The question posed by the sermon title is a difficult one, particularly for those of us brought up in the liberal religious tradition. We are brought up to believe in a world of natural law, where physical effects are understood in terms of physical causes, and so the Biblical world of wonders where a prophet is fed by ravens, where the waters of a sea are parted, where a virgin gives birth, and where prayer is said to move mountains strikes one as unacceptable, impossible. We understand a miracle, you see, generally as an event that happens contrary to nature, as a violation of the law of nature, and then we are taught that nothing can happen contrary to natural law. There is a whole tradition of liberal Biblical criticism inspired by scientific rationalism that either rejected miracles entirely as pious fabrications, or understood them as imaginative myths; or accepted only some, such as some of Jesus’ healings as consistent with what we now know about psychosomatic ills and their cures. But in general they make us uneasy and in spite of the fact that they take up no small part of the scripture tradition, we tend to ignore them, rarely preach about them, and in general leave the miracles, even the healing miracles, to the Christian Scientists, the Pentecostals, the cults of the TV church.

I think this is a mistake on many grounds. First, I think a miracle cannot be defined as something contrary to nature. Second, I think our view of natural law may be unduly restrictive, reductionist. Third, I think we are not sensitive enough to the Biblical meaning of the miracle and the good news of the way God breaks into our world and our lives to act as a redeeming, saving power.

First point. A miracle cannot be defined simply as an event contrary to nature, or as a violation of a law of nature. Augustine had a modification that many would approve: he defined a miracle as an occurrence which is contrary to what is known of nature. This formula has the merit of humility, theological and scientific. It suggests we may not know all there is to know about the laws of nature, and thus expresses some scientific humility about the possibility of extending the laws of nature beyond the physical level of cause and effect to include the area of psychic powers, for example. But this formula suggests theological humility as well, because it would be prepared to surrender belief in a particular miracle if it should turn out to be a natural occurrence, after all.

I think, though, that this improved formula, as stated, is still inadequate, to say that the miracle is an event contrary to what is known of nature. I am convinced that a merely inexplicable event, an event that seems to occur contrary to any known causal explanation, is a puzzle at best and simply an accident at worst, not a miracle.

The miracle makes a kind of sense — it shows a rational connection between faith and its consequence, or virtue and its reward that has more of an appeal to our primal sense of logic than the fortuitous connections of causal processes in nature. The miracle illustrates moral forces and purposes while a causal mechanical law of nature is only a record of the usual but reasonless
order of change. Thus, a merely inexplicable event, showing no purpose, would be no miracle. What surprises us in the miracle is that contrary to what is usually the case, we see a particular purpose, a real and a just reason for it. As Luke says with respect to Jesus’ miracles, by the finger of God He cast out devils. It is the finger-of-God revealed religious purpose that makes a miracle a miracle.

For example, as Santayana has said in his book *Reason in Religion*, if the water of the shrine at Lourdes bottled and sold by druggists cured most disease, this would be no miracle, but an impressive pharmaceutical discovery. But note we would know no more why we were cured than we now know why we were born or why aspirin works as it does. But if the believer in taking the water believes the effect morally conditioned; if he interprets any favorable result as an answer to his faith or prayers, then the cure becomes miraculous and intelligible also as manifesting the obedience of nature to the exigencies of the spirit.

It is in this way, I think, that we must understand the Biblical tradition of miracles — not as isolated wonders contradicting the laws of nature, but as signs of the purpose and power of God. We must remember the Bible knows nothing of nature as a closed system of law. Nature is an un-Biblical term, even. The world is God’s creation. God puts plants in the ground, causes rain to fall on the just and unjust, weaves us in our mother’s wombs, as the Psalmist says, so that we are indeed wondrously made. God appoints the times of seedtime and harvest, sets the seasons by the sun and moon. He is in the sea and storm as well as the green valleys and vineyards.

God is in nature. But more importantly, God works through nature in the realm of history, working out His purposes for man. Here He intervenes, sometimes forcibly, sometimes with wonders, sometimes in the still small voice. These extraordinary interventions are called miracles, not because they are uniformly violations of laws of nature — some are not — but because they are startling evidence of the power and purpose of God. They are not acts of God — in the insurance company’s sense of the word, as when we call in God because there is no other explanation available — but acts of God as recognized by the eye of faith, signs of His Presence at work in our world, signs of the world obedient to His purpose.

In this sense there is one basic miracle in the Bible — the miracle of God operating in the world in history. It is expressed in two stages: the Old Testament miracle of the Exodus recalled by Joshua in the scripture lesson as the basis for the believer’s loyalty to God; and the New Testament miracle of the Incarnation — what more vivid expression of God in history could be imagined! Christ’s redemptive work as Savior of man is the miracle as seen symbolically by John as he recounts the miracle of the wine at the wedding feast in Cana.

Each of these supreme miracle events is accompanied by other lesser miracles to call attention to the special meaning of God’s redemptive powers. There were the plagues of Egypt, the parting of the waters, the manna in the wilderness — all contributing to the theme of escape to freedom under God. And the miracles of Jesus, especially healings and exorcisms, are preliminary indications of the final struggle with evil and the victory in the final revelation of the glory of God. As John reports of the miracle in Cana, “This beginning of His signs did Jesus in Cana, and manifested forth His glory; and His disciples believed on Him.” And ever since those who have
believed on Him have found the glory of God reflected in the ongoing life of the church, and His miraculous power at work in the life of the believer.

