

As we begin the message this today, I want to ask you a question. What is a miracle? You've got an outline in your FOCUS, take that out and write this down... A miracle is defined as: **1. an event or action that apparently contradicts known scientific laws;**
2. a remarkable thing

Based on that definition, think about the following things that have been defined as or could be referred to as "miracles" ...

(1) The 1969 New York Mets were known as the "Miracle Mets." That's great if you're a Mets fan, but what happened in 1969 was not a "miracle." THIS, my friends would be a miracle...

(2) World Champion Chicago Cubs! Now THAT would be a miracle! How about this...

(3) Smokey Robinson and the Miracles. Or how about...

(4) Miracle, KY (if this is nowhere, Miracle is right in the middle of it). Located in Bell County, Miracle, Kentucky has a population just over 1700 happy residents.

Here's a couple of controversial ones...

(5) Weeping Icons and "stigmata." These are "miracles" that have a distinctly Catholic flavor to them. The term "stigmata" refers to visible wounds (or marks) that mysteriously appear on random people. The wound marks correspond to the wounds received by Jesus Christ on the cross. And weeping icons are paintings or statues that mysteriously appear to be weeping. People come from all over to investigate these occurrences. So are we to consider these kinds of manifestations as "miraculous?"

What about this one...

(6) Miracle Whip. This, my friends is false advertising. No sandwich spread should ever be considered a miracle. Here's one: "Do you believe in miracles..."

(7) Yes! The 1980 U.S. hockey team. They beat the mighty Russians. They called it the miracle on ice! Unlikely, yes, a miracle—probably a stretch.

Well, you get the point. There are many things that we refer to today as "miracles." But for the most part, the word miracle is probably over-used, or mis-used in describing people, events and strange occurrences. To illustrate what a miracle is really like, I had a movie clip I was going to show, but instead, I have something better, I'd like to invite up here a couple of our new members who were introduced to you earlier this morning. Todd and Rachael Reese have a story to share about recent events in their lives that had a big impact on them. Todd come on up with Rachael and tell us your story....

FAITH STORY: Todd & Rachael Reese

Good Morning. My name is Todd Reese. This is my wife Rachael. We met at Bible College in Florida. We have been married now for 13 years and we have three boys: Jared, who is 11; Benjamin, who is 9; and Matthew, who is 8.

In September, our son Matthew got what we thought was a virus. He started complaining of headaches and started running a fever. After a week of continued symptoms, we took Matthew to the doctor. After weeks of blood tests and anti-biotics, the doctor finally ordered a CT scan to check Matthew's sinuses. The CT scan was done on a Thursday. Friday evening around 5:30 p.m., the nurse at our pediatrician's office called my wife Rachael and told her that the CT scan showed a tumor on Matthew's brain. The nurse immediately set up an appointment the next morning with an on-call pediatrician and scheduled an MRI for Tuesday morning. I don't think that I can explain all of the different emotions that we went through when we heard the news. But, we were both in complete shock.

On Saturday morning we met with the pediatrician, who explained to us what type of tumor Matthew had. He also explained that the MRI was needed to determine whether or not the tumor was operable. We would not be able to find out if it was cancerous until after they removed the tumor.

On Sunday, we still had not told Matthew or Ben what we knew (Jared, the oldest, was the only one who did know). The younger ones only knew that Matthew was having tests for his headaches. Because so many were praying for Matthew and we were on our way to church, we wanted them to be prepared. When I went to tell Matthew, he was in his room playing at his desk. I said Matthew, I just wanted you to know that you have a little bump on your brain and that is why you are having the headaches. Matthew said, "Are they going to cut my head open?" I wasn't prepared to answer that question so I said no. Kids are amazing; he immediately changed the subject like it was nothing and asked if he could use a certain marker. I then found our middle son, Benjamin, at the kitchen table eating an orange. I told him about Matthew and the first question out of his mouth was, "Dad, can I have another orange?" I said to him, "Did you hear what I said?," and he said "yea." He again asked for another orange.

We then left for church. We were scheduled for a meeting with the elders as part of becoming members of the church. When we met with the elders, Rachael started to cry and explained what was happening. The elders comforted us and prayed with us. At the end of our meeting, the elders laid hands on Matthew and prayed for him. A sense of peace came over Rachael and me from that point on. I remember telling "Pastor Bertie" that I was not angry at God or asking why this was happening. It just really tore me up to think about what Matthew was going to go through.

