
Sermon by Rev Paul Christopherson
Matt 1:18-25, Advent IV

December 22, 2019
St Andrew's, Kent

"An angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid."

Science today can show that zillions of light years away, stars burn up, collapse in supernova explosions, and form enormous black holes in space. Sometimes these black holes collide with each other, producing pits of infinitely deep darkness, and giving up more energy than all the stars in the observable universe.

That is science, and we believe it is so. It just is. But we also believe there is another whole dimension to the universe, besides stars exploding and collapsing into black holes. Another aspect to things, that explains why caregivers look after the elderly and the disabled and the mentally retarded, and why they will be first in line at the gates of heaven; an aspect that explains why strangers smile at each other.

I believe in miracles. I just do. They come from that other dimension, and they are real. They are not allegories. They happen. To believe in our Lord Jesus Christ is to believe in his resurrection, the biggest miracle of all.

My wife Dede and I were married in 2012. By that time, both our sets of parents had long since passed. They never met or even heard of each other. But if there is one thing Dede and I know, it is this. Her parents and my parents are now enjoying each other and laughing together. They are best friends. We are as sure of this as we are of anything.

There is another reality out there beyond the one we live in day to day. We know this from our dreams, which show us in vivid, sometimes terrifying, detail that there is so much more going on, so much that is hidden from us, so much more insight that we are capable of.

Miracles are not explainable; that is what makes them miracles. For one thing, our Lord did too many for them all to be explained or rationalized; it would just be too much work. There are the countless healings Jesus did--the blind, the paralytic, the crippled, the lepers.

The feeding of the five thousand in all four gospels, and the miraculous catch of fish in Luke. Then there are the miracles in John's gospel, which he calls signs. Like the times he overrules nature by turning water to wine, or stilling the storm, or raising Lazarus from the dead.

Someone smart once said, a miracle is that unexpected event that pierces our despair to reveal God's love. In today's gospel, there is Matthew's account of the miracle of the Nativity.

We need a good miracle today, to pierce our despair. We live in dark times, and I don't mean the winter solstice. Inequality is an appalling national scandal that is getting worse by the day, On that subject, the most recent news is that the food stamp program will be cutting millions of people off. Meanwhile, for those of us attending next Sunday's international polo matches in Palm Beach, helicopter parking will be available.

We continue to sacrifice tens of Americans every day on the altar of the gun lobby. Humanity itself is headed toward climate catastrophes, including food shortages and extreme weather events endangering billions of lives. Birds in Australia, instead of flying, now gather on the ground under the shade of trees, gasping for air in the heat.

Our democracy has become a contradiction of itself. It is ruled by interests not answerable to the people, producing a lot of justifiable anger and paranoia. The defining characteristic of our national life today is a pervasive sense of wrongness. Therapists report seeing an alarming degree of anxiety, depression, despair, and rage in their patients.

Also, grief. We miss those qualities of love and honesty and decency and justice and compassion and humility and truth and grace and dignity, that are now gone. It is hard to see how we might all come to our senses. If this isn't grief, it will do 'til the real thing gets here!

Maybe we grieve more personally. We have lost a loved one. Or we ourselves have received bad news of one sort or another, maybe financial, or we have a health condition that torments us. Or there is someone we are at odds with, and we know we should not be, but reconciling with him or her seems unlikely.

This morning, we read Matthew's account of the birth of our Lord. On Christmas, we get Luke's account. The point of both versions is that a miracle happened that night long ago, and that miracle means we are set free. Our grief is real, but it has been redeemed. As the lesson says, "God is with us."

The miracle we celebrate is not just the virgin birth. Christmas is not a pretty story that we indulge once a year and sing carols about. It is not sentimental; it is shattering. It should break in on us like a brick through a window.

The miracle is that God sent his only Son to live and die as one of us, the greatest sign of all of God's love for us. Jesus was God made flesh; we call it the Incarnation. That is, he was God, and he came to live among us, not as a superbeing in disguise, but truly as one of us.

Jesus experienced all of it, everything we do, plus he was crucified. That is how much God loves us, and he proved it by sending us his Son to be born of a virgin. That is what we celebrate with all the gifts and caroling and trees and parties. That is why we are joyful at Christmas. "The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight."

This morning, an angel of the Lord says to Joseph, "do not be afraid." The gospels are full of people being afraid; it happens over and over. And in every case, what happens? An angel shows up, or our Lord appears, and says, "Do not be afraid," or, "Fear not." So, a big part of the gospels is about not being afraid.

So, how in the world do we not be afraid? A good friend who is a bishop says we might look around us and see signs of God's love. People all the time doing acts of love and compassion and charity and justice and peace and reconciliation. We can get encouragement, maybe inspiration, from witnessing those acts.

I can also commend one of the so-called minor prophets of the O.T., (the book is just three chapters), namely, Zephaniah. Other prophets are pretty gloom and doom; Zephaniah is more optimistic. He is no fool; he is not naive. He knows that Jerusalem is corrupt--he calls it a "soiled, defiled, oppressing city".

But his last seven verses are a song of joy. "Sing aloud; shout! Rejoice and exult with all your heart. The king of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst; you shall fear disaster no more. Do not fear. The Lord, your God, is in your midst; he will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love; he will exult over you with loud singing as on a day of festival."

We know not the hour or the day, but we know that Christ will come again, a second time, and He will restore justice. He will destroy evil and suffering in all its forms. He will put everything right for all time. In the meantime, He is at work in the world, and He wants us to join Him in that work, so that when that great day comes we will be ready.