

A MIRACLE GREATER THAN THE ONE ON 34TH STREET

MATTHEW 1:18-25

This morning we begin yet another Christmas season. I decided to do something a little different for my messages this Advent season – the four Sundays leading up to Christmas Day. Part of what makes this time of year unique is the return of favorite, classic movies that are usually only shown this month. Most of us have grown up with these movies; they’ve become part of our cultural heritage. They add to the nostalgia of the Christmas experience. I’ve selected four well known, classic Christmas movies to illustrate some of the eternal, timeless themes surrounding Jesus’ birth. Each week we’ll watch a few brief clips from these four movies that underline truths found in God’s Word. There’s so much in our culture that is godless and, frankly, anti-Christian. Sadly, most movies today only illustrate the enormous differences between biblical values and what our larger culture seems to value. But every now and then, truth can emerge in even the unlikeliest of places! When it does, let’s use it to support and illustrate what God has already said and done.

Back in 1947, the movie, “Miracle on 34th Street”, was made. It’s become a classic Christmas movie shown every year. In the movie, a little girl named Susan has been taught by her mother to believe only in things that are concrete and reasonable. Enter a charming, old man with white hair and flowing beard by the name of Kris Kringle who believes himself to be the real Santa Claus. He ends up in court because the city of New York wants to send him off to an insane asylum for believing himself to be Santa Claus. An aspiring young attorney named Fred, who is also the new boyfriend of Susan’s mother, decides to defend Kris Kringle. Not knowing any other way to defend Mr. Kringle, Fred tells the court that he’s going to prove that this man really is Santa Claus. By the way, I think there’s some truth to the observation that there are four stages in the life of every man. First, you believe in Santa Claus. Second, you don’t believe in Santa. Third, you are Santa Claus. Finally, you start looking like Santa Claus! Be that as it may, let’s watch this scene from the movie just now.

Here’s one reason I like this movie. It does a great job of underlining the absolute skepticism most people have toward anything that’s miraculous. Be it Santa Claus or be it the story of Jesus’ birth, the truth is that most human beings don’t like to believe in anything that doesn’t fit into what they consider rational and possible. The movie reminds us – in a round about sort of way – that Christmas is really all about a miracle from first to last. So, here’s a first point to ponder:

THE FOUNDATION OF CHRISTMAS IS A MIRACLE.

Most of us have gotten so used to hearing about the birth of Jesus year after year, that the sheer impossibility of it all from a human point of view gets lost on us. The prosecutor in the movie says, “Anyone who thinks he is Santa Claus is not sane!” We’d all agree. But what if a human being claimed He was God?

Jesus claimed He was and is God. It all comes down to a miracle that Christians refer to as the Incarnation. God became a human being. And the Incarnation is possible only because of another miracle – what Christians call the virgin birth. When you read the New Testament, you discover that Jesus performed many miracles. He healed the sick, calmed raging storms and raised the dead. Following His death on the cross, Jesus rose from the grave. Not only is the foundation of Christmas a miracle, but the foundation of Christianity itself is based on miracle after miracle after miracle. That's one reason why some people find it very hard to believe in Jesus. They constantly want to strip away everything miraculous about Jesus. They want to reduce Him to being a good man, a great teacher or an inspiring prophet. But the simple fact is that the real Jesus doesn't make any sense without the miraculous. Christmas doesn't make any sense without the miraculous. Let's read about and be amazed at this miracle again.

You can't dismiss this miracle as a fable or a myth and call yourself a Christian. Why not? You can't build a biblical faith without the Incarnation and the virgin birth of Jesus. They're foundational. Without them the structure of your faith will fall apart. The Bible leaves no room for alternative opinions. The passage we just read explicitly described Mary, the mother of Jesus, as a virgin. The Bible bends over backwards to tell us that neither Joseph nor any other man was responsible for Mary's pregnancy. How might we describe this miracle? God is a Trinity of three Persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. He is Three in One. The Second Person of the Trinity – the Son of God – took upon Himself a human nature and a human body at a particular point in this world's time and history. He didn't stop being God at that point in time nor was He somehow less than God when He became Jesus. The Son of God just started to be a human being as well. He wasn't God minus some element of "Godness." Instead, being fully God, He started to be fully human, too. The Bible says, "In the beginning was the one who is called the Word. The Word was with God and was truly God.... The Word became a human being and lived here with us...." (John 1:1,14 CEV)

Matthew tells us that the Holy Spirit enabled Mary to become pregnant. That doesn't mean that the Holy Spirit somehow had sex with Mary. God transcends gender. He's neither male nor female. God doesn't need to have sex to create life. He speaks and life springs out of nothing. The Holy Spirit somehow implanted the life of the Son of God into the uterus of a teenage woman named Mary some 2000 years ago. - that speck of divinity provided by the Holy Spirit was joined to a speck of living, human tissue provided by Mary. It was and is a miracle – a much greater miracle than anything to do with Santa Claus. But precisely because it is a miracle, many people reject it.