Incidentally, there are several words for “miracle” in the Bible. The most common term, used both in Exodus and John, is the word “sign”. A miracle is a sign of God’s power and purpose. The synoptic gospels seem a bit wary of the term sign. Jesus is portrayed as uneasy about those who were simply looking for signs as a kind of proof. The problem was that wonder working can be of the devil, as opposed to the signs of God’s redemptive love. And Jesus resisted the temptation to magic, we know. Would that all His followers today could sense the difference. But in the gospels the most important word is “mighty work”, again suggesting a power of God that is able, not a secret magical power of the individual.

Can we believe in miracles? As we see what the miracle means in Biblical tradition, it would seem that as believers, as Christians, we must. We must accept the major miracle of God’s redemptive power in our world and His creative love in our lives, for this is what is meant by the miracle — evidence of God’s extraordinary power and purpose. It need not be a prodigy, a wondrous, strange event — such words in reference to the miracle are rare in scripture and are pagan. One can speak as the Psalmist did of the miracle of human birth and life, the miracle of the new day and new life, and still inhabit and believe in an orderly world of nature. We can believe in miracle as evidence of the purpose of God and still believe in an orderly world of nature. There are causes and purposes. The larger spirit of God and man is moved by purpose. This intervenes on the system of causality. The world is more than a closed causal system.

And this is the second point I wish to make — not in as great length, but none the less it is important. That is we tend to exaggerate our knowledge of and control over nature as a closed system of physical law. We thereby cut off the possibility of finding more fundamental meanings and active purposes. For example, we assert the dogma that physical effects must have physical causes, and refuse to countenance or accept evidence of psychic phenomena Psychologists who explore psychic powers are relegated to departments of parapsychology in our universities. The Para prefix means, as in paramedics, not quite a real scientist, expert, professional — not to be taken as authoritative. We ignore or explain away evidence of miracles in our own times, our own lives. We are suspicious of faith healings, for example. Perhaps we have tied the noose of law too tightly. Perhaps there is much that escapes it. Perhaps we want to be too sure of things, really know what to believe and what we can reject — so that we don’t have to wonder about the unknown.

Our systems of natural law may well be simply our way of interpreting the world for our own control. And just as we can draw a figure which can look now like a rabbit and now like a duck, we can make a picture of our world that looks now like a mechanical system and now like a great cosmic moral purpose and now like an order of beauty.

The point is we may have imposed too narrow an order. We may have defined God out of the picture. We may have a view of God that is too small. There is so much we don’t know. All the prognosis of knowledge in medicine can point in a certain direction for a patient, and yet a different and unexpected result can ensue. Norman Cousins was suffering from a chronic and it
would appear terminal disease of the spine. And yet he managed to effect a cure — I say “he”. He directed his therapy, part of which was to watch old films of the Marx brothers. Laughter was part of the therapy. There is a theory that the brain can manufacture agents that fight disease — and laughter stimulates the procedure. I don’t know how to take all this. I do know he was a remarkable healthy-looking Commencement speaker, and he is now teaching at a medical school. And I do know that one’s psychic attitude, his depression or optimism, his sense of tragedy or sense of humor can make an enormous difference in his outlook toward life, in facing problems. There is a power of the spirit. Thinking does make it so in many cases, as William James said. Your world will be exciting or boring, friendly or hostile, an occasion for creative activity or defeat, valuable or meaningless — largely depending on the kind of spirit with which you face life. I think our worst problem is the tendency to try to play it safe, find security, keep control, defining reality in terms of laws we can understand at the risk of losing the possibilities of a richer, freer, more creative existence.

A pathetic example of this on TV a couple of weeks ago was a documentary, “Choosing Suicide”. It consisted of a series of conversations with and artist, Jo Roman, suffering from inoperable cancer who was planning to take her own life before she had to suffer a minute of pain. It was, she kept insisting, the rational thing to do. But it was as a psychiatrist commented in a follow-up discussion — after her suicide — as if she had to remain in control in a rational way and couldn’t imagine giving up, letting go. Of course, the pathetic thing, I think, is that she really didn’t control anything and gave up any determination of her future. We cannot ever have total charge. We cannot reduce life to rational laws of nature and take control of things.

The Biblical doctrine of the miracle gives us an answer to this dilemma. It tells us that we are not caught in a meaningless cycle of natural forces and natural laws. Just as we as centers of purpose and action can make a meaning and build a world out of the neutral forces of nature, so the purposes of God can break through and liberate man caught in the world of time and sense. There are spiritual forces at work, divine purposes, psychic energies at hand. We should be open to the possibilities of their power in our lives. They are there in answered prayer in renewed confidence, in opening ourselves to God. Perhaps laughter is so good for us and real grief can be so therapeutic, because we let ourselves go, lose control and abandon our sense of tight control to be aware of, and to find, a larger purpose and peace.

The miracle at Cana is a beautiful symbol of what I have been trying to say. Christ comes to the wedding feast — joins us in our joys. And when the wine fails, he provides for our needs. The six waterpots symbolize the failure of the Jewish law. The wine — in enormous quantities — symbolizes the new spirit of God’s redemptive power more than sufficient to our needs. The oblique references to the fact that His hour is not come, and the concluding reference to the revelation of His glory shows this miracle at the beginning of His ministry as an earnest of the new spirit of His incarnate love at hand in the conduct of life, richly at hand for our lives, as an indwelling spirit.

We can believe in miracles. When I think back over the last several months in the life of our church, it is certainly beyond normal expectation what this congregation has done. But this is the miracle of our Christian faith. God can use us singly, together, in the spirit of Christ, to heal, to
strengthen, to proclaim His purpose, and to gain a richer life for us all. This is the miracle—surely the Lord is in this place. May His presence continue in our midst.