

Christmas Eve Candlelight Service (December 24, 2021)

“The Miracles of Christmas”

I have long liked the comic strip, Andy Capp. I really shouldn't; Andy is a bounder and a cad, a layabout, a male chauvinist of the worst order, a boozier and carouser. He spends his entire day on the sofa, napping — unless he's running to the pub (or crawling home from there), playing snooker, or football, or rugby, or darts. He has never worked a day in his life, enjoys swindling the British system commonly referred to as “the dole,” and lives off the hard-earned cash of his wife, Flora.

In fact, it is Flora (who earlier in the series was known as Flossie, and is sometimes referred to a Flo, or Florrie) it is Flora who makes the comic strip worthwhile. She will often turn to the reader to make some observation about her life, hard as it is. One strip in particular has stuck with me. Flora looks to see all the bills that are pouring through the letter slot in their front door. She moans to Andy that she doesn't see how they will ever be able to pay all that they owe. Andy says something to the effect that he's not at all worried about that; at which point Flora turns to the reader to proclaim: *“We don't believe in miracles around her. We just rely on them.”*

It is hard for twenty-first century Western civilization folks such as we to believe in miracles. We are so inundated with scientific information — medical breakthroughs here, new discoveries there, new information on this theory, new challenges to that long-held opinion — so vast is the bombardment of information that we find it difficult to hold on to the idea that anything is beyond the explanation of science.

It is true that ancient peoples often mistook a purely natural occurrence and imbued it with magical thinking and labeled that “a miracle.” We don't do that — we find nothing miraculous about radio, or television, computers, or telephones, what in a bygone era would have stunned people as astounding miracles, indeed.

Yet we continue to use the concept of the miracle. Some procedure is

inaugurated at the Cleveland Clinic or University Hospital that had never been tried before and, when it succeeds, it is called a “miracle cure.” A person outlasts the mountain snows that buried him in the avalanche, or the blizzard conditions that stranded her on the highway for days on end, or a puppy is found yapping in the basement after the house collapsed from the fire — and all of these are referred to as “miracles.” Or we’ve just come through a particularly difficult time in our lives and, as we look back in wonder over how we ever got through that, we come to think of the fact that we are not only okay, but fine . . . that’s a miracle.

Maybe Flora speaks for us, as well: *“We don’t believe in miracles around her. We just rely on them.”*

Years ago, in the New Yorker magazine, there appeared a cartoon that showed two scientists standing at a chalkboard on which was scribbled all manner of scientific notations and equations to the left and to the right. Smack dab in the middle were the words, *“Then a miracle happens,”* and one of the scientists (you know they’re scientists because they are wearing lab coats) one of them says, *“I think our theory needs developing.”* We tend to think toward the miraculous when we have run out of explanations. Something out of the ordinary, something that amazes or entralls us, if we cannot easily explain what is happening or why may well get the designation “miracle.”

What is miraculous depends somewhat on how you define “miracle.” Many people, I suspect, tend to see miracles as things that step outside the classifications or understanding of science. Many others simply label as miraculous whatever goes beyond their own experience of understanding. There are miracles we associate with Christmas that cry out for our attention and careful consideration.

There is, first of all, the Virgin Birth. Those two words together are an oxymoron — you cannot have a virgin and have birth in the same person . . . that would take . . . a miracle. Even Mary, in whom this miracle was already taking shape, had to ask *“How can this be?”* How can it be? From everything we understand, it simply cannot be. For there to be a

pregnant woman there has to have been impregnation . . . that involves sexual intercourse, engaging in which is the definition of one who is no longer a virgin.

The Church has long understood that the Virgin birth was made necessary so that a perfect child — one that would not have the stain of inherited sin — could be born, and thus be the substitutionary sacrifice for all human sin. There are those who will claim that Luke and Matthew simply made up the whole idea; but if they were smart enough to invent something like that, I (and I am not alone in this) hold that God is smart enough to actually do something like that. Of course it would be easy to dismiss this as another wild claim from an ancient past that could not be, and therefore is not, true. We, who rely on miracles, rejoice that God brought onto the scene a pregnant Virgin.

For miracle, there is, of course, the baby. Many of us are in the habit of referring to “the miracle of birth” — by which I think most people mean that it is an exciting and stunning event every time it happens. Of course, it takes on special excitement and becomes the more stunning when it is your child or grandchild. But the miracle of this Child of Bethlehem is not just the little baby noises that emanate from the manger, nor the softness of newborn skin.

It is not that Baby Jesus was just the best-looking baby that ever there was . . . He was uncomely as an adult; there is little reason to imagine that He was all that physically attractive as a child. It is the inner nature of this Child that causes wonder. Virgin-born means that Jesus comes without the baggage you and I carried into the world — the burden of being already and immediately broken by sin. In every respect human as we are, yet without sin — that’s the miracle of the Christ-child. We who rely on miracles rejoice that such a one could be born into our world and bring to us such hope.

