

December 14, 2014 “The 3rd Miracle” Luke 2:1-7

Christmas is a time of miracles! I am always surprised by this simple fact. Every year at this particular time of year something happens that reminds me, God is real. Jesus saves. The Holy Spirit is truly present and in the midst of God's people. This past week, the touch of God's unchanging hands came as I listened to a meditation. A meditation about the Santa Clause Parade in little old Stirling. Faith is born, sometimes, reborn when miracles occur.

By now I hold out some hope that you are beginning to remember the working definitions.

From the Oxford Dictionary. In my day...which may indeed be passing...the Oxford was the scholar's dictionary, the final arbiter if one was searching for the meaning of a word, in the English language.

Miracle: a marvelous event due to some supposed supernatural agency...translation, an act of God! The Oxford further shares with those doing research that the word miracle in English is derived from the Latin word...miraculum, which means an object of wonder. I have shared with you that in his play St. Joan, George Bernard Shaw places this line in the mouth of the Bishop. “a miracle is simply an event that creates faith.” I shared that because my professor of Systematic Theology was so impressed by it, the late Dr. David Hay, or at least he was impressed by it until he discovered it came from the mouth and mind of George Bernard Shaw. But that is what miracles accomplish...they sweep the questions of otherwise skeptical people off the table. Miracles render doubt irrelevant.

I have seen it happen. A dying child, that's what the doctor said was happening, following prayer, was pronounced well enough to go home from hospital within an hour. I have no idea what

2.

became of the child, but the father who was an incurable alcoholic, became a sober loving father and husband, a **Bible** reader, an every Sunday attender at worship services, asking his minister to go with him to AA meetings to meet other reformed alcoholics, to bless their pursuit of sobriety. It affected him deeply. It affected me too and is still affecting me. Miracles...events that create faith. So that there be no doubt...faith in God. The conviction He is real and present and involved in what is

happening to us.

And the story of the birth of Jesus is replete with....no other word suffices....miracles! The wise men were not men of faith. Strange beliefs? Yes. In Biblical terms either superstition or belief in false gods. The appearance of that singular star transformed them. Their financial investment in the journey to find the child born to be king, to save his nation, is a wonder in itself. It was a huge and costly undertaking...and that's before we consider the cost of gold, frankincense and myrrh. The shepherds....transformed. Excluded from formal religion. Unwelcome in their local houses of worship. They leave their flocks to go see this thing which occurred...this new born baby. Jobs on the line. Their reputations as shepherds on the line. Their insistence that they saw angels and heard angel song. And you are right if you are thinking I am getting ahead of myself.

What Luke is telling us in the brief portion I read this morning is that every detail in the story of the birth of Jesus, every detail in His coming into this world bears the fingerprints of the God who created the universe, this world and you and I. Every detail of time and place he claims was orchestrated by the God who parted the Red Sea and gave national being to a people who were in fact the expendable slave labour forces of one of the great Empires of the ancient world. The Exodus was he reminds his readers, initially Jews

3.

who believed in Jesus, then Gentiles who believed in Jesus and even we who believe in Jesus...the Exodus was a miracle. The result not of Moses political and pastoral campaign, but the power and presence of God who can bring Empires and emperors to their knees.

You see, the average historian has little interest in the question, what did God do? I am not belittling historians here. One of my closest friends is an historian. Some of you know my friend Gerry well. But the average historian describes the facts. Who did what and when and where. How the climate of the time affected the place and the people. A description of industry, custom, culture, accomplishment. Building programmes and so on. They tend to stick to the facts, so that the facts do not get lost. And in the case of the ancients, we know they sometimes rearranged facts, even invented facts to make people in power

look better than they were. To the extent that modern critics of the Bible tend to think that is what is going on here, an endeavour to make a peasant, who died like a criminal, look better than he was. Skepticism comes easy to us. That is why God is still in the miracle business. For many of us it takes miracles to lift our eyes beyond the facts, the details, to heavens door.

Luke seeks to make the point...all the pieces fell into place because God is real, has come among us in Jesus to redeem us, has with the Father poured out the Holy Spirit into our midst that we might realize we are not alone as we face the challenges, joys and pain of living. The Prophets had written that God was going to provide a Messiah, a Saviour. The Prophets had written that the Messiah would come out of the line and house of Israel's greatest king...the writer of the Psalms, the praise songs, David. They had

4.

written, the prophets, centuries before the details unfolded, that the Messiah would be born to a virgin, in Bethlehem.

