

"A TIME FOR MIRACLES"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
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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 just 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!

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 next day...Christmas Day....Elizabeth couldn't seem to get into the Christmas spirit. She felt restless and did some cleaning around the house and then strangely enough, she began to feel a tug and an urge to go back downtown to their store....it was around noon on Christmas Day. She and Herman had never before in all the years opened their store on Christmas Day. The weather outside was a freezing mix of snow and sleet, but still Elizabeth felt drawn to go to the store. By this time it was early afternoon and she told Herman she was going to get the car and go downtown. Her husband wasn't at all encouraging and suggested she walk rather than take the car.

As she slid along the snowy sidewalks to their store, her numb body mocked the urgent sensation she had about that day, but nearing the store she noticed two small boys - one about six and the other about nine - camped out in front of their store and they got excited when Elizabeth came up to the door and got her key out to open the door. They were two little African-American boys and they were almost frozen. The six year old was crying, but the tears stopped when she spoke to him. She scolded them for being out in the cold and they told her they had been waiting and hoping she would come. The nine year old explained that his younger brother hadn't gotten anything for Christmas and so they had come there to get the little six year old, Jimmy, some skates. He pulled out three dollars and put them in her hand and sadly, Elizabeth explained they had sold all their toys and there were no skates, but as she glanced around the store, her eyes fell on the package left on the shelf from the night before. She walked over to it and ripped off the wrapping and lo and behold - she found a pair of child's skates in the box. Jimmy reached for them and tried them on and they fit! They fit him perfectly. And when the boys tried to pay her for the skates, she told them to use their three dollars for a couple of pairs of good gloves for their frozen hands. The boys grinned in amazement at this gift of free skates.

But there's more....after the boys got warm and Elizabeth was closing up the store and putting out the lights, she remarked to the boys how lucky they had been not to have frozen out there in the cold and she asked them, "How did you know I would be coming to the store...on Christmas Day?" The nine year old replied,

"I knew you would come....I asked Jesus to send you."

And with that Elizabeth went back home...slipping and sliding on the sidewalks of her town....feeling much more in the spirit of Christmas.

A TIME FOR MIRACLES AND A SEASON FOR SHARING STORIES

This is the season of miracles and it's also the season for some pretty heartwarming stories. Eight year old, Mark Amador's lett to Santa laid it on the line. "My MOM needs help....bad!" His tale of woe ran from his mother's unemployment to selling almost everything to get a bit of food for the family. Wrote Mark to Santa,

"I want clothes and food for us to last three months. I'm hoping that my Mom will have a job by then....we need help".

Tucson, Arizona, postal workers were jarred with his story and came up with a deluge of presents, from clothing and toys to food for Mark and his two older brothers and their mother, Abigail. But there's more to come. Mark confided to Santa that he tried to be good at school, but it was hard for his classmates often ridiculed his ears which stuck out at right angles.

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 we say we believe...in our better moments.....that Christ is the hope of our world, and that living the Christlike life...the life of love and sacrifice and of self-giving....is the only way that humanity can save itself or be saved.

When Christmas lives in our hearts, then we will have at least made a bit of beginning to spreading the spirit of Christmas to the world, and not just at one time of the year....but all year long. Could it happen? Could it ever really happen? Friend, if you believe in miracles, it will...indeed, it's a cinch. Take that thought with you as you depart. It is a time for miracles and ~~these miracles~~ miracles do happen.....and lives get changed and when lives are changed, the world is changed.

PRAYER

Make us sensitive to Your nearness and to Your presence on this Sunday as we approach Christmas and the birth of the child. Let the hope, the peace, the joy and the love of this season work in our hearts. As the winds of faith sweep once again across our world, may it touch our hearts and caress our lives....that we may be led to keep the spirit of these days always....in His name we pray. Amen.

ADVENT SUNDAY / ADVENT BANNER AND WREATH

ADVENT SUNDAY

Today is ADVENT SUNDAY which marks the beginning of a new church year. Advent Sunday ushers in the Christmas Season. I always like to think that from here on it's OK for us to sing Christmas carols here in church. It's OK to start sending out Christmas cards....and to do our Christmas shopping.

Commercially speaking...Christmas time now starts before Thanksgiving. A couple of weeks ago two ladies were looking in a window of one of our fancy NYC stores and saw a beautiful display of the manger scene at Bethlehem.

"Look at that church" one of them said. "Why even the Church is trying to horn in on Christmas...."

Boys and girls...the reason for this season has everything to do with Jesus and His birth. I think you know that!

SPECIAL

Advent Sunday is special for us and that's why the children are down here with us....there going to help us light the candles on the Advent wreath from now up through the Sunday before Christmas.

We have the first of our beautiful Advent banners hanging over here on the wall.....our HOPE BANNER...reminding us that Jesus always brings hope and light into a life...into a situation.....without that hope and without that light which He brings, we'd be in trouble! HOPE give us confidence in the future.

WREATH

Now we're going to light the first candle on our wreath...and [redacted] is going to do that for us. And then one of the young men [redacted] in my confirmation class - NICHOLAS ROUSA - is going to lead us all in prayer.

"We pause in these moments to thank You, O God, for the light that came into our world long ago in the birth of the baby, Jesus....Your Son....and we think, too, of the HOPE that His spirit always brings into a life....."

We thank YOU for the red banner on the wall of our church that reminds us that HE continues to be the HOPE of our world. And for the touches of red and green that now begin to remind us that Christmas is coming, we thank YOU. We thank YOU for our homes and for our loved ones that give us HOPE and LIGHT and confidence in the future of our world. In the name of Jesus, we pray." Amen.

CAROL: 235 "Rock-A-Bye, My Dear Little Boy"

ANNOUNCEMENTS: Sunday, November 30, 1997

GREETING / VISITORS

- A. A word of greeting to the visitors....DELIGHTED to have you here with us....hope we shall have the opportunity...BE FREE in the sharing....FILL OUT. SIGN ONE....COME, WORSHIP...COME, WORK with us.
- B. Doing the Lord's work" at this busy corner....since 1837. Fourth Building...ROOTS are deep....in the soil, concrete, I should say! Methodist Church with AN INTERNATIONAL, INTERRACIAL, INTER-DENOMINATIONAL flavor....Minister here in the name of Christ and it is in HIS LOVING...
- C. MEMBERS: wear name tags. Go out of your way to welcome a new friend. Bend over, greet a child...grasp the little hand. Remember the child's name...

PARISH CONCERNS

- A. A few announcements to high-light and lift up....next Sunday NEW MEMBERS will be received. Persons interested in strengthening a tie with us should be in touch with me...today....be glad to sit down with you at the end of the coffee hour....with any of you...review the steps that lead to membership in our church. We have about 15 persons who have expressed interest...there may be others.
- B. Our 1998 Financial Canvass continues with pledge cards still being received. To date, we have received pledges totalling \$ toward our goal of 250 pledges and \$ 190,000....still have a ways to go to reach that goal.....if you have not yet responded with a pledge commitment, may we encourage you to do so soon....today, if possible. Follow-up work begins on Monday, tomorrow....further calls, letters....complete the task by mid-December.
- C. The TREE LIGHTING and COMMUNITY CAROL SING takes place next Sunday afternoon....91st and 92nd and Park Avenue...to be followed by a HOT CHILLI meal here.....note the flyer....make plans to come..... See Gail Bradshaw at the coffee hour....

OFFERING

- A. Our thanks for those who have responded with a Thanksgiving Gift. Resting in the after-glow of Thanksgiving...may God touch all of our hearts with gratitude for our blessings....remembering, "It is more blessed to give than it is to receive". In this spirit...