

## ONE MIRACLE IS ENOUGH

Sermon Preached by the Rev. Dr. Lindley G. DeGarmo  
Union Church of Pocantico Hills  
January 3, 2021

Jeremiah 31:7-14  
John 1:10-18

The late David H. C. Reade was pastor of New York City's Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church for 33 years. A Scot by birth, Dr. Reade was a chaplain in Britain's Highland Division during World War II. He was captured by the Germans at Dunkirk and spent the rest of the war being shuttled from one prisoner-of-war camp to another.

Years later, he told the story of Christmas 1941:

December [that year] was a bitterly cold month in Europe [he recalled]. From the Pyrenees to the Volga it seemed as though winter held every land in its frozen grip, with snow lying thick and bitter winds whistling through towns and villages where there was an almost universal shortage of food and fuel. For it was not only winter that reigned over that huge territory. The Nazi war machine, at the height of its power, had its frozen grip too on the lives of millions all the way from the Spanish frontier to Central Russia.

[The] German prison camp [where Reade was being held was] located on a disused race course on the outskirts of Rouen in France. In the camp were about a thousand allied prisoners-of-war, mostly crippled and disabled. There had been a brief hope that they might be sent home—"Home by Christmas" was the happy thought—but instead of that word had just come that [they] were to be sent back across that wintry Europe to the frontiers of Poland. It was not the brightest prospect for a happy Christmas. In the huts, men huddled together trying to keep warm, while outside the German sentries, muffled to the ears, stamped miserably round the barbed-wire enclosure, hardly more free, and certainly not more comfortable, than [the allied prisoners] were.

Then something happened[, Reade recalled]. Call it a miracle, if you like, [he said,] but it had nothing to do with any sudden transformation of [their] material conditions. No angel came to tear the wire down. No manna fell from the skies. [They] were still prisoners in the hands of the enemy. But for a day or two the camp was transformed, and what [Reade remembered years later was] not the cold or the hunger, but some little things that were the symbol of this transformation. The German commandant, for instance, unexpectedly ordering into the camp an enormous Christmas tree, and a group of hard-bitten prisoners designing and signing an elaborate Christmas-card which [Reade] presented to the commandant at midnight in the silence of his office. Then there was that brew of weak cocoa which was taken out to a shivering guard on Christmas Eve, and the cigarettes that were slipped across the wire from the outside. And there was the

moment when [Reade] heard a magnificent tenor voice resounding from one of the huts. When [he] looked inside [he] saw a massive [Sergeant], complete with belt and revolver, singing to a group of badly crippled prisoners: “Stille Nacht; heilige Nacht.”

[Was this just] meaningless sentiment? [Reade wondered]. Sentiment, [perhaps, he decided,] but certainly not meaningless. The miracle[, he said,] was in the overflow of the Christmas spirit in the midst of war. For a time at least, in spite of the titanic struggle to which they were entirely committed, [he went on,] human beings were human beings; and the memory of the One who was born to bring all mankind to the peace and joy of God prevailed over human hate and despair and squalor. [Reade concluded,] I have never since been able to be cynical about the fringe benefits of Christmas—the sparkle of light that comes into drab streets, the excitement of children, the happiness of genuine giving to please another, the wave of good humor that sweeps over even the most unlikely people, the desire to forget quarrels and be reconciled.

I think Reade’s speaking of “fringe benefits” is apt, for this miracle of transformation that we have all experienced in some way, however small, derives from the greatest miracle of all time. We didn’t just invent Christmas. There was no group of people who got together years ago and said: “Let’s have a holiday once a year when everyone will try to be happy and kind.” We invented a lot of the trappings—the holly, the cards, the trees, the presents, even the date. But no one invented the Fact behind Christmas. It was a gift of God. It was the birth of a child, the gift of a Person like none other who has ever lived. The Fact behind Christmas is the appearance on our earth of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

What is the miracle of Christ? It is himself. It’s not the wonderful stories connected with his birth, or even the amazing things that he was able to do. The real miracle centers on his person—who he was, and is. When you read the New Testament, you find that his followers are overwhelmed by the wonder of Christ himself. From the moment that he turned to his disciples and asked the question: “Who do you say that I am?” and Peter answered: “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God,”<sup>1</sup> everyone who made that discovery wanted to shout it to the world. It wasn’t his miracles they spoke about so much as *the* miracle—himself. “God has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them,”<sup>2</sup> they cried; “God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son”<sup>3</sup>; “in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself,”<sup>4</sup>; “God has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.”<sup>5</sup> To hear these eyewitnesses is to catch again something of the awe, the wonder, the excitement, the joy with which men and women experienced and communicated the miracle of Christ. Something new had happened; something unheard of; something almost unbelievable. To believe it transformed their lives.

