prison built exclusively for the use of solitary confinement. Today, there are more than 40.

Placement in solitary is arbitrary and left up to the discretion of prison staff: women are placed in solitary as retaliation for reporting rape, transgender people, just for being

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<sup>3</sup> <https://ccrjustice.org/statement-plaintiffs-settlement-ashker-v-governor-california>

transgender, Muslim immigrants in detention for simply praying. Far too often, incarcerated people with a mental disability who are unable to function in the prison environment are placed in solitary and forgotten.

*It takes a lot of nerve to ask for the miraculous*, to believe that another world is possible. And I don't know about you, but this business of miracles is not an easy topic for me to buy into when I look around. There has been too much that I've prayed for that did not come to be, events in the lives of those I love and the histories of our globe that lead us to questions without answer: **Where was the miracle?** Why was this --you fill in the blank ---allowed to happen? We need only to survey the headlines to have ample reason not to believe in the miraculous: a warming planet, Syrian refugees fleeing unthinkable violence, migrant families here in our communities subjected to raids, detention and deportation, black youth shot down in the street by police, our Muslim neighbors targeted by hate speech and violence.

*And yet this call to us to embrace and expect the miraculous is a call for us to pay attention- to live, speak and act-- with a resilient expectation that, with the guidance of the Holy Spirit, we can be about the miraculous work of mending, of changing, of redirecting, of restoring.* To live with an audacity that expects a miracle is not to say that we sit on our hands and just wait for God to do something. It is instead an invitation to participate with God, walking in faith that the miraculous is indeed possible, and that death does not have the final word. In the words of Dr. King, it is to “undergo a radical revolution of values,” that questions “the fairness and justice of many of our past and present policies,” and **“to see that the whole Jericho Road must be transformed so that (people) will not be constantly beaten and robbed as they make their journey on life’s highway...to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring.”**<sup>4</sup>

***Phase 2: Martha and Mary, sisters of Lazarus then, Marie now:***

It takes a lot of nerve to ask for a miracle.

In the 11th chapter of the gospel of John, Lazarus' sisters have a lot of nerve. Just like the first of Jesus' miracles at the wedding at Cana turning water into wine, the final of Jesus' seven signs in the gospel of John takes place as a result of the prompting of bold women.

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<sup>4</sup> [http://kingencyclopedia.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/documentsentry/doc\\_beyond\\_vietnam/](http://kingencyclopedia.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/documentsentry/doc_beyond_vietnam/)

Concerned for their sick brother, Martha and Mary, sisters of Lazarus, send a message to Jesus: "Lord, he whom you love is ill." Despite their call for Jesus, by the time he arrives, Lazarus has been in the tomb for four days. "If you had been here my brother would not have died," Mary says to Jesus in her grief and outrage, standing outside his tomb.

Four days in the tomb.

Even through her anger and her tears, she calls for Jesus to act. Jesus joins her in her grief, as his tears fall. Jesus goes to Lazarus' tomb, with the stench of four days of death. And after thanking God for hearing him, Jesus cries out "Lazarus, come out!" with these words, **breaking the power of death's hold on him**. And the man who had been dead walked out, "his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth." And Jesus said, "Unbind him, and let him go."

There was another sister, who wept at the sight of her brother's tomb, a living tomb of solitary confinement. Since the early 1980's Marie Levin has visited her brother in the Corcoran, Tehachapi, and Pelican Bay prisons, always speaking to him through a thick glass window. "He's been behind the window for a long time," she says. At the end of every visit, Levin has watched as her brother is put in shackles to be led back to his cell, where he will spend at least [22 and a half](#) hours alone each day. "I remember the first time I saw him behind the glass, when I saw him with chains around his waist, his legs, and his ankles," Levin recalls. "It was hard for me to watch." Decades, she waited by her brother's living tomb. She joined others in organizing vigils, rallies, fasting, speaking, asking for and walking in faith that the miraculous was possible. Late last year, following the landmark Ashker settlement in which her brother Sitawa was a plaintiff, for the first time in more than 30 years, [Marie Levin](#) of California was able to hug her brother. Marie, sister to Sitawa, like Martha and Mary -- catalyst for a miracle.

### ***Phase 3: Getting proximate***

It takes a lot of nerve to ask for a miracle.

And I believe that you, Trinity Church, people of God, have a lot of nerve. **Each of us is called to be a catalyst for making that which seemed impossible, a reality. Of acting in an openness to the miraculous activity of God's Spirit at work in our day, in our town, in our world.**

**So I leave you with this question: what is your proximity to the empty vessels and living tombs of our day?** What is your proximity, church, to the living hells made by human decisions today-- right now, not far off, *and the* systems that keep some trapped in these situations of despair and death, which demand our response in the here and now.

How are you prompting a miracle by what you notice, by what you speak? As Bryan Stevenson says, we have to get 'proximate' to the people and places where injustice rules the day. And from that proximity, we have to prompt a miracle- miracles of new, fine wine in empty vessels, miracles of calling by name, calling to life what has been left for death. That proximity will change our prayers, will change our wills and dreams. Getting proximate will open our ears to the stories of those most akin to the injustices hidden from plain view. Getting proximate will force us to get honest about the legacies and lies of white supremacy that have for too long held our faith captive by a theology that says some lives are disposable, **when in God's kin-dom, black lives matter, and there are no throw-away people.**

**Hear this good news: death and grief are not the final reality: just as we see Jesus' filling empty jars with the best wine, and raising Lazarus from the grave, we are called to be people who, like Mary and Lazarus' sisters, prompt miracles, who are unafraid to ask for what is needed, to be a people who notice, who pay attention, who are proximate to the pain and move forward in audacious expectation of the miraculous.**

**What miracle will you prompt?**

**What living tomb is awaiting your voice?**

People of God, prepare the way for the miraculous.

Amen.