

Reel Faith sermon series
Leap of Faith
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Do miracles still happen today? I know one priest who believes they do. He was driving home one night from a party at a congregation member's house and was pulled over by a police officer. The officer said the priest had been swerving and wanted to know if he had been drinking. "Oh no, officer, I'm a man of the cloth. I've only been drinking water." The officer looked in the car and said, "Then why is there a half-empty bottle of wine next to you?" The priest paused and said, "Oh, sweet Jesus, he's done it again!"

Do miracles really happen? I don't mean coincidences or strokes of luck or spiritual sleight-of-hand. I'm talking about real signs and wonders. I mean quieting the storms, raising the dead, turning water into a nice Merlot or Pinot Grigio. Do the blind miraculously receive their sight? Do lepers suddenly have smooth skin? Do the lame take up their mats and walk?

We're continuing our summer sermon series called "Reel Faith," in which we are looking at popular movies and how we might learn more about God through them. If can truly work through all things, then God is present in movies and popular culture just as God is present in creation and scripture. Rather than decry those secular things as evil or anti-Christian, we might do well to listen for what God is saying to us through them.

Our movie today is the 1992 film, "Leap of Faith," starring Steve Martin and Debra Winger. The movie's slogan is "real miracles, sensibly priced." Martin plays Jonas Nightengale, a slick traveling evangelist, a parody of the Jim Bakker and Jerry Falwell types. Jonas is wildly successful, not because of his faith, but because of his ability to manipulate his audience with signs and wonders. The movie gives you a behind-the-scenes glimpse of his traveling roadshow, in which Jonas dupes people into giving him money by stirring them up into a spiritual frenzy and performing fake healings. As he says from the stage, he brings people Jesus, "a twelve-gauge, double-barreled grenade launcher of love!"

Here's the thing: Jonas doesn't believe a word of what he's saying. He knows he's a fake, and the only thing he has faith in is the gullibility of the people who come to his worship services. As he tells one skeptic who questions his motives, "People pay a lot of money to go to the theater and see a play. I'm giving them a show much cheaper than Broadway with some worthwhile sentiments thrown in."

While traveling through Kansas, Jonas' bus breaks down, stranding him in the drought-plagued town of Rustwater. The lack of rain has put this agrarian community on edge, so Jonas sees an opportunity to play on people's need for hope and make a few dollars while they wait for the bus to get fixed. His crew sets up the tents and Jonas goes around the town drumming up a crowd for his show.

While doing so, he meets and hits on Marva, a waitress at the local diner who has no interest in Jonas' slick talk. While trying to impress Marva, Jonas meets her brother Boyd, who is crippled from a car accident that killed their parents. Marva says once the doctors gave up on trying to fix Boyd's legs, she took him to a faith healer like Jonas. When that person failed, he told Boyd that he didn't have enough faith to be healed, so Marva wants nothing to do with Jonas' antics.

But Boyd still has faith, even in spite of his physical condition. In a conversation with Jonas, he says, "I'll walk again if it's God's will." Jonas tries to talk him out of believing that

God can heal him, but Boyd says, “I believe things happen for a reason.” Jonas says, “You want to believe that, that’s great. I’m gonna run.”

Jonas has no room in his life for faith. His whole schtick is calculated and planned for maximum impact and maximum profit and he’s always thinking three steps ahead. He has people planted in the audience to shout “Amen” and “Hallelujah” to get the crowd fired up. His assistant feeds him information through a hidden earpiece so he can appear to “know” people’s afflictions. One elderly lady who walks into the worship is escorted to the front in a wheelchair and later is called on stage and told to get up from her wheelchair and walk. It’s a miracle! Or at least it’s a good show. When the crowd asks when it’s going to rain, Jonas spins the question, saying the real rain is the sin that is flooding people’s hearts. He can’t work real miracles, but he’s a master at producing contrived ones. And it’s all totally under his control. Despite the name of the movie, the one person we know is not taking any leaps of faith is Jonas, because faith has nothing to do with his business.

What happens when Jonas loses control over what happens on stage? On Jonas’ last night in Rustwater, Boyd hobbles up to the stage and asks Jonas to heal him. Jonas is rattled; here’s a situation he can’t control. He leaves the stage saying, “I don’t think I got any more healing power in me tonight!” But the crowd start chanting “One more!” and Jonas is forced back to the stage to try and heal Boyd.

