

Miracles Still Happen

Isaiah 7:10-16; Matthew 1:18-25

December 12, 2021

It was a dark and formidable time when Isaiah delivered the prophecy you heard in this morning's Old Testament passage. In Isaiah's time, the people were missing the point about the miracle that was to come. Isaiah was speaking to King Ahaz. The enemy had surrounded Jerusalem. It appeared that Jerusalem would fall and the king would be killed.

But Isaiah told Ahaz that the Lord would give him a sign. He said that a young woman would conceive and bear a son, and call him Immanuel – which means, “God with us.” Isaiah reassured Ahaz that before the child was two years old, God would rescue the people of Jerusalem. The city and the king would be saved.

This is fact did happen. Isaiah's prophecy was fulfilled, and the people of Israel were saved. But Isaiah was also pointing to a time 700 years into the future when another sign would take place. Another young woman would conceive and bear a son, and call him Immanuel. He would save the people from their sins.

* * *

Matthew was addressing primarily a Jewish audience, and referred to the prophecy of Isaiah from the OT more than 700 years before the birth of Jesus. But specifically he was talking about the birth of another baby. You know the story. Mary and Joseph were engaged, but not yet married. Then Mary was found to be pregnant. Joseph, being a righteous man, and also a kindly man, did not want to embarrass Mary any more than necessary, so he “intended to put her away secretly.” (v. 19)

* * *

Now it helps to know that Jewish marriage customs included three steps. The first step was engagement. Engagement was often worked out by the parents or a Jewish matchmaker. The young couple often didn't know each other prior to the engagement. Can you imagine? The song “Matchmaker” from the musical *Fiddler on the Roof* celebrates this kind of arrangement.

The second step in marriage was betrothal. Betrothal lasted about a year and gave the couple a chance to get to know each other better. The second stage of betrothal was so solemn that it could be terminated only by divorce, even though they were not yet formally married.

The third step was the marriage proper. It was in the second step of the Jewish marriage procedure that Joseph learned that Mary was with child. It was a shock to both of them since they had not yet been together. But then an angel of the Lord

appeared to Joseph in a dream, telling Joseph not to hesitate to take Mary as his wife. The angel said that Mary would have a son, and they would name him Jesus, “for it is he who shall save his people from their sins.” (vs. 21)

The name “Jesus” comes from the Hebrew word “Ya-shu-a,” from which we get the name Joshua and Jesus. We named our younger son Joshua, but we don’t remind him that his name means Jesus! We wouldn’t want it to go to his head! That is what Mary and Joseph were to name the baby – because it would be Jesus who would save the people.

Then the angel departs, and the scene shifts to the shepherds. Matthew says: “Now all this has happened, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, saying, ‘Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son. They shall call his name Immanuel,’ which means, “God with us.” And so he was. Matthew tells us that indeed Isaiah was pointing to the future – to the time when the messiah would come.

Isn’t it amazing that God would choose such a surprising way to be revealed to the world? He didn’t turn to the best and brightest scholars of the day. He didn’t turn to kings or those with power and wealth. That might be what the world would do, but God had a different plan. God chose a baby as a means of revelation.

So today we come to ponder the miracle that is about to come into the world again – the miracle of Christmas. Miracles still happen. Matthew is speaking to you every bit as much as he was speaking to the Jewish audience of his day. He was saying that we cannot be saved by the rich and powerful or influential, but only God holds the real power and shares it with us as we humble ourselves and open our hearts. The baby Jesus is the sign that this will happen – that it has happened and it will happen again.

Just in case we missed it the first time, God is coming again. Miracles still happen. God’s word to us is the same word Isaiah uttered to King Ahaz and the people of Israel. God’s word to us is the same word Matthew spoke regarding the angels and their proclamation to Joseph and Mary.

* * *

Sometimes miracles happen through earthly music in addition to the heavenly choir of angels. There is a story about the author who wrote the hymn we sang this morning. His name was Phillips Brooks, and he wrote the words to, “O Little Town of Bethlehem.”

Phillips Brooks was a great 19th century preacher—great in oratory, great in the esteem of the people, and great in size—six feet six inches tall. In 1865, Brooks

journeyed to the Holy Land, where he rode a horse from Jerusalem to Bethlehem on Christmas Eve. He visited the field where it is said the shepherds saw the angel, and remained for services at the Church of the Nativity. He found the whole experience quite moving.

