

Christmas Restores Hope Miracles Happen

by Senior Pastor: Bill Couch

Copyright © 2011, Bill Couch. All rights reserved worldwide.
This material may be printed or copied for personal use only.

VIDEO: DO YOU BELIEVE IN MIRACLES?

Do you believe in miracles? Have you talked with someone who claimed to experience a miracle? Have you experienced a miracle? The Christmas story is full of miraculous events. The most familiar Christmas stories are found in the Gospel according to Luke. Before Luke launches into these amazing stories about the birth of Jesus, he tells us why he wrote about them.

¹ Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, ² just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. ³ Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, ⁴ so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.

Luke 1:1-4

Is Christmas really true? The Christmas story is full of miraculous events like angels talking to shepherds. Wise men following a star. Have you ever tried to follow a star? How wise are they if they try to follow a star? A virgin conceives and bears a son. How can that happen? Sometimes we wonder. Only a few people dare to wonder out loud. After all it's Christmas, so even if you are not sure it all happened, you pretend to believe. You don't want to be labeled as a Scrooge or the Grinch who stole Christmas. You want to go to the parties and family gatherings. If you express that you don't believe the Christmas stories are true you might get uninvited—especially by your mom or grandmother!

Deep down you may wonder: what difference does it make if I believe those incredible stories? Aren't they just intended to provide nice symbols for

Christmas decorations: angels, shepherds, wise men? Aren't they nice? Sweet? Cute? But really just fairy tales?

Rational, logical persons often find it difficult to accept all the miracles. The Christmas stories make some audacious claims. Some persons quit reading the Bible at this point. They say, "If I have to believe this, I'm done. No thanks." It is OK to ask our questions. Did all this stuff really happen? What difference does it make? Unfortunately some persons stop with their questions. They just like to doubt. They are not really interested in finding the answers. It requires some investigation. It requires some work. This morning I want us to do a little investigating. Did the miracles of Christmas really happen?

Our scripture reading this morning may help to answer some of our questions. Since today is the third Sunday of Advent, you may have been surprised that the scripture reading was not one of the usual Christmas stories. Often we read past these verses and miss their significance. They set the whole framework for everything Luke tells us in his gospel. They set the context for the miracles.

Luke is a physician. He is not Jewish. He was not looking for a Messiah. He certainly was not looking for a virgin-born Messiah. For that matter, neither were the Jewish people in the first century. They were looking for a Messiah and their primary requirement regarding his birth was that he would be a descendent of King David.

After hearing the claims of Jesus, Luke became a believer. He accepted Jesus Christ as his Savior and Lord. Luke had a friend named Theophilus who

also became a believer. Reading between the lines in these first verses of Luke, we can conclude that Theophilus asked his friend to help him put together the story of Jesus. At this time in the first century, there was no New Testament. Most of the information about Jesus came from oral accounts told by the original followers of Jesus. Theophilus heard these stories told at different times as believers came together for worship. But it was difficult to put the whole story together. We can surmise that Theophilus said to Luke, “Wouldn’t it be great if someone wrote Jesus’ story from the beginning?” In response to that question Luke writes two documents: “The Gospel of Luke” and “The Book of the Acts of the Apostles”. Those titles were given much later. The original documents were letters written by Luke to his friend. The first document tells the story of Jesus. The second document tells the story of the movement that was launched after Jesus’ resurrection and ascension into heaven. A movement that changed the world.

Luke’s introduction does not sound like a myth or a fairy tale. It sounds like the beginning of a factual account of historical information. If you have questions about the miracles and about Christmas, these may be the most important words you have ever read. Let’s unpack these verses.

Verse 1: “Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us...” When Luke says “many have undertaken,” he implies that lots of folks have started to write down the stories of Jesus. We are familiar with three others: Matthew, Mark and John. Luke implies that there were others. Only four of the accounts were selected by the church fathers to be

included in the New Testament. These four were chosen because they were the most reliable accounts. They were written or heavily influenced by one or more of the original 12 Apostles.

Verse 2: "...just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word." Luke tells Theophilus that he desires to record what actual eyewitnesses have said. We know that Luke traveled with the Apostle Paul as his physician. He knew Peter. He knew James, the brother of Jesus. He may have even had opportunity to talk with Mary, the mother of Jesus.

Verse 3: "Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus..." As a physician, Luke was trained to observe and analyze. He listened to his patients and observed their symptoms. With his analytical mind, Luke wanted to investigate all the stories about Jesus and present an orderly account of the facts from those who knew him best—persons who were eyewitnesses of his birth, his teachings, his crucifixion and his resurrection. He interviewed a lot of folks with the spirit of Sergeant Friday on the old show "Dragnet"—"Just the facts, ma'm."

Verse 4: "so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught." When oral traditions are passed down from group to group, sometimes they tend to get embellished. The core facts are blurred with extraneous details. Luke says to Theophilus, "I want to cut through all the embellished stories and go

back to the eyewitnesses. Tell me what really happened so that I can help others know for 'certainty' the facts about Jesus.”

The Christian faith is based on something that happened in history—in space and time. The first Christmas happened in a real town called Bethlehem probably around 4 to 6 BC. The Christian message is not something made up by one person sitting in a cave thinking up nice stories about God and what he is like. Luke and the other gospel writers were careful to stick to the facts. When you read their accounts, they do not begin with “Once upon a time,” or “Long ago in a galaxy far, far away.” What galaxy? Don’t ask. It does not matter. It didn’t really happen. Fairy tales and myths are made up stories to get across some point.

Luke is very careful to say, “What I’m about to describe really happened. I’ve talked to many persons who were eyewitnesses and the core of their stories are the same. I asked penetrating questions. I investigated and these are the facts.”

Some of the events are extraordinary. If the Creator of the universe were going to break into human history; if the Creator of the universe were to become one of us; wouldn’t that be extraordinary? Wouldn’t you expect some unusual things to happen?

I want you to listen again to the familiar Christmas story. Now you know from Luke that these are eyewitness accounts. This is the beginning of the story of Jesus. Imagine yourself listening to Luke reporting the results of his

investigation. Close your eyes and listen to the story as if you are hearing it for the first time.

¹ In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. ² (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) ³ And everyone went to his own town to register. ⁴ So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. ⁵ He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. ⁶ While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, ⁷ and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn. ⁸ And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. ⁹ An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰ But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. ¹¹ Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. ¹² This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." ¹³ Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, ¹⁴ "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests." ¹⁵ When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about." ¹⁶ So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. ¹⁷ When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, ¹⁸ and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. ¹⁹ But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰ The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

Luke 2:1-20

Continue with your eyes closed for a few moments and just absorb the wonder of this story:

Hear the angels as they announce the birth of Jesus

Watch the shepherds as they travel to the manger

Smell the hay and the animals.

Picture Mary's exhausted but joyful face.

Picture Joseph's perplexed, but relieved face.

See the baby in the manger.

This is God in a manger. This is God coming to earth for you. This is God saying “I love you.” This is God working miracles to bring light and hope to a desperate world.

God still performs miracles. As you bask in the miracles of Christmas, is there a place in your life where you need to experience a miracle? Lift that situation up to God right now. Ask him to meet you in the midst of it. Ask him to do the impossible.

Thank him for the miracle of Christmas. Thank him for the miracles of transformation he wants to do in your life.

Miracles happen—even today. Even to you. Amen.