The city of Bethlehem is something of a miracle. I suspect that many of you would not place the label ‘miracle’ on this part of the story . . . but consider for a moment . . . Bethlehem had been prophesied as the site of

the coming of the Messiah some 700 years before this birth. The coming to power of the Roman Empire brought the land of Judea under Roman rule about 90 years before this birth. And the ascension of Tiberius Caesar as Emperor of Rome occasioned the first census which prompted Joseph to travel from Nazareth to Bethlehem, which became the site of this miracle birth. That would be a lot of coincidences to ignore if you were trying to trace how it was that Jesus was born in Bethlehem. We who rely on miracles rejoice that even history unfolds in line with divine purpose.

Just outside of Bethlehem gather a bunch of shepherds, in my estimation yet another component of the miraculous. Once again, maybe you don't see this as particularly miraculous — it was likely mere happenstance, serendipity, kismet — I think not. I ask myself “*Why shepherds?*” Why not the priests, or why not the rulers. What was so special about shepherds? The answer, of course, is that there is nothing special about shepherds, unless you consider ordinariness special.

But shepherds in Judea were not even ordinary — they were lowlifes, just barely higher on the social register than pickpockets and thieves. They were considered too coarse and smelly (if you've ever been around sheep, you'd comprehend) to be included in better company. The miracle is that God, in this case as in so many others, chose the least likely candidates to receive the message — least likely to appreciate it or “get it”, least likely to respond to it, and least likely to be believed by others. We who rely on miracles rejoice that God consistently chooses the “wrong people” (if you're not sure of whom I speak, just look to your left and to your right) to do His bidding, and then equips them to do it.

Without the angels, the shepherds don't even get into the act. Are the angels a miracle? Well, maybe not strictly, but the very fact that they show up signals that the miraculous is in play. Look throughout the Bible and you will discover that, whenever angels show up, some dramatic event in God's plan of salvation is either just about to unfold or has just taken place. *An* angel announces the birth to Mary, because at that point

she's the only one who needs to know. The angel *army* shows up to clue in the shepherds, I'm guessing because they might not have gone for it had there been just the one. Angels showing up in your back yard may not sound like a miracle to you tonight — I'll ask you again when you've actually had the experience whether or not it qualifies as "miracle." We who rely on miracles rejoice that God employs His heavenly messengers to bring good tidings of great joy to all people.

I could go on with the rising star in the east, the arrival of the Magi, the Flight to Egypt . . . but those are miracles to consider on the Day of the Epiphany (January 6) and on the Day of the Holy Innocents (December 28).

There is overarching all these miracles of Christmas one coalescing miracle: God's Love. Once again, you may not immediately classify this as miracle, but again I ask you to consider.

There are so many reasons why God should not share His love with us: we abuse it ... we often ignore it ... we take it for granted ... we even throw it in God's face when we disobey or fail to live up to the high calling for which we are called. God has to look at this broken, angry, war-filled, racist, self-centered, acquisitive, unsharing, violent collection of beings called humanity — He has to look ... He cannot turn away and pretend that we're not here. Plus, we do what we do perpetually — there is no end to the inventiveness of the ways we work to inflict on each other pain, grief, shame, conflict, anxiety, and woe. God looks at it day after day after day after day — and still He loves us.

He doesn't just tell us He loves us. God acts out His love by leaving heaven and taking on our humanity. That's the GREAT miracle of Christmas — that God would override His justice by His love for us. God's justice would demand that God wipe out all the messy junk that we heap upon each other, the planet, and Him. God's justice would demand that each and every one of us own up to our rebellion against Him, our enmity with Him, our willful sin that separates us from Him — and that each of us hear and fall under this verdict: ***"The person who sins shall***

die.” [Ezekiel 18:20]

But God’s love trumps that verdict. God’s love cancels that edict. God sends His Son and, in effect says, “*The person who does not sin shall die so that those who do sin can live.*” That is *the* miracle of Christmas . . . the miracle that brings about every other miracle of this season and all the seasons beyond.

I have kind of jokingly repeated the phrase “*We who rely on miracles*” throughout this sermon, echoing that line from the cartoon. In dead earnest you need to know — you absolutely do rely on this miracle. Without God’s love there is no hope, there is no joy, there is no peace. Pull out the miracle of God’s love at work in Christmas and all you have left is a day to lower your credit rating and increase your cholesterol.

We who rely on miracles rejoice — we rejoice because God has shown His love for us in Christ Jesus. We rejoice because God works in all kinds of events and people to bring that love to bear in us. We rejoice because God gives us voices to sing, hearts to elate, and fellow-believers with whom to share this miracle. We rejoice because there is this miracle of God’s love.

Amen.