Why is believing in this miracle so important? First, the virgin birth of Jesus is essential if Jesus was and is truly God. You can't make someone God. You can't turn a mere human being into God. Only God can be God. He's without beginning or end. He's eternal. Jesus didn't start out as an ordinary man who

then suddenly became or even gradually evolved into being God at some point in time. At the moment of His conception in Mary's womb, Jesus was truly one of a kind. He was and is the only Being in the universe that has a fully developed God nature and a fully developed human nature. No, he's not half God and half human. He is both human and divine fully and completely.

Here's a second reason why believing this miracle is important. Jesus had to be both fully God and fully human in order to save us. Why? On the one hand, no mere human being could ever be an adequate mediator between God and us. The reality of our sin is just too great. Also, every human being other than Jesus was and is a sinner. Any other person could only have died for his or her own sins. But God sent God in order to save us from God! On the other hand, by definition God can't die. Only human beings can die. And death was necessary to pay the penalty for your sins and mine. Because Jesus is truly human, He was able to die for all those sins upon the cross and pay our penalty. In the Incarnation, then, we see something truly miraculous, mysterious and marvelous. The Son of God descended from Heaven in such a way that, without leaving Heaven, He willingly entered the uterus of a young, virgin woman. He was born, walked around on this planet, died upon a cross and yet somehow continued to fill the world even as He had done from all eternity. Make no mistake about it; the foundation of Christmas is a miracle. But, secondly...

THE FUNDAMENTALS OF CHRISTMAS ARE BASED ON A MIRACLE.

In the next scene from the movie, "Miracle on 34th Street", Fred – the attorney who is defending Kris Kringle – gets into an argument with Susan's mother about defending Kris and doing what's really important in life. Let's watch....

I like what Fred says in that scene: "Some day you're going to find out that your way of facing this realistic world just doesn't work and when you do, don't overlook those lovely intangibles. You'll discover they're the only things that are worthwhile." Every Christmas season we celebrate what Fred calls "those lovely intangibles." Like what? Peace on Earth. Being kind to others. The joy of giving and receiving gifts. The enduring value of family and friends. The intrinsic worth of all human beings. You might call them Christmas fundamentals. We hear about them every Christmas season and not just in church. But what our culture forgets or ignores is the fact that those fundamentals are based on the God of the Bible and what He has done. All that's good, right and true in this world traces itself ultimately back to a good, right and true God. When you remove God, then all that is good, right and true quickly disappears.

Where does this desire for peace on Earth come from? God. Why should we be kind to one another? Because God is kind and He created us to enjoy both receiving and giving kindness. Why give and receive gifts? Because God's nature is to give and He created us to enjoy both giving and receiving. Why value family and friends? Because God created us for relationships. Where do

we get this idea that human beings have intrinsic worth and value? God says every human being is created in His image. All that is good, right and true traces itself back to a good, right and true God.

But let's take that thought a step further. It's not just God's existence that is the basis for "those lovely intangibles" – those fundamentals of Christmas. It's also based on what God did. Christmas is this yearly reminder that God loves you sacrificially. The Bible says, "God loved the people of this world so much that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who has faith in him will have eternal life and never really die." (John 3:16 CEV) Remember that as you decorate your tree, wrap your gifts, sing your carols, enjoy your feasts and delight in your family this year. Wonder at the truth of it. Enjoy the simplicity of it. Reflect on the awesomeness of it. God loves you... sacrificially.

Without God, Christmas is a colossal waste of time and energy. But Christmas is anything but a waste of time and energy. Christmas is about the miracle of God becoming a human being. Why did He do that again? It was the only way that the sin issue in your life and mine could get resolved. It was the only way your sins could be forgiven. It was the only way we could enter into both a personal and eternal relationship with Him. It's a miracle, isn't it? God loves you and me. You celebrate that miracle every year when you celebrate Christmas. It's one of the fundamentals of Christmas itself. Well, there's a final truth about Christmas that the movie, "Miracle on 34th Street", underlines and illustrates. Here it is...

