

Advent 4, December 20, 2009
Church of the Reformation—Lutheran, Affton, MO
Text: Luke 1:39—45

Miracle on Mackenzie Road

How many Christmas specials, movies, and shows have you watched this Christmas season?

Don't worry, this is no intervention or twelve-step program to get you to wake up and finish your Christmas shopping. "It's a Wonderful Life," "Miracle on 34th Street," and those ever new classics, "Home Alone," and "Home Alone 2". There's always "Santa Clause" series, the Simpsons, the Charlie Brown Christmas shows, and the like. Only in America can you get a DVD of a fire in a fireplace to provide ambiance for Christmas gatherings, but little warmth. The unspoken premise behind almost all of these shows is that angels earning their wings, miracles of belief in Santa Claus, or a third-grader defending the family home—while all are fictional, all are believable, more believable than the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Our Advent journey is almost over now; we're but a few days and steps away from the manger. There's a restless silence in the fields of Bethlehem as we anticipate the sudden angelic choral outburst of "Gloria in Excelsis Deo" at the news that in the town of David a child is born who brings salvation to the world. Over Bethlehem a star marks the place where Jesus Christ is born. "What child is this, who, laid to rest, on Mary's lap is sleeping?" Breaking on us from eternity comes God's reply, **"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God....And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us."** It really does seem incredible, unbelievable.

Physician Saint Luke provides the details of the Christmas Gospel. It is Dr. Luke, the sometimes gynecologist, who tells us of the aged Elizabeth and Zechariah, soon to become the parents of John the Baptizer. Isn't that incredible? The sometimes obstetrician Dr. Luke tells us of a maiden in the town of Nazareth to whom an angel promises an infant son without a human father. Isn't that incredible? It is Dr. Luke, the sometimes geriatrician, who becomes so senile that he sees things in the sky and hears this message: **"Unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord."** Isn't that incredible? The sometimes psychiatrist, Dr. Luke, tells us that a Nazarene carpenter was getting messages in dreams that his fiancé would have a child and they would name Him Jesus. Isn't that incredible?

We can tolerate the fanciful as long as we remember that it's only fancy. We can speak credal words, such as **"conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary,"** as long as we consider them cultic overstatements of the truth. But what if one day we are stopped short and confronted with the question, "What if they are true?" Might we choke on them? What if some Christmas we are stopped by the angelic sermon **"Unto you is born...a Savior"**? Is it true? Is it true that a world that doesn't look saved *is* saved? Is it true that in a world where sin enslaves, freedom is possible? Is it true that life that ever walks the valley of the shadow can know victory over death and everything that brings it on?

You see: the miracle of Christmas has nothing to do with angel wings, belief in Santa Claus, or elementary home defense plans. The miracle of Christmas is the miracle of faith. The most incredible of all Dr. Luke's details is that there were those believed all these incredible details, those who still believe these things. And isn't that incredible? Isn't that what's behind the words

of Elizabeth to Mary? **“Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord.”**

Mary went to the Judean home of Zechariah to visit his wife, Elizabeth, a relative of Mary.

Elizabeth was already in the sixth month of her pregnancy. Known as the Visitation, this event follows the Annunciation when Gabriel came to Mary at her Nazarene home and told her that she had found favor with the Lord, that she would bear a son, and that His name would be called Jesus, the Son of the Most High. Gabriel also told Mary about Elizabeth’s great blessing, that she who had been barren and was no along in years had conceived and was already in the sixth month of her pregnancy. And in Mary’s response is the miracle of faith, the miracle of Christ: **“Behold I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.”** Isn’t that incredible?

Yet, at Christmas, there are three miracles, as Martin Luther noted in one of his sermons—the one that in the child of Mary God and man are joined, the second that a mother should remain a virgin, and the third, the most amazing of all, that Mary actually believed this mystery was to be accomplished in her womb. Luther emphasizes: **“The Virgin birth is a mere trifle for God; that God should become man is a greater miracle; but most amazing of all is that this maiden should find the angel’s message credible and that the Christ he promised would be her Son.”** She found it credible enough to act on—going with haste across Samaria from Galilee to Judea to share not only her joy but Elizabeth’s as well.

Of the Gospel writers, Dr. Luke was a Gentile, whose major accent that our Lord was born for all the world, that He had come with all-embracing grace as our Redeemer, that He included in His

love all people—people who had come from every station, every walk of life, even those gathered here on Mackenzie Road. Saint Luke wants us to know that this Jesus is our Lord, our Savior full of grace for us. And that's the fact when need to get pinned down before we hear the Christmas Gospel this coming Thursday and Friday. As Luther said, **“This is for us the hardest point, not so much to believe that Jesus is the son of the Virgin and God Himself, as to believe that this Son of God is ours.”** This is the miracle of Christmas that even when burdens of guilt and disappointment threaten to destroy us, even in affliction, even in the darkest moments when a multitude of doubts assail us, that even then we can believe that Jesus Christ who came to be our brother came to be OUR brother.

Isn't that incredible? Like many, our own agnostic streak would say, “Yes, it is.” Zechariah, Elizabeth's husband, demanded that the angel give a sign—and he was left speechless until the birth of his son. John the Baptizer in prison thought Jesus looked like anything but the Messiah. **“Are You the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?”** Disciple Thomas excuses his absence with “Unless I see in His hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into His side, I will never believe.” And what would you and I like to say? **Unless** He fits my plans and acts according to my wishes, **unless** He brings my loved one safely home, **unless** He intervenes in our national scene to bring some sense to the government, **unless** He heals this sickness, **unless** I see Him act, I will not believe. But this is the miracle of Christmas, **“Behold I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.”** And **“Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord.”** And how about us? **“Your sins are forgiven you.”** **“O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire.”** Isn't that incredible?

Indeed, it is incredible. Yet, incredible as it may be, it's true. This is the fact of faith—a fact that has no proof but faith. The world may not look saved and we may not look saved; but is it how we look or is it how Jesus looks? Does Jesus look like a Savior confined in isolation of the stable of a crowded hotel? Does Jesus look like a Savior, or a King or Lord—this man who wears a crown of thorns, whose scepter is a cross of crucifixion? Isn't that incredible, not to mention a little mixed up? Can't we just forget it and enjoy our Christmas with its lights, gifts, and food? Wouldn't it be better if we had it this way than to have it that way? Well, tell me, would it? How long does your Christmas joy endure? How long do your Christmas lights burn on before they are burned out? How long does your Christmas food make you content until you hunger once again? The frills and decorations we have designed to take the “disappointment” out of Christmas, aren't they disappointing, too?

Here the Word again: **“Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord.”** That's where the sheer joy of the Christmas Gospel is, and that's the miracle—the blessing that attends our faith, the joy that springs from faith even in the midst of sorrow heavy with tears, the joy of being able to believe, able to respond, much as Pastor Paul Gerhardt when he wrote:

Thou Christian heart, whoe'er thou art,
Be of good cheer and let no sorrow move thee!
For God's own Child, in mercy mild, joins thee to Him;
How greatly God must love thee!

So let the truth be known: the Gospel is incredible. But let this truth be known as well: we have listened to the voices who were credible, and we have found that the realities of life were far too

harsh to be dispelled by them, far too sticky to be solved by them. Their footprints can be found all over this disturbed and tangled world, and you can follow them to certain failure—these disturbed and tangled people! But the Gospel is incredible. And believing it, you too, can be incredible, enjoy a blessing that's incredible, and be a blessing in your world that is incredible. That's the miracle of Christmas, the miracle on Mackenzie Road.

Henry V. Gerike