To provide himself an out, he tells the crowd, “This is about faith or you can’t get healed. If there’s even one among you who would doubt, it won’t work.” Jonas knows he can’t really heal Boyd, so he’s going to need an excuse, and as he so often does, he uses faith as that excuse. For Jonas, faith is not something you leap into, but simply a tool in his toolbox of tricks.

Boyd comes up and makes his way to the 20-foot-tall crucifix of Jesus in the center of the stage. As he touches the statue’s feet, he drops his crutches and stumbles. But he regains his footing and begins walking across the stage. It’s a miracle! As the crowd goes wild, Jonas has a look of bewilderment on his face. This isn’t supposed to happen. This isn’t how the show had been scripted.

Jonas rushes off the stage, angry that things didn’t go according to his plan. He assumes that Boyd has fooled him by pretending to be crippled, because that’s how Jonas has fooled other people his whole life. Still angry and confused, Jonas offers this prayer: “Hey Boss. Remember me? Jack Newton (his real name). Got a question for you. Why did you make so many suckers? You say, ‘Love never endeth.’ I say love never started. You say ‘the meek shall inherit the earth.’ And I say all the meek can count on is getting the short end of the stick. You say, ‘is there one among you who is pure of heart?’ and I say not one.”

In the midst of this rant, Boyd comes in and asks to go with Jonas to his next revival. Jonas snorts, “You’re a little too old to be running away with the circus.” Boyd says, “You made me walk. No one has been able to do that before.” Jonas responds angrily, “I had nothing to do with your walking.” Boyd asks him, “Are you saying you think you’re a fake?” And Jonas says, “I know I’m a fake.”

That sentence right there has been uttered by just about every Christian in history, in one form or another. I remember my first day at seminary, being utterly terrified that someone would find out who I really was and kick me out. “Who let you in? You’re not good enough to be here.” I’ve talked to many people who are scared to come to church because they just know other people will look at them judgmentally for what they’ve done or how long they’ve been gone. I know folks who are reluctant to step into a leadership role or teach our children because they feel

like they don't have a strong enough faith. "Are you saying you think you're a fake?" "I know I'm a fake."

After that conversation, Jonas walks out and surveys the little community that's popped up around his revival. People sit around a campfire telling stories. An African-American woman teaching the Lord's Prayer to a group of white children. There is laughter, sharing, true relationships and community being built in the midst of a crippling drought. If God can work through a fake like Jonas to build that, maybe Jonas isn't as fake as he thinks he is.

Do miracles still happen today? I believe they do. They may not be as spectacular as what we read in the Bible, but they are no less real. On our mission trip last week to Springfield, Mo., we learned about organizations like Convoy of Hope, which provides disaster relief and education around the globe. We worked at a Ronald McDonald House, where parents of sick children can find sanctuary and rest in a tumultuous time. We painted a fence at Eden Village, a small-house community for the chronically homeless that gives people a chance to restart their lives. And we sorted clothes at Victory Mission so lower-income people would have nice things to wear for job interviews. I saw seven teenagers and two adults from this church join with 200 other Disciples from across the country, giving up a week of their precious summer break to go and serve the least of these in another state. Is that any less of a miracle than Jesus walking on water?

In the last scene of the movie, Jonas runs away from his own circus, hitchhiking a ride on a semi-truck. When he finds out the driver is headed to Pensacola, Jonas, the man who's always thinking three steps ahead, says, "Never been there before." In a way, he's taking his own leap of faith, leaving behind his unethical ways for a new start. And, of course, as he leaves the town of Rustwater, it begins to rain, not only answering the prayers of the townspeople but providing a form of baptism for Jonas' new life.

You may have noticed that Jesus is no longer walking around, healing people and transforming lives. So, I guess if a miracle is going to happen, it's up to his followers. We might not be able to walk on water but walk alongside those who are going through storms in their lives. We may not be able to heal a leper, but we can help heal the hurts of injustice, poverty, and homelessness. We may not be able to change water into wine, but we can change minds and hearts about the worth of all God's people. Or maybe the best we can do is read a book to a child and let them know God loves them. That counts. If God can work through Jonas Nightengale, surely God can work through the likes of sinners like you and me.

What's your leap of faith? Is it taking on a new role, befriending someone who believes differently than you, investing more in a ministry you are passionate about, walking down this aisle and joining the church? None of us are called to be complacent Christians, so we all have a next step to take on our faith journey. Maybe yours is a leap instead of a step. Take it, even if you feel like a fake. You never know what miracle God is going to work through you. To quote the last line of the movie, "Thank you, Jesus!"