

## **All I want for Christmas is...**

Finding hope, peace, joy, and love during the ending of 2020

Message #1 – “A Miracle”

Matthew 1:1-16 The Genealogy of Jesus

Romans 5:6-9

St. Paul’s United Methodist Church of Elizabethtown

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On this final week of November we are entering into the season of Advent through which we prepare, in anticipation, for the Christmas season—the time of year (every year) that we celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the forgiver of sins, our redeemer and savior. To Christians all around the world this week begins a four-week period of introspection and reflection as we dwell on up on who Christ is, what he has done for us, and how we might bend our hearts toward him in worship and adoration.

As we look to God during this season, we simply can’t avoid all that God is. He is powerful, he is loving, he is just. He is the arbiter of all things seen and unseen; he has authored every step we take and is the purveyor of the concrete and the abstract. And when you dwell on just how big and powerful God is, when you begin to grasp for just a moment how much God is, you might also notice how much we really and truly need the redemption he brings.

We are entering into a new message series that we are calling “All I want for Christmas.” Through this series we hope you will see all that God sees in you. We hope that as you lean into this Christmas season, and you feel the pull of emptiness, isolation, greed, pain, or brokenness you will see the power and life and grace and redemption that lives in you because Christ lives in you. And when we look for Christ in our lives we see love, joy, peace and hope.

This week, our message is titled “All I want for Christmas is a Miracle.”

Now, in the two years now that I have been able to serve as one of your pastors at St. Paul’s church, I’ve never had this feeling—the feeling that God was giving me a message to preach that I find really difficult to preach.

Earlier this week when I sat down to begin my preparation for this message, I was dealing with a range of emotions. If I’m being completely honest, I was somewhere between completely content and absolutely exhausted and overwhelmed. I think the contentment came with the realization that through everything that has unfolded in 2020, and perhaps everything that I believe and feel that has been taken away from my family during the last nine months, we have remained healthy and relatively unaffected by the novel coronavirus. On the other hand, I was tired and overwhelmed because like many in our country and, indeed, like many all around the world I have been praying for this nightmare to end. While the virus has had its impact, my heart has broken over how mistrust and paranoia have gripped corners of our culture. And, like so many, you and I have prayed for COVID-19 to end and along with it the shutdowns, closures, mandates and edicts and protocols—all of it—that God would use this moment, while everyone is

watching, to bring down a miracle that would prove, once and for all, that he is the one true God. For most who've prayed this prayer—that miracle hasn't come. And so, this is a message that I had some hesitation in preaching, but God has revealed something that I think you all will see. It is my prayer that in spite of everything that might distract us, everything personal, social and political, will be cast in the shadow of the great hope that persists and thrives in the beating hearts of all who pursue Christ.

So, let's jump right into it. When trying to pin down an explanation of what a miracle is, I looked into how the original languages refer to the amazing things that God does in the Bible. In the Old Testament, the Hebrew word that is often translated into our English word miracle is *mophet*, but this word, *mophet* is also translated into "wonder" in different places in the Bible as well. So, we have a clue as to how these interventions and glorious encounters with the sheer might and power of God left an impression on those who witnessed it in the Old Testament. It was a wonder. Something they had never seen before. Something they couldn't possibly explain.

In the Gospels of the New Testament, there are several examples of Jesus performing miracles. The Greek word often used to describe these works of Jesus is *dynamis*, which means "power" or "deeds of power."

And what remarkable power it is. Here are just a few examples of how *dynamis* impacted the lives of actual people in the gospels. Check it out.

In Matthew, Mark and Luke we read of Jesus healing a man with leprosy and another who had been paralyzed. We can read of him healing a gentile woman's daughter and casting out demons.

In Matthew, Luke and John we read of Jesus healing the Centurion's son with just a simple command of his voice. In John's gospel we read of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead.

Across the Gospel stories, Jesus walks on water, turns water into wine and calms the raging sea.

He brings sight to blind men, opens the closed ears of the deaf and feeds (on two different occasions) thousands of people with what appear to be limited provisions.

Jesus restores the broken, fortifies faith, and brings hope to those who need it most.

Glorious deeds of power. Glorious deeds of power indeed.

