

December 21, 2014 "The 4th Miracle" Luke 2:8-20

Miracles. It is one of the tragedies of the church in our time that we tend to shrug the subject off, almost assuming we are too rational to believe in that stuff. It is the adult Christian equivalent of children's outgrowing the Santa Clause story. We almost act, regardless of what we say we believe, as though we have outgrown God. Christmas runs counter current to that reality. As Kermit the Frog sings in the Muppet Christmas Carol, "There's magic in the air." We as Christians may descry the commercialism of this season, but you have to admit there is an undeniability about Christmas.

This year's Christmas miracle came for me at 10:30 on Friday evening. A friend from my second congregation, another St. Andrew's in New Liskeard a hundred miles north of North Bay was scheduled for heart surgery, quadruple bypass. And of course we had been praying for her. That's what we do when things go critical. When surgery has been canceled twice. When you know this either works or you attend another funeral. Saturday evening, 10:30 the email came through. Sarah is out of surgery, and the surgeon says there is every reason to believe best possible results. The prayer becomes "Thank you Lord!"

Miracle...something that creates a sense of wonder. The carol begins with the line... "I wonder as I wander, out under the sky." The writer contemplating an event whose author is none other than the Lord God Almighty, revealed in Jesus, in flesh and blood, in time and place. His Holy Spirit caressing us through the most painful parts of life and leading us step by step through the rest of it.

I said the order was arbitrary on my part. I chose as the first, that star which caused Gentiles (Non Jews) to pack and spend

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and go with urgency, on the road for 2 years seeking the child born to be King, born to redeem His people Israel. Born to save the world. It is true the Bible never says it and yet the Bible describes it....their discovery of life lived in the hollow of the hand of the living God. 2nd miracle: the discovery of Mary and Joseph, not together by individually, that God is involved in their love life. That contrary to logic, some would say contrary

to the law...they are bound together in marriage because God is real and present. 3rd miracle: The combination of factors that cause that holy birth to take place according to the Scriptures in Bethlehem in Judea. The Roman Emperor plays his part. Mary and Joseph play their part. The innkeeper who provides the stable plays his part. The Roman Law regarding the 1st census, plays its part. God orchestrates.

This morning we focus on the 4th miracle. In a nutshell, it is the birth of Jesus. But again it is so much more than that. The shepherds are involved. Angels are involved. The original hallelujah chorus...and I don't mean the one written by Mr. Handel. But again, I am getting ahead of myself. The fact is I need to confess. As Christmas approaches I get grouchy. I get short tempered. I know it is a pattern, I try to recognize it coming on, to stop it, and I never seem to succeed. I seem to be overwhelmed by the never enough time in a day to get everything done that "must be done." And then I wind up feeling guilty...guilty for that which is left undone, incomplete, guilty for my short temperedness. Guilty for my lack of self control. Guilty for my sin.

Here is the thing we have to see and are in danger of not seeing as we read Luke 2:8-20. The birth of Jesus is all about saving people like me, from their very real sin. The birth of Jesus in the stable in Bethlehem is all about God dealing with our tendency to

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beat ourselves up over our guilt. God washes it away. He makes straight that warpedness in our human nature, He changes us after the fact of the record of our behaviour. That is the genius of Charles Dickens, "A Christmas Carol." It is no miracle that Scrooge was this bitter, nasty, employer and citizen of London. Dickens nailed the fact that Christmas changes people. God enters in, and people become different, even though we still make mistakes, still sin, we become changed from what we were.

The main characters of Luke 2:8-20 are the shepherds. They are Jewish shepherds. They do not own the sheep they shepherd, they are like the characters in the parables of Jesus the teacher and preacher. They care for the sheep that belong to others. They are a special breed of security guards, and what they are guarding is the wealth of those who actually own these flocks. Like modern security guards that means there

are times when they risk life and limb to guard these animals, they face the bear and the lion. They search out the lost and the straying. They leave 99 to find the 1 that has wandered off, silly and mindless of the danger. Because each lamb is a precious commodity. Because each lamb must be accounted for at the end of the day.

