

"A TIME FOR MIRACLES"

A Sermon By

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INTRODUCTION

Here's a story that came across the Internet recently, and whether it's true or not is not known. It's a report from the Center for Strategic and International Studies dealing with organized global crime. According to this report, FBI agents were conducting a raid of a psychiatric hospital in San Diego that was under investigation for medical insurance fraud. After many hours of reviewing medical records, these agents had worked up quite an appetite. The agent in charge put a call through to a nearby pizza parlor with delivery service to order a quick meal for his colleagues. The following telephone conversation took place and was recorded by the FBI because they were taping all conversations at this psychiatric hospital.

Agent: Hello....I'd like to order 19 large pizzas and 67 cans of soda.

Pizza Man: And where would you like to have them delivered?

Agent: We're over here at the psychiatric hospital.

Pizza Man: The psychiatric hospital?

Agent: Yes...that's right. I'm an FBI agent.

Pizza Man: You're an FBI agent?

Agent: Yes. That's correct. Just about everybody here is...

Pizza Man: And you're at the psychiatric hospital?

Agent: That's correct. And make sure you don't go through the front doors. We have them locked. You'll have to go around to the back to the service entrance to deliver the pizzas.

Pizza Man: And you say you're all FBI agents?

Agent: That's right. How soon can you have them here...19 pizzas and 67 sodas?

Pizza Man: And everyone at the hospital is an FBI agent?

Agent: That's right and we've been here all day and we're starving. Can you speed it up?

Pizza Man: How are you going to pay for all this?

Agent: I have my checkbook right here.

Pizza Man: And you're all FBI agents?

Agent: That's right. Everyone here is an FBI agent. Can you remember to bring the pizzas around to the service entrance at the rear. We have the front doors locked.

Pizza Man: I don't think so....click. BZZZ..

DEVELOPMENT

I was thinking....that the feeling that the Pizza Man must have had as he participated in that conversation must have been something like a teenager whose name was Mary must have felt that first Christmas. An agent of the Lord...an angel whose name was Gabriel, came to her and said:

"GREETINGS, favored one! The Lord is with you!"

Was it a dream? Was she hallucinating? How could she be sure? This agent of the Lord continued....

"Do not be afraid, Mary....for you have found favor with God. And now you will conceive in your womb and bear a Son, and you will name Him, JESUS. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord will give to Him the throne of His ancestor, David. He will reign over the House of Jacob forever, and of His Kingdom there shall be no end!"

This bewildered teenage girl named Mary said to this agent of the Lord,

"How can this be....since I am a virgin?" The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you...therefore, the child to be born will be holy. He will be called the Son of God."

Mary's answer was,

"Here am I, the servant of the Lord,
Let it be with me according to Your
word."

WOW! What a story. What a miracle! Really...beautiful. I...I don't know...

THE REAL MIRACLE

I don't know what it is in the Christmas story that you find to be the most impressive thing. Perhaps...for you it is the birth of Christ to a virgin. To be sure, that's impressive, but since God only has to speak to create life, that seems to me to be only a minor part of the Christmas story. Or, perhaps what impresses you the most is that star shining in the East that attracted the Wise Men....and which has been attracting the "wise" of every generation since then....or perhaps it's the account of those angels singing for the shepherds on the hills outside Bethlehem. All of these have their place, of course.

But to me, the real miracle of Christmas is the outpouring of love that this Season of the year always produces. Something seems to happen to people when they are exposed to this story of the child in Bethlehem's manger. Why historians have told us that guns have fallen silent on Christmas Day on the midst of fierce battles and that people whose hearts are cold and indifferent toward the poor and the downcast suddenly feel the urge to drop some money into a Salvation Army kettle. And even those people who have ignored Christ all year long somehow find their way to a Christmas Eve service where their hearts are caressed by faith and music and touched significantly. Something happens to us at Christmas. Something magical. Something miraculous. It is a time for miracles and friend, as I've said before, you're not a realist if you don't believe in miracles.