As some of you are aware in mid January I will be going to the Holy Land to walk where Jesus walked. If the land is at peace we will go to Bethlehem. Our Jewish guide will not be able to go with us because Bethlehem is in Palestinian hands. We Christian tourists who will come to spend money are welcome. But our Jewish guide might...well....disappear if he went with us on that side trip. The facts are these: the Jewish state does not control all of the territory in the Bible lands.

Luke is deliberate in his attesting that all the pieces fell into place and his insinuation is that is genuinely because God is involved, the prophecies are fulfilled, down to the last detail. I am told, I was never much good at Math, that the odds against this concurrence are extremely impressive. One author at least suggests it could not happen as a result of chance. He was an enquiring reporter trying to justify his own lack of faith...trying to understand what had happened to his wife in that she became a woman of faith. And in the end he decided it was easier to believe in Jesus, than to continue as a non believer.

So what is he saying this gospel writer named Luke? He is saying that Augustus Caesar was the emperor of Rome in that time

because God had a use for him. Augustus came to the conclusion there was only way to raise the money needed to accomplish all that he wanted to accomplish. He needed an effective tax system. That meant he needed to know who the men were as they worked and did business and accumulated capital. So Augustus ordered a census be taken. You have to count the men...means counting their

5.

households, their families, even their babies.

That had never been done before in the Roman Empire. The first census! What do you mean the first census? The one that occurred when Quirinius was Rome's governor in Syria. Augustus appointed him. Why was Quirinius there? What did he accomplish. I haven't a clue...except for this: he becomes a reference point to later generations, to later writers of history as to when that first census occurred that required Joseph to take his family to Bethlehem, so that Jesus would be born in Bethlehem....as the prophets had written centuries before.

It is never simple is it, designing a governmental programme for the whole of an empire and one that will be the basis for the system of taxation for years to come. There have to be rules. It has to be systematic. It has to leave little room for error, no loopholes, no cracks that will allow some people to remain invisible, and therefore making it possible for them all, everyone to pay taxes. People are to return to their birth cities to register. In Judea that means there is tribal significance to the place in which you have to do the paperwork. Joseph being of the tribe and lineage of David must go to the city of David. He must take his wife regardless of her condition. If the baby is born and male he too will have to be recorded. So the census of Augustus Caesar becomes the fact by which prophecy after prophecy after prophecy is fulfilled....no matter how impossible the odds. God snaps his fingers and the mathematics works.

If Jesus had been born in Jerusalem, Herod's reach would have allowed him to eliminate that singular child. If Jesus had been born in Nazareth, the prophecy about Bethlehem would not

6.

have been fulfilled. But that is not what happened. The tumblers of God's grace tumbled. Joseph and Mary arrived in Bethlehem. Joseph found accomodation...very basic to be sure but they were out of the weather. An

innkeeper's random act of kindness, is not random at all. And the phrase in the prophecies about the Messiah being rejected by men....takes on a deeper meaning...no room in the inn. Miracles. Events that create faith. We are tempted to say like Scrooge...Pooh! Pooh! Humbug! Apparently not if you are Joseph. If you are Mary. If you are the midwife to whom Luke spoke. Apparently not if you were a shepherd working the hills overlooking Bethlehem. Apparently not if you were a Magi from the far east. Apparently not if you are Herod, pathologically afraid of losing control or yielding it to a baby born to be king... Apparently not, if you are one of those people summoned to court of whom answers are demanded....where is the child to be born according to the Scriptures? Events that draw us close to the embrace of God who loves us so much He would come into the world, to save you, to save me from our very real....sins. Events touched by God's unchanging hands, and we get to see it. And we...feel.... we must believe it....the story of Christmas.

Let us pray;

Dear saving Lord, cause our hearts to grow. Grant us perception of your presence. Conviction concerning your grace, your being with us and for us, your ability to make all things unfold as they should, such that we do not lose our minds, and yet find it obvious and normal, that you are Immanuel...God with us. Amen