

2013_12_15 Advent 3 | Sermon
Ascension Lutheran Church, Batavia IL
Pastor David Pfeiffer

SDG
A Miracle Hidden in Plain Sight
based on the Gospel of the day
Matthew 1:18-25
INI

Let us PRAY: O Holy Spirit, conceive in us a faith which waits patiently relying on Your Word alone to sustain us. Amen.

Matthew 1:20–23 ²⁰ But while he thought about these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take to you Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. ²¹ And she will bring forth a Son, and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins.” ²² So all this was done that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, saying: ²³ “Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel,” which is translated, “God with us.”

To all who look for the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, the grace of God which brings salvation be yours, dear fellow redeemed, (Titus 2:11-13)

Last week I witnessed a miracle. We had an ultrasound. On the computer screen I saw a child which weighed less than a pound – a child, weighing less than a pound, with arms, legs, eyes, a nose, a mouth, fingers and toes. In this person, weighing less than a pound, were all the intricate parts of life, handcrafted by God – as the psalmist says: “You formed my inward parts, You covered me in my mother’s womb.” And what was perhaps most miraculous of all was to see a beating heart. There, in a flicker no bigger than my thumb nail, was life – a gift of God, a miracle.

And in case you’re wondering, the answer is no – we didn’t find out. We decided to wait. The technician said it is rare that parents decide to wait to find out whether it is a boy or a girl. In fact, it is rare now a days to wait for much of anything. We are so used to having what we want when we want it.

Joseph and Mary lived before the age of technology. There was no such thing as ultrasonic imaging. There were no such things as cars and the internet. It took time to do just about anything. There was no choice but to wait. And yet even the best

ultrasound technology in the world could not have revealed what had happened in Mary's womb. It was a miracle hidden in plain sight.

1. Because God's miracle is hidden, sin leaves us confused

It leaves Joseph quite confused. Mary, the woman he's engaged to, is pregnant; and he is not the father. Now in his day, a more common response would be to make a spectacle of this. The label "sinner" was more than just an acknowledgement that no one is perfect. It was a title reserved for public shame. Perhaps you recall the event that John's records in chapter 8 of his Gospel where a woman is caught in adultery. How do the Pharisees respond? They bring her before Jesus. They "make a public example" of her. They say she ought to be stoned.

Joseph, however, responds righteously. He deals with this matter privately and patiently. He doesn't overreact; he doesn't respond in self-righteousness. He responds in true righteousness. Yet as he considers it all, he becomes confused and troubled. The marriage commitment has been broken. This was supposed to be his life long companion. This was supposed to be the one God had chosen for him to spend the rest of his life serving. He loved her. It seemed all his plans had come unraveled.

Sin has a way of bringing confusing and troubling situations upon us all. Things don't work out as we expected them to. We're left waiting and wondering how these things will turn out. We're left waiting for the right treatment; we're left wondering if we'll ever find the right spouse. When will we get the answer we've been waiting for? We know we should be patient; but we're used to getting answers now – we're used to working hard enough, paying enough, whatever it takes to have things back to normal. We get fed up with it all. Sin has a way of prompting troubling situations.

Joseph is troubled. He supposes this pregnancy was prompted by sin. And indeed it was. It was adultery that prompted Mary's pregnancy. And it was lust. And it was hatred. And it was discontentment. And it was ... our impatience. This situation was prompted by our sins. The weight of the world was upon this event, this Child. This should trouble us indeed. What we see with our eyes, leaves us confused.

2. The Word reveals that hidden in plain sight is Immanuel – God in our midst

Matthew 1:20–23 20 But while he thought about these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take to you Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. 21 And she will bring forth a Son, and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins." 22 So all

this was done that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, saying: 23 “Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel,” which is translated, “God with us.”

They had no ultrasound. They had no visible evidence. Years upon years, generations upon generations had waited. We’re talking patience – not just a few more months – the people of God had been waiting for this Child for centuries; for millennia. And all they had to rely on was the Word of the LORD. Prophets like Isaiah had hidden this miracle of God in plain sight, in plain words: “Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel.”

All Joseph had was the word, even when He finally arrives. Because when God is born, there is really simply nothing spectacular about it. It is a plain, ordinary, painful labor; in a small village, in a small cattle shed. God was hidden in plain sight.

He comes in such plain and ordinary appearance – as Paul puts in in Philippians: “He did not consider it a thing to be paraded about that He was equal with God. Yet He emptied Himself, taking the form of a slave; He humbled Himself, and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross.”

The miracle of God’s incarnation was hidden in plain sight. He cried like a baby. He suffered like a man. And He died like a sinner. Upon this child which weighed less than a pound, was the weight of the world.