How about that! Noble work this shepherding! Noble, and dangerous, and performed at a terrible price on the personal level. Their work means they are defined as being ritually unclean. They do not attend services at the Temple. They do not go to the local synagogue. They never touch their local rabbi...they are unclean. Like Gentiles, were they to touch a rabbi, they would make him unclean. They would make it impossible for him to do His God centered work, to handle the Scriptures, to light the oil lamps that represent the light of the world. He would be unable to conduct the

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rituals on which the faithful depend for the sustaining of their faith, and the care of their souls.

Here is the miracle once again, the event which creates faith in spite of everything that has happened or will continue to happen. It is to these unclean, sinners, these shepherds who are watching their flocks of sheep that God sends the angel messenger. And what is the message that is proclaimed before their awe struck, wonder driven eyes? "Today in the town of David, a Saviour has been born to you; He is Christ the Lord." To you who are defined as unworthy of the grace of God, the grace of God is poured out, down this hill, down the road in Bethlehem. And by the way shepherds, never forget this. The gift is not just given to you or for you, it is for all the people....sons of Israel, and daughters too. Samaritans and savages. People you can name and people you will never know.

Now it might have been an awesome event if just one angel arrived with the telegram of grace, but suddenly...that is what the Word of God proclaims... "suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with that spokesperson of an angel, and this chorus of angels praises God and sings, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom God's favour rests!" As they say on those thrilling sports casts...this is a game changer! The tone and content of the message is that the child is born to redeem sinners. And this marvelous display of

heaven's armies does not occur in the local theological school among the faculty, it does not occur at the Temple for all the priests to hear, it occurs on the hills overlooking Bethlehem. It occurs so that Shepherds hear it first, see it first, rejoice at the words first of all.

There is affirmation in this 4th miracle. One angel

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proclaims the birth of Jesus. A legion of angels affirms that it is true. It is a company of angels that fills the night sky with their song of praise. It is a performance to behold. It is a wondrous and wonderful event. And it is a miracle because it is responsible for the creation of faith among the sheep herders.

Did you ever ask yourself, what were the shepherds doing just before this angelic pageant began to unfold? I will tell you something. They were not conducting a Bible study around the evening fire. They were not singing Psalms. And they were in all probability not praying prayers. They were probably cursing the weather. It would be cold. There would be an edge of bitterness if not crudity to their choice of words. They were fenced off from the bulk of society. Most of these dumb lambs were probably bound for sacrifice at the Temple in Jerusalem. They can't go where these sheep will attend.

And yet what is it they are saying as they huddle around the fire and talk after the angel, and the angel praise band have disappeared? "Lets go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about." They are talking about what God has done and shared with them. They are talking about breaking the rules shepherds do not break. A journey into town, to Bethlehem to see with their own eyes what God has revealed. As suddenly as there were angels present, there is also the language of faith, and a venture of faith, a desire to see the Saviour whom God has given. And that is not where the spillover or spin off of this night's revelation ends. When they have seen the child they go back to work, but they are singing as they return to their labour. To be specific, and we need to be specific....they glorify and praise God for all the things they had seen and heard, which were just as they had

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been told by the angels of God!

And Luke 2:8-20 is every bit as specific as are the words, the lyrics of John Jacob Niles. It is not I think about that he writes, but... “I wonder as I wander out under the sky, how Jesus the Saviour did come for to die, for poor ornery people like you and like I,...I wonder as I wander out under the sky.”

Let us pray;

O Lord our God and our Saviour, Spirit present with us everywhere and all the time, grant that this sacred season might indeed be holy in our sight and hearing. As we hear the story, humble us with wonder and the degree to which you love, the extent to which you go to draw us to your bosom. In the light of Christmas, deepen our faith, and put steel in our resolve to serve you and your people. Amen