Three years later, needing a Christmas carol for the Sunday school Christmas program, he decided to write one. Inspired by memories of Bethlehem, he wrote the words in one brief sitting. He then handed them to his organist, Lewis Redner, asking him to put the words to music.

Redner struggled for some time—trying to come up with just the right melody to fit the words. Then, on the day of the program, the melody came to him in his sleep. He, too, did his writing in one short session, considering the tune a gift of God – a real Christmas miracle, considering how it came unsought and seemingly apart from his own efforts. It came at just the right time – for his Sunday School Christmas program.

* * *

I wonder what new ideas and inspiration will come to you during this Christmas season? I wonder what gifts will come unsought but direct from God as a result of God's great love and desire to be with us? Remember how an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. What is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit."

What will the Christmas angel bring to you this Christmas? What will the Spirit conceive in you? Most of what has been important in my life I would like to think has come from a place beyond myself. It is a subtle discerning process of "both / and" to be sure, but to go to college and seminary, to seek a call to ministry, to get married, to have children, and even end up here in California was, I think to some extent "conceived from above," and not only by myself.

Either all of it makes sense, or none of it makes sense. I think it was the work of the Spirit. If I didn't believe that, I would not stand up here and talk to you Sunday after Sunday.

The gifts of Christmas may come from beyond yourself, yet can be found in yourself once something is conceived in you, like Mary. The great Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung knew what Joseph knew -- that God often speaks to us in dreams. But such revelations can also come when you're wide awake. It takes paying attention to the thoughts and emotions that arise in you. Where do they come from? Is there something that is wholly other than yourself? Could there be

angels that speak to you in subtle tones about gifts you know nothing of? Now we're talking Christmas. The angels just might not be done with this 'ole world.

* * *

I don't know what you will be doing this Christmas or where your travels will take you. Many of you will be with family and friends and unwrap presents under a glittering tree, and gather for a family dinner. How wonderful it will be since we were shut down from Covid last Christmas. Hopefully it will be a time for other gifts as well.

Sometimes I can imagine us standing shoulder to shoulder with the shepherds. We can witness the loving gaze of Mary, and the stalwart support of Joseph. We can watch the animals surround the baby in an effort to keep him warm. We can almost hear the heavenly angels serenade the new born king. It is a scene worth pondering. This Christmas can bring about a real transformation and bring us closer to the babe lying in the manger.

Christmas is how it all began, and remains the reason for the perpetual presence of Christ in our lives. God is where we are: at the office, in the kitchen, on the plane, around the tree. The manger invites, even dares us to believe that the best is yet to be. The truth of that first Christmas is happening all over again *for* you and *in* you. That's the message of the angels, and that's the message of Christmas that will soon be upon us.

Remember the words of Phillips Brooks:

“Yet in thy dark streets shineth The everlasting Light --
The hopes and fears of all the years Are met in thee tonight.”

Pretty soon, God will be coming to your corner of town. Miracles still happen. They don't have to be extraordinary. They can be ordinary events that your eyes see in extraordinary ways. Miracles still happen and it's about to happen again. It is the season to listen for the words of angels and paying attention to your dreams – both while you are asleep and while you are awake. Just like Mary, something may be waiting to be conceived in you this Christmas. May we echo the words of Mary who spoke to the angel and said, “May it be to me according to your word.” Amen

Isaiah 7:10-16

10 Again the Lord spoke to Ahaz, 11 “Ask the Lord your God for a sign, whether in the deepest depths or in the highest heights.”

12 But Ahaz said, “I will not ask; I will not put the Lord to the test.”

13 Then Isaiah said, “Hear now, you house of David! Is it not enough to try the patience of humans? Will you try the patience of my God also? 14 Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel. 15 He will be eating curds and honey when he knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right, 16 for before the boy knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right, the land of the two kings you dread will be laid waste.

Matthew 1:18-25

18 This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. 19 Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet he did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

20 But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. 21 She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.”

22 All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: 23 “The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel” (which means “God with us”).

24 When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. 25 But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.