---

<sup>1</sup> Matthew 16:16.

<sup>2</sup> Luke 1:68.

<sup>3</sup> John 3:16.

<sup>4</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:19.

<sup>5</sup> 2 Corinthians 4:6.

Here was the secret of life, and the secret of death. “To me,” said St. Paul, “living is Christ and dying is gain.”<sup>6</sup>

One of the disciples, looking back over all that had happened, and trying to find words to express the wonder of it, wrote down these extraordinary words that we read this morning and that have never ceased to echo in the Christian Church. “The Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.”<sup>7</sup>

How often do we stop to think of the words we sing in the carols? The best of them are not about the trappings of Christmas, but about its heart. Listen:

*Word of the Father, now in flesh appearing!  
O come, let us adore him, Christ the Lord.*

“Word of the Father”—God’s Word—God speaking to us, God communicating with God’s people—that’s the basis of all living religion. When the old prophets wanted to indicate that they had something to say in the name of God, they used the expression: “Hear the Word of the Lord.” Words are our symbols of communication. And so God’s Word is God communicating. And that Word has come to humankind in many ways—through prophets and teachers, through stories and poems, through commandments and ordinances, through experience and through the silence of the conscience. But the astounding miracle of Christmas is the personal appearance of God’s Word on earth, the translating of the Word into flesh and blood.

There’s no mistaking what the New Testament tells us. We can accept the miracle or reject it, but they want us to know just what they believed—and what has been believed by Christians ever since. In Jesus Christ who was born in a stable, lived the plain, tough life of his day, died on a Roman cross, and was seen again alive by his disciples, God has come personally into our human life.

Here is how another apostle put it: “Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds.”<sup>8</sup>

There’s the miracle that is beyond all other miracles, the one miracle that is enough. If in any way we respond to this, finding in Christ the image of God, the way to God, the life of God flowing into ours, then we don’t need to be too much concerned about any other miracles in the Bible or elsewhere. A living faith is not measured by the number of incredible stories we can swallow. So often people speak as if it were more virtuous to accept a vast number of miracles than to be only committed to a few. And sometimes men and women are blocked from considering this one supreme miracle of Christ, because they are told they must first believe all kinds of things they find it impossible to accept. This miracle is enough—that Jesus Christ is God’s Word made flesh, dwelling among us. When the wonder of that event really gets hold of me—that almighty God has taken our nature, really becoming a human being in order

---

<sup>6</sup> Philippians 1:21.

<sup>7</sup> John 1:14.

<sup>8</sup> Hebrews 1:1-2.

to rescue and redeem us —then I don't find it at all strange that other unique things should have happened that are associated with him. But none of them—except the Resurrection which is the crown and seal of the Incarnation story—is of cardinal importance. Compared with this stupendous claim—“For in him,” says St. Paul, “the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily”<sup>9</sup>—no other story of strange and inexplicable events has any great significance.

So let's come to the center of the Christmas season. If there is still such a thing as the Christmas spirit in this modern world, if kindness and compassion seem to glow just a little more brightly, and love breaks through in unexpected places, if God seems strangely active in the lives of God's human family, if hope burns more brightly in spite of the sins and follies of our time, then it is because a miracle has happened in this world—the miracle of the Word being made flesh, of God becoming a man. It was *this* man he became, this Jesus who, alone and supreme among all before or since his day, was the perfect reflection of the Father. No matter what goes on around us in this turbulent world, no matter what may happen in the days ahead, we still behold his glory, “the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.” In Christ we know the love, the transforming power, the saving truth, the infinite grace of the Father, translated into the flesh and blood of our everyday life. This is the miracle, and it is enough.

Glory to God in the highest and peace to God's people on earth! Amen.

---

<sup>9</sup> Colossians 2:9.