What we have in miracles are wonderful, powerful acts of God that impact real people who actually lived in the Biblical story, and I would contend that we see glorious wonderful things happen in our lives that we might also refer to as miracles. When God, through his perfect timing makes what seems impossible, possible. The wonderful power of God is seen in every new life, in the hearts of those he's healed, in every relationship that has been restored, and in every ordinary resurrection of the human spirit. If you are waiting for a miracle today, I invite you to look around you. You just might be living in one.

The thing is, I think we've, at times lost the meaning of a miracle in our lives. We'll find that great parking spot, or that dollar on the ground, maybe we'll even get off with just a warning with Etown's finest pulls us over for rolling through a stop sign and we'll say, "It's a miracle!" Come, on... you know it's true. I mean if the Eagles win a football game this season it's like watching a true miracle unfold in front of our eyes, amen?

But let's be honest, are these wonderous deeds of power? Are we forever transformed by happenstance and random luck?

What is a miracle? A miracle isn't magical or mystical. It isn't a string of good fortune or surviving a series of near-misses. A miracle is the power and force, the *DYNAMIS* and *WONDER*, of God on your life. Listen, when a miracle happens it should change your life. You should be so transformed by a miraculous experience that it changes your very perspective and outlook on life. After you've encountered a miracle you are a changed person. You no longer see the things your life the same way. You have been transformed by the power of God in your life.

The books of the Bible make every effort to explain how the power of God reshaped and fashioned new life in the people of God, and in every corner of the Bible you can find evidence of the great transformation God makes in people of all walks life through the great wonder and power of his character. To illustrate this, I've been assigned through careful sermon planning, to share with you the miracle that exists, in the genealogy of Jesus.

While I agree there are probably more obvious examples to draw from in the Bible of God's great power and wonder, take a look at Matthew 1:1-16 with me and see the amazing, wonderful and perfect power God delivers Matthew's account of Jesus's family tree.

As you turn your Bible's or point your Bible App to the first few verses of Matthew's Gospel, you might be reading this passage for the first time, or maybe the first time in a long time. That is because we often skip over this part so that we can get to the more exciting parts of Jesus's story. But as you scan through the names, some we may not even know how to pronounce properly, you'll see a powerfully condensed history of the Bible.

Matthew is writing, primarily, for a Hebrew audience. As we've said time and again in our study throughout the Biblical story, one's lineage is very, very important. Establishing Jesus's family history from the beginning of the book to its present sequence pulls a significant thread that begins at the original covenant that God makes with Abraham (the promise in which God told a aging man that his descendants would one day outnumber the stars), and passes through periods of exile, slavery, wars upon wars, a time of judges and eras of kings. It lives through the lives of royalty and commoners and it is written so that it lives on in our lives today. These sixteen verses of scripture illustrate the winding, twisting road of marriage, adultery, near annihilation and restoration. Generations and generations of people are listed in this passage and what it also reveals is that Jesus's

family, comes with more than a little baggage. In fact, you might even say it was nothing short of miraculous that the savior of all humanity would come from such a family.

Just pulling a few names out of this long list of people... Take for instance, from verse 3, Tamar. Earlier this year, Pastor David preached a sermon in which we learned that Tamar actually sold herself as a prostitute to her father-in-law so that she could secure a position in his family after her first husband and second husband had died. As a result, however, Judah, Tamar's father-in-law, recognizes that he had been unfair to Tamar and order was restored. This is something of a crazy story though when you think that this encounter played an integral role in Jesus's family tree.

Or, how about this example. In verse 5 we read the name Rahab. She is most commonly known in the Biblical story as Rahab the Harlot. Her most memorable thing she does in the Bible is tell a lie. And, perhaps worst of all to the intended audience of Matthew's Gospel, she was a Canaanite—a mortal enemy to the Hebrew people. However, it was Rahab, who owned and operated a house of ill repute in Canaan that hid two Hebrew spies who had been sent to Canaan on behalf of Joshua. Rahab lies to the guards that come searching for the Hebrew spies thereby saving them from capture. She clearly survives the turmoil that later comes to Canaan and is included in the familial line of Jesus.