Driving home from church, Rachael asked our boys what they talked about in Sunday School. Matthew said that they talked about Abraham and Isaac and that Isaac was going to be killed but Abraham didn't have to because he found a goat. Rachael then asked why Isaac was going to be killed. I wish I could remember the exact words that Matthew said, but he said something to the effect that God wanted to see if Abraham would give up his son and trust him. Rachael and I looked at each other and it was if God was asking us that same question.

On Tuesday morning, Matthew had the MRI. He had to be put under anesthesia so that he would keep completely still. After the procedure, Matthew woke up screaming for the doctor because his head hurt so badly. He was very sick for the rest of the day with a headache and

vomiting. We were told that the results of the exam would not be ready for a couple days. That was fine with us because we wanted the neuro-surgeon to review the results with us and talk about what the next steps were going to be.

On Wednesday morning, Rachael received a phone call from the same nurse that initially gave us the bad news of the tumor. She said that the MRI came back clear. The tumor was gone. Rachael asked, "How is that possible?" The nurse replied, "Well, if you have faith, I would call it a miracle." Rachael called me at work and told me the good news. She said the doctor didn't have an explanation because he saw the tumor on the CT scan and now it wasn't there.

On Thursday morning, we traveled to Madison to meet with the neuro-surgeon. It was confirmed, the MRI revealed no tumor.

Throughout this entire experience, we felt God's presence. We praise God and we thank all of you for your prayers. We received more blessings than we could count. When we initially found out that Matthew had the tumor, our oldest son Jared was very upset. Rachael told Jared that God is the Great Physician and that if it was God's will then Matthew would be healed. God did perform a miracle and Jared's faith was strengthened. In fact, all of our faith has been strengthened. We know that God does not always heal in miraculous ways, but my wife and I are thankful how God chose to work in this situation. This was one of the biggest weeks in our lives and we hope that your faith is also strengthened from hearing what God has done.

Wow! Have you ever been a part of something like that before? Have you ever witnessed a miracle? That's a great faith story because it introduces what I'd like to talk about this morning. Because I am convinced (and hope to convince you too) that it is NO exaggeration to say, that Christmas, the very first Christmas was indeed a miracle.

And, this morning, we're going to look at four specific miracles surrounding the birth of Christ. There were four miracles (or remarkable things) that happened and we're going to look at them one by one.

First there was the miracle of who came at Christmas.

Then there was the miracle of how He came.

Then third, there was the miracle of who He came to.

And finally, there is the miracle of why He came.

Hopefully by the end of the service, you'll realize that the Christmas you've always longed for doesn't lie under the Christmas tree. The Christmas you've longed for lies in the manger, in Bethlehem.

You see, Christmas is the celebration of an invasion, when God invaded earth. It was a big deal when man walked on the moon. But it was a bigger deal when God walked on the earth. So that's miracle number one...

Miracle #1 is: God Came To Earth! 2000 years ago, God came to earth and he came disguised as a little baby named Jesus. You see, Jesus was God. He said it Himself. He claimed to be God—and He proved He was God when he died on the cross and was resurrected three days later. He appeared after being raised from the dead, in plain sight of over 500 witnesses over a 40 day period. All these people saw Him. Jesus was God in the flesh.

Colossians 1:15-16 summarizes what the Bible says about Jesus Christ: *"Christ is the exact likeness of the unseen God. He existed before God made anything at all. In fact, Christ Himself is the creator who made everything in heaven and in earth."* The Bible says that Jesus Christ was responsible for creating the world. Jesus didn't start in a stable. What we're celebrating is not the beginning of Jesus Christ. He is God—he is eternal. What we're celebrating is the day He came to earth.

I know a lot of people say, "I believe Jesus was a good man. I even believe He was a great teacher." There's only one problem with that. Jesus never claimed to be a good man—or even a great teacher. He claimed to be God. So He either has to be who He says (the Lord God) or one of two other options: If He wasn't God then He was a liar and a con-man of great cunning or He was a lunatic and didn't know what He was talking about. So who is Jesus? Was he a liar, lunatic, or Lord? Was he a con-man, crazy, or Christ?

Let me give you an example: Let's say I were to stand up here and say to you, "I'm a good man." And you'd say, "Yeah, I know you. You're a pretty good guy. I think you're a good man." And then, if I were to say to you, "I'm a good teacher," some of you would say, "I'd agree with that. You're a good teacher." (Hopefully you'd say that).

But if all of a sudden I stood up here and said, "I'm God and you all need to follