

+ Luke 2:25-40 + Celebrate the True Miracles of Christmas! + 1st Sunday after Christmas +
+ 28 December 2008 +

You probably heard about it on the news in the days leading up to Christmas. A Continental airliner filled with holiday travelers was getting ready to take off in Denver, when suddenly it skidded off the runway, lost an engine and a fire quickly started...but no one died. There were plenty of injuries, but everyone got out alive. An amazing story, and this time of year, such "Christmas miracles" are often prominent in the news—an organ transplant comes in the nick of time, an anonymous donor gives a large donation to a food pantry or to a needy family with looming bills, strangers show kindness for no reason, mothers and babies survive car accidents

Stories like these are heart-warming and bring a smile to our faces or maybe even a tear to our eyes. To a certain extent they at least seem to be "Christmas miracles". If nothing else, all are blessings of God's providence—how he provides for the needs of all creatures, great and small, yet all of these "miracles" are often short-lived or limited or may change a life, but they're limited to this life at best. Usually after Christmas you don't hear much about events like these as often either, but yet this morning we marvel at a different kind of Christmas miracle—two really.

You might say, "Christmas Eve and Day have come and gone!" That's true! I've even seen a Christmas tree out on the roadside already, but we're still in the midst of the Christmas season, so our celebrations continue as we **CELEBRATE THE TRUE MIRACLES OF CHRISTMAS!**

Nobody noticed who had come to the temple that day. Most people in the bustling temple courtyards rushed by the peasant couple carrying an infant not quite six weeks old. He was like so many other Jewish baby boys whose parents had brought them for dedication to the Lord. Long ago God had commanded that parents present their firstborn sons for service to the Lord, but could "take back" their sons through a sacrifice made on their behalf—a lamb and a pigeon or dove were to be offered. If they were poor like Mary and Joseph, they could offer two doves. So Mary carried the baby, while Joseph held a small cage with two doves. They looked like any other poor, faithful Jewish couple bringing their firstborn for presentation to the Lord. No one noticed that God in human flesh had entered their midst.

That was the first true miracle of Christmas, which we heard about just days ago—God became human for all people. The apostle John tried to put that miracle into human language as he described Jesus as the Word of God. ***"The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth."***

How remarkable that the almighty and holy God, whom the heaven of heavens cannot contain, allowed himself to be contained in human flesh, in a filthy manger, in Mary's loving arms! How remarkable that the almighty and holy God would set aside his power and might to clothe himself with humility and weakness! How remarkable that the almighty and holy God would hide his glory to reveal his grace and truth to all people through his own conception, birth, life, suffering and death! How remarkable that the child entering the temple that day was actually The Temple—God's true and everlasting dwelling with men in the flesh!

God didn't seek to dazzle onlookers with special effects, but instead, preferred the simple, the lowly, even the strange to carry out this true miracle of Christmas for all people. It's no surprise, then, how many simply passed right on by that poor family making their way through the busy temple courts. So many passed right on by the Christ Child like people taking down their tinsel and lights, putting away their holiday music, and tossing out their Christmas trees on December 26th. So many were hoping for a political conqueror with some dazzling "shock and awe" effects in his arsenal, instead of a normal, even poor little boy whose parents properly understood God's promises. So many ignored the simplicity of God's miracle in the flesh, but the Child wasn't to be ignored.

For his own gracious reasons, God chose to reveal his miracle to two elderly believers named Simeon and Anna that day. Like so many believers before them, Simeon and Anna had waited long years to see this miracle. Luke describes the pair, ***"Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Christ... There was also a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was very old; she had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, and then was a widow until she was eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying."***

From an earthly point of view, we might think they deserved to have this miracle revealed to them. Both were faithful believers. Both were dedicated to the Lord and watched for his Messiah, but it wasn't their merit or faith that moved the Spirit to reveal this miracle to them. It was God's pure grace.