The year was 1949 and Elizabeth and her husband, Herman, who ran an appliance store that sold just about everything a person could possibly want for their home were closing up the store on Christmas Eve. It had been a good Christmas season for them and even the few toys they sold had been cleaned out. She was uneasy about closing up and going home because one package on the shelf had not been picked up by the buyer. Perhaps it wasn't anything important...then again, it might have been a toy for a child. She couldn't remember. They stayed an extra hour waiting...and then decided to close up and head home. The day was over.

Dr. Boyd Burkhardt, a plastic surgeon, was asked by his nurse and administrator, Lu Banks, if he would be willing to fix an eight year old boy's ears for nothing. Dr. Burkhardt responded, "Why sure...."

"That's good" replied Lu Banks...."Because I've got Channel 13 on the line....hold on while I get them."

Eight year old, Mark, even got to ride in a limousine to the operation and his mother, Abigail, was astounded by the response to Mark's letter to Santa Claus, astounded by the postal workers who responded and also by the response of the plastic surgeon, Dr. Burkhardt. She said, "It was a God-send...for things like that never happen to us!"

But it was Christmas. And Christmas is a time for miracles and for the sharing of stories like this. Maybe such stories don't impress you or touch your heart, but every now and then I find myself moved by them...and this, after all, is what Christmas is all about. God has reached into space and into time to show us the meaning of love. And even today, two thousand years later, the ripples of love first born in Bethlehem's manger, still radiate out into the world.

ONE MORE STORY

Under a cultural-exchange program, Alan Abramsky, and his family down in Roanoke, Texas, were hosts to a Rabbi from Russia at Christmas time several years ago. They decided to introduce him to a culinary treat that was probably not available in his country and so they took him to their favorite Chinese restaurant. While eating, the Rabbi spoke excitedly about the wonders of North America in comparison to the bleak conditions in his homeland. When they were through eating, the waiter brought the check and presented each of them with a small brass Christmas-tree ornament as a seasonal gift and a reminder of the meal in that restaurant.

They all laughed when Abramsky's father pointed out that the ornaments were stamped in small letters, "MADE IN INDIA". But the laughter subsided when they saw that the Rabbi was quietly crying. Concerned, Abramsky's father asked the Rabbi if he was offended because he had been given a gift for a Christian holiday. He smiled and shook his head and said,

"NYET....no....I was shedding tears of joy to be in a wonderful country in which a Buddhist gives a Jew a Christmas gift made by a person in India, probably a Hindu".

A time of miracles. A time for sharing some stories. A time for us to be grateful for some miracles of sharing that take place right here in our own city...our own neighborhood...of people of different backgrounds, different faiths coming together in love and understanding. Occasionally, I'll hear someone say, "OH...wouldn't it be great if only it could be Christmas all year long!" Surprise. I believe that was God's intent and that is why God invaded our planet and gave us the gift of His Son....and there is only one thing that stands in the way of celebrating Christmas all year long - you and I!

If you and I lived the way Christ intended for us to live...if we lived out on a daily basis the love and the caring and the charity that are part and parcel of this special season, we'd have Christmas all year long and the world would be better for it.

The world "out there" is still waiting for the people of God to "live out" what - in our better moments - we say we believe....yes, that Christ is the HOPE of our world and that living the Christ-like life...a life of love and sacrifice and of self-giving....is the only way that humanity can save itself or be saved.

The point is this: ~~what~~ when Christmas lives in our hearts, then we will have at least made a bit of a beginning to spreading the spirit of this season to the world....could it happen? Could it ever really happen. If you believe in miracles, it will....indeed, it's a CINCH. So, take that thought along with you today as you prepare to depart. It is a time for miracles and those miracles ~~do~~ happen....and lives get changed in the process and when lives get changed, the world is changed.

PRAYER

Make us sensitive to Your nearness and to Your presence in these moments on this Sunday as we draw near to Christmas. Let the hope, the peace...the joy and love of this season work in our hearts. Wrestle with us in our hearts where doubt and despair, where selfishness and self-centeredness seem to be in control. And now as the winds of faith slowly brush across the face of this earth, may those same whispers of faith caress our hearts and make us believers once again...in the miracle of love. In the spirit of the Christ Child, we now ~~pray~~. Amen.