Or, just a few words later we read the name of Ruth. A Moabite. A widow. A woman with absolutely nothing. She shows compassion for her also widowed mother-in-law, who is Hebrew, and together they travel back to Israelite homeland with nothing but one another. They have no husbands; they have no sons. And in that time, that was the mark of absolute ruin. Ruth's story takes a remarkable turn when, through the guidance of her mother-in-law Naomi and the compassion of a wealthy relative, Ruth, a foreigner, remarries and has a son named Obed. And so the line continues.

Within just a few lines of scripture recounting the long line of fathers, mothers and sons, we see God redeeming lives of so many including the lives of a prostitute, a lying Canaanite, and a husbandless, childless foreigner. To Matthew's original audience, this would have appeared to be scandalous and impossible all at the same time. Some might have even looked at the events surrounding just these three stories alone and thought these turnaround stories were nothing short of wondrous and wonderful power of God. Within these three transformed lives God authored great miracles but the greatest miracle of all is that in the course of time each would play their part in bringing to Earth God himself in the birth of Jesus Christ hundreds of years later—the very illustration of Hope in a lost world.

What this list of names reveals is that through trials, through tragedy, through times of prosperity and peril, God is authoring miracles every single day. You are the living example of a miracle that started many, many years ago and you are the foundation of miracles that have yet to come because we are all living examples of the great forgiving and redeeming power of God. God's influence and presence in our lives has the power to transform and completely reform every heart within the sound of my voice and beyond. If you believe that with me today then you too see the glorious, wonder-inspiring, deeds of power God is bringing forth around you and through you.

The God who set the captive Israelites free is the same God who sets you free from the bondage of addiction and depression. The God who made blind men see and deaf men hear is the same God who with love and grace can silence your every fear and lift you up on wings of eagles. The God who makes the impossible possible, the one who brings life from death, his very spirit is in you and he is flowing in your veins. As you think about the life you live and the influence you have on the lives around you, look at how God redeemed the lives of three women in the Bible story and brought forth from them the savior of all. If you are looking for a miracle today, I encourage you to look in the mirror because your life is a living testimony of the love of God and the hope he brings to the world.

Hear the word of God.

1An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham.

2Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers, 3and Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar, and Perez the father of Hezron, and Hezron the father of Aram, 4and Aram the father of Aminadab, and Aminadab the father of Nahshon, and Nahshon the father of Salmon, 5and Salmon the father of Boaz by Rahab, and Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth, and Obed the father of Jesse, 6and Jesse the father of King David.

And David was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah, 7and Solomon the father of Rehoboam, and Rehoboam the father of Abijah, and Abijah the father of Asaph, 8and Asaph the father of Jehoshaphat, and Jehoshaphat the father of Joram, and Joram the father of Uzziah, 9and Uzziah the father of Jotham, and Jotham the father of Ahaz, and Ahaz the father of Hezekiah, 10and Hezekiah the father of Manasseh, and Manasseh the father of Amos, and Amos the father of Josiah, 11and Josiah the father of Jechoniah and his brothers, at the time of the deportation to Babylon.

12And after the deportation to Babylon: Jechoniah was the father of Salathiel, and Salathiel the father of Zerubbabel, 13and Zerubbabel the father of Abiud, and Abiud the father of Eliakim, and Eliakim the father of Azor, 14and Azor the father of Zadok, and Zadok the father of Achim, and Achim the father of Eliud, 15and Eliud the father of Eleazar, and Eleazar the father of Matthan, and Matthan the father of Jacob, 16and Jacob

the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah.

The messiah that would restore God's promise to the entire world. He was the last sacrifice. He died for the sins of all. What is sin? Sin are the things we do and think that separate us from the heart of God. We all sin. The book of Romans says that all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. But here's the deal. When Jesus died on the cross he said it is finished. The veil that stood between us and God was torn down and now you and I can live in the assurance that our sins will never stand between us and God. Jesus died for you and he died for me so that we, all of us could be reconciled for eternity.

Are you looking for a miracle today? Are you looking for Hope? I invite you to pray with me now.

Heavenly Father, we pray collectively from living rooms and bedrooms, from cars and closets and offices and waiting rooms. Here us O Lord and bring before us the markers and reminders of the great miracles, the great hope, you have restored in our lives. We know you are good Lord, and we know that you restore hope. As we lean into the Christmas season let us be reminded every hour of everyday the great hope that persists through you. Amen.

Are you looking for a miracle today? Are you looking for hope? A great miracle lies in you.