So God would give this mysterious child the name: Jesus – “for He will save His people from their sins.” When Jesus arrives, He turns a situation prompted by sin into a miracle of God’s grace.

We are completely helpless; and even blind. That baby which I saw on the computer last week – is completely helpless. It is a problem no ultrasound could identify. Our child, like all others, is sinful. Even in mom’s womb the baby is full of sin and threatened by death every moment. Only the grace of God can save this baby.

It will require a miracle. To save us from our sins would require something never before conceived. The virgin birth would be the only conception ever to result in something sinless; to give a mother a child from heaven – without sin. The Holy Spirit would conceive Immanuel – God with us; or more literally, “God in our midst.”

All we can do is wait. God’s grace alone can bring our child through delivery and to His delivery. Only the name of Jesus can save, however ordinary it might look.

It does look so plain. A baby. Tap water. A few spoken Words. Yet in these plain, ordinary things, we find Immanuel: God in our midst. No ultrasound; no visible proof: Like Joseph, we have nothing more than the Word to rely on. Yet in that word God has hidden Himself away in plain sight. Here, in the Word; here where two or three are gathered; here, where He forgives your sins and conceives Jesus among us and within us. Yes, when Jesus arrives, He takes what is sinful and turns it into an occasion for God's miracle.

The Word reveals that hidden in plain sight is Immanuel – God in our midst.

3. Our response of patient faith is yet another miracle hidden in plain sight; a miracle of God's Spirit.

There is then another miracle of the Spirit happening. There is another miracle hidden away in plain sight. Not only is there the miracle of God in Mary; but there is also the miracle of God in Joseph; there is the miracle of God in you.

“And Joseph called His name Jesus.” This response is a miracle. Because when He is born, there is nothing spectacular about Him. He does not glow or have a halo over His head. They call His name Jesus not because they saw a miracle with their eyes, but because there was a miracle conceived within. They believe the word. So they call His name Jesus – the Greek name which means: “the LORD is salvation.” They believe that God is in their midst, saving them from their sins.

Joseph's response was a miracle hidden in plain sight. He takes Mary to be his wife; he waits to consummate the marriage; a miracle: relying on the word alone, “he did as the Lord commanded.”

It is a miracle to call His name Jesus. To confess: “I believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, Who for us men and for our salvation, came down from heaven and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the virgin Mary, and was made man.” Not just to say the words, but actually believing that this name means: “The LORD is salvation.”

God is a miracle hidden in plain sight as we gather here to call His name Jesus; when parents bring their child to the waters of baptism trusting nothing more than God's promise. God is hidden in plain sight when Christians gather around the Altar to receive plain bread and wine, trusting in nothing more than God's promise. God is hidden in plain sight when during this busy season, during this busy life, Christians take extra time to gather for special services; when, out of 365 days consumed with business, appointments, commitments, and goals, they set aside one evening on

December 24 and one morning on December 25 to gather; to pause all things for just a moment; to stop all the confusion, the trouble and behold the wonder of God in our midst; trusting in nothing more than His promise. We call His name Jesus.

What are the miracles God is working in your life? Can't you see them? We'll of course you can't. They are hidden in all sorts of troubling situations. God is hidden in plain sight when Christian wait. God is hidden in plain sight when someone waits for a diagnosis; for the right treatment; for a Christian spouse, for a job, for a child, for an answer to financial troubles, for an answer to physical troubles, for strength to resist the next temptation, for forgiveness. When all they have is the Word to rely on. So that word promises in Isaiah,

Isaiah 40:31 But those who wait on the Lord Shall renew their strength; They shall mount up with wings like eagles, They shall run and not be weary, They shall walk and not faint.

We find ourselves in many strange and even troubling situations. Situations prompted by sin. ...our own sins. ... other peoples' sins. ... the world of sin. And yet in the midst of such troubling times, this is when God-in-our-midst appears. This is when God appears among us to conceive a small flicker within; to lift the weight of what burdens you; to fulfill His name; to save. When Jesus appears, He turns a situations of sin into an opportunity for a miracle.

Philippians 2:13 for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure.

You've just witnessed a miracle. Less than a pound; He was such a small thing. God formed His inward parts, covered Him in His mother's womb. He is a gift to you – toes, fingers, and a beating heart: our Immanuel is a miracle hidden in plain sight.

How silently, how silently,
The wondrous Gift is given!
So God imparts to human hearts
The blessings of His heaven.
No ear may hear His coming,
But in this world of sin,
Where meek souls will receive Him still,
The dear Christ enters in.

Amen.