

I BELIEVE IN MIRACLES

12/24/20 ~ St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Encinitas, CA (*live-streamed*)
Christmas Eve (II): ~~Isaiah 62:6-12~~, Psalm 97; Titus 3:4-7; Luke 2:1-20

The other day, making my way out of the parking lot from Trader Joe's to El Camino Real, my car was filled with music coming from Discount Tire. And, just as suddenly, I was reliving a high school memory. The song blaring across the parking lot was "You Sexy Thing" by Hot Chocolate, but I've always called it the "Malco" song.

Floating along in my high school memory, I started laughing, remembering the day my best friend and I were bobbing along to the music while we drove around town. I said, "I love this song, but what's 'malco'?" Peggy stared at me like I was speaking another language. So, I tried again, "You know...in the song, they say: 'I believe in malco.' What's 'malco'?"

Peggy could hardly stop laughing long enough to get out the words, "It's not 'malco,' they're saying 'miracles'... 'I believe in miracles.'" Of course, from then on we always sang it the way I had heard it: "I believe in malco."

It's a silly memory, but driving by Discount Tire last week was a mini-miracle for me. I was desperate for a good laugh, and hearing that song gave me just the shot of endorphins I needed!

In my sermon a few weeks ago, I talked about avoiding the "fix-it God" mentality of believing all we have to do is "wish upon a star and all our dreams will come true." I had no idea, at the time, that, this week, we'd have the Christmas star in our midst. Another miracle worth noting.

I'm recording this ahead of time, so I don't yet know whether the alignment of Jupiter and Saturn was visible to us, but I do know the astronomical event occurred for the first time in hundreds of years.

Now, I understand that some of you might say, "Well, it's not actually a miracle; it's a scientific event." And, of course, you're right; the lining up of Jupiter and Saturn in a way that makes them look like one bright star is a scientific occurrence, but there's nothing to say that miracles and science are mutually exclusive.

One definition I found for a miracle is: "a highly improbable or extraordinary event that brings welcome consequences." So, the alignment of two planets resulting in what looks like a giant star is a miracle. But we usually use a definition more like this: "a surprising event that is not explicable by scientific laws but is considered to be the work of divine agency."

And still, I argue that the Christmas Star is a miracle—not necessarily the part about the alignment of two planets, but the part that's our reaction to the occurrence. It is in our reaction to these extraordinary events, where the miracle occurs. We celebrate the event and create community around it, and that is a miracle.

The roll-out of the COVID vaccine is a miracle among us. It's not a miracle in that it was created; it's a miracle in the way that the vaccine is providing healthcare workers, doctors, nursing home facilities—you name it—it's providing them hope for the first time in months. The real miracle is what happens within us; there's no scientific explanation for the hope and joy we feel in the presence of a miracle. That's Divine agency for sure!

In the case of our Christmas Star, if nothing else, the miracle is in reminding us that there could've actually been what looked a super-bright star in the evening sky leading the way to Jesus's birthplace. Scientists have no way of knowing if this astronomical event was the same star visible to the shepherds and magi, but we now know it's plausible. That's a miracle!

One scientist, describing how moving it can be to witness such a rare event, said:

For those of us who enjoy finding our place in the universe by staring into the sky...go look. And just kind of appreciate the precise and very elegant clockwork of the universe that made this possible.

That reflects what the author of Luke's gospel was getting at with these words: "Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart." Even the shepherds react to the birth of the Christ-child in miraculous ways: "When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed."

The other important miracle is that the Messiah is born among the lowly. From our current context, where not everyone is welcomed into this country, or into certain communities, or even into some churches, we might consider all the reasons Mary and Joseph didn't stay at an inn.

What we repeat is that there was no room, but think about what Mary and Joseph must have gone through to end up in a stable. They probably didn't look like they could afford to stay at an inn; maybe they were dirty and stinky from the long trip; maybe they didn't resemble the "acceptable" people in that area; maybe no one wanted a pregnant girl giving birth in their inn. There could have been so many reasons why they were unwelcomed.

And, yet, Jesus's birth became the holiest of nights. The Christmas miracle for Mary and Joseph was that they found shelter, and new friends who helped them. And because they were willing to make themselves available to God's miracle, all the others—all of us—were invited into the birth of Emmanuel—God among us.

That is the miracle that the Christmas Star represents to us—that all can see the Good News of God's love incarnating in the form of the Christ-child. Not only can we all see it, we participate in it. We celebrate the Christ-child's birth, rejoicing in the miracle that God is among us. Not somewhere up there, but right here!

Tonight's passage from Titus reminds us that these miracles don't happen because we will them, but we get to participate in them because of God's will. The passage states: "When the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared...[this wasn't] because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to God's mercy...[which was] poured out on us richly."

What a beautiful image—God's mercy is "poured out on us richly." And it doesn't stop there. The passage continues that God's mercy is "poured out on us richly," so that "we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life."

The real Christmas miracle is that God wants to be with us, to hold us close even though we hear things wrong, and get the words mixed-up, and make decisions that are self-centered, and lose sight of the miracles that are happening among us; but, still, God is faithful.

So, some of you might live to see the Christmas Star again in 2080, but then Jupiter and Saturn won't align like this again until the 2400s! And, yet, there will be other miracles. So many

miracles we won't be able to count them all. May each of you—in the depth of your heart and soul—experience the Good News of God's love this season. Merry Christmas, everyone!

Isaiah 62:6-12

Upon your walls, O Jerusalem, I have posted sentinels; all day and all night they shall never be silent. You who remind the LORD, take no rest, and give him no rest until he establishes Jerusalem and makes it renowned throughout the earth. The LORD has sworn by his right hand and by his mighty arm: I will not again give your grain to be food for your enemies, and foreigners shall not drink the wine for which you have labored; but those who garner it shall eat it and praise the LORD, and those who gather it shall drink it in my holy courts.

Go through, go through the gates, prepare the way for the people; build up, build up the highway, clear it of stones, lift up an ensign over the peoples. The LORD has proclaimed to the end of the earth: Say to daughter Zion, "See, your salvation comes; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him." They shall be called, "The Holy People, The Redeemed of the LORD"; and you shall be called, "Sought Out, A City Not Forsaken."

Psalm 97

- 1 The LORD is King; let the earth rejoice; *
let the multitude of the isles be glad.
- 2 Clouds and darkness are round about him, *
righteousness and justice are the foundations of his throne.
- 3 A fire goes before him *
and burns up his enemies on every side.
- 4 His lightnings light up the world; *
the earth sees it and is afraid.
- 5 The mountains melt like wax at the presence of the LORD, *
at the presence of the Lord of the whole earth.
- 6 The heavens declare his righteousness, *
and all the peoples see his glory.
- 7 Confounded be all who worship carved images
and delight in false gods! *
Bow down before him, all you gods.
- 8 Zion hears and is glad, and the cities of Judah rejoice, *
because of your judgments, O LORD.
- 9 For you are the LORD,
most high over all the earth; *
you are exalted far above all gods.
- 10 The LORD loves those who hate evil;
he preserves the lives of his saints
and delivers them from the hand of the wicked.
- 11 Light has sprung up for the righteous, *
and joyful gladness for those who are truehearted.

12 Rejoice in the LORD, you righteous, *
and give thanks to his holy Name.

Titus 3:4-7

When the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy, through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit. This Spirit he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.

Luke 2:(1-7) 8-20

[In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.]

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see-- I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." So, they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.