THE MIRACLE OF CHRISTMAS IS DISCOVERED BY FAITH.

You might remember something Fred, the young attorney, said about faith in the previous scene we watched. Susan's mother repeats it in this next scene where a very skeptical Susan doesn't receive the gift that she most wanted from Santa.

Did you hear that statement about faith in that scene: "Faith is believing in things when common sense tells you not to." There is some truth in that observation. After all, there is much that defies common sense in the Christmas story. God becomes a human being? Jesus is born of a virgin? Angels appear to shepherds? Wise men follow a star? By the same token, there is much that seems to defy common sense in the Christian faith itself. God loves human beings so much He sent His Son to die for us? A dead man named Jesus rises from the dead? People can't earn their way into Heaven by being good? Trusting in what Jesus did for us at the cross and empty tomb opens the door to Heaven for you and me. It just doesn't seem to make a whole lot of sense.

Now, not for a minute do I want to suggest that the Christmas story – or the Christian faith, for that matter – is irrational or doesn't make sense. In fact, once you look at it from all angles, you'll find that it makes the most sense of all! It's based on rock solid facts. Yes, it involves miracles, but they're miraculous facts, nonetheless! The question is how you define "common sense." Unfortunately,

for many people common sense is limited to what they can explain and understand. If they say miracles can't happen, they'll dismiss even the possibility of the miraculous. But if there is a God, such "common sense" doesn't make much sense! If there is a God, isn't it perfectly reasonable to believe that He can and will do things beyond our ability to understand or explain? Biblical faith believes that God and His actions are bigger than my own common sense.

Perhaps that's the very reason why you struggle with Christmas and with Christianity. It just doesn't seem to make a whole lot of sense to you. You find it hard to believe in miracles. Is Susan's mother's definition of faith accurate? Does faith in God believe in Him even when common sense tells you not to? Here's a better way to put it. Faith in God believes that He's bigger than your common sense. Faith believes that He has acted – often in miraculous ways – and that those miracles are as much a fact as the nose on your face!

In the movie, Susan's mother tells her daughter that sometimes faith requires you to continue to believe in something even when outward circumstances seem to contradict the substance of your faith. That's actually a very biblical thought – no, not in relation to Santa Claus, I admit, but in terms of living life before God. Faith always requires you and me to continue to hold on to God even when circumstances might undermine or chip away at that faith. This morning you trust in God. You believe His Son came into this world through the Holy Spirit's miraculous work in a virgin. You believe Jesus died on a cross and was resurrected back to life three days later. You've trusted Jesus as your Savior. But, at the same time, you might well be facing very hard, difficult issues this Christmas season – serious illness, the impending death of a precious loved one, a broken relationship with your spouse or even the possibility of divorce, the loss of a job, a painful conflict with one of your children, uncertainty about the future.

Here again what the Bible says. "For I know the plans I have for you," says the LORD. "They are plans for good and not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope." (Jer. 29:11 NLT) The Bible also says, "And we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them." (Rom. 8:28 NLT) Christmas can be a great time to remember that even though your life may be far from perfect, God is still God. He's still on the throne of the universe. He still loves you. He really did send Jesus into this world to save you. It really will all work out for God's glory and your good in the end. Those are all facts backed up by incredible miracles. The miracle of Christmas points to all of those realities. How much we need to hold on to those truths and live fully for Jesus every day!

For more than forty years, a very shy man went to his neighbor's door each week and slipped a love letter to her underneath. She had refused to speak to him for many years because of a very serious argument they'd had early in their relationship. Finally, after 2,148 love letters with no response of any kind, the man – now 74 years of age – mustered up his remaining courage, went to her

door, but this time knocked on it. When the 74 year old woman living there opened the door, he asked her to marry him. Much to his surprise and delight, she said yes and they got married. Real love is persistent. And no one's love for you and me is more persistent than God's. Every Christmas we're reminded of how much God loves us. And we're reminded of the sheer persistence of that love. Have you ever said yes to the love of God? Have you ever opened your arms and your heart wide to receive it? Perhaps you did, but you doubt God's love today because of life's difficulties. Christmas is the yearly reminder that God loves you and He has performed an awesome miracle to prove it. It's a miracle far greater than what happened on 34th Street or anywhere else!