Imagine how Simeon felt when that poor couple with a cute, little infant made their way into the temple courts. "Finally! After all these years! My salvation! My deliverance! My forgiveness and the forgiveness of all people! The

Light has come that will shatter sin's darkness. The glory of God's people, Israel has finally come. That little child will crush the serpent's head and suffer wounds and death for my sins. There he is—my Savior, my Messiah, my Lord, my God!" I think in our impatient world we have a hard time understanding how amazing and awesome and exciting this was for Simeon. At some point in time, the Holy Spirit had revealed to Simeon that he would see Christ before he died, so he waited and waited and waited until finally the day arrived. His excitement bubbled over. He clearly knew it was only God's grace that allowed him to live to see that child that day, so we shouldn't be surprised about his actions.

For Mary and Joseph, it was a little frightening. Here's this old, strange man running up to them and snatching the baby out of Mary's arms. It's amazing that Joseph and Mary's parental instincts didn't kick in, but that was God's grace too. To a certain extent, they realized who their son was and why he had come. They had been visited by a group of strange and excited shepherds! Now this unusual man lifted their son high and sang to him words of praise that only God himself deserved. ***"Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel."***

We're told Mary and Joseph ***"marveled at what was said about"*** Jesus. Simeon was singing not about his merit or faith or good cheer, but he was rejoicing that God had sent his salvation by becoming human and then revealing that to humanity. Simeon already knew why the Christ Child had become human too. With prophetic words, he pointed to the cross looming ahead in the child's life. He said, ***"This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed."*** One day Mary would witness the bloody crucifixion of her Son for the salvation of her and all people. As a mother it would pierce her soul like a sword.

All this excitement about the baby didn't go unnoticed in the temple courts. I mentioned another elderly believer before, who also rushed over to the family. ***"Coming up to them at that very moment, [Anna] gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem."*** Anna lived in the temple courts and she surely knew Simeon. If he was this excited about a baby, it had to be the Messiah. In his grace, the Lord revealed his miracle to her as well.

So what did Anna and Simeon do when God revealed the true miracle of Christmas to them? They sang about it. They proclaimed it. They shared it. They didn't let anything hold back their praise and joy and excitement. It must've been quite a sight to see these two elderly believers filled with holy joy over God's miracle revealed in the Christ Child.

That's also a true miracle of Christmas for us. It's understandable that God reveals his miracle and all its benefits to other people, but yet in his grace, he reveals that miracle of the Word made flesh even to you and me. We deserve it not. Too often we don't pay full attention to the child in Mary's arms and pass the miracle in all its simple glory. Too often we get so focused on ourselves and our own lives and our own mixed-up priorities that we forget that God revealed his salvation, his forgiveness even for us.

Still God in his grace reveals his true miracle through the Christmas gospel. The Word became flesh for you and me! Peace came to earth at last that chosen night for you and me! The Christ Child, even in infancy, fulfilled God's holy Law for you and me! That Child grew in wisdom and stature to live for you and me! Jesus was spoken against and was crucified for you and me! That Child, whose hands and feet were eventually pierced with nails for you and me, later left his tomb for you and me! Redemption and salvation in Christ happened all for you and me! Now in Word and water and meal he reveals himself and all that he is and has to you and me. Isn't that marvelous? Isn't that remarkable? Isn't that breathtaking?

Yes, Christmas Eve and Day have passed. Yes, many around us who don't know the true miracles of Christmas are moving on to the next holiday. Yes, it's easy for us to say, "Well, I'm glad that's over for another year", but our celebration is just beginning. Our joy is just beginning and it will continue long after the Christmas season comes to an end, because God became human for all people and in his grace revealed that to you and me.

Whether it's December or July, let's respond like old Simeon and Anna. Let's tell people about this Christ Child. Why hold back? Why worry about being socially awkward when we have opportunity to rejoice and sing praises about our gracious God for his true miracles of Christmas? Why hesitate to share the good news with people we know and love who desperately need to hear about that miracle and not another "feel-good" story this Christmas season? Let's share that good news of salvation and redemption and revelation from the Lord. God became human for you and me! In his grace God reveals that miracle and all its benefits even to you and me! So let's celebrate those true miracles of Christmas and sing Christ's praises to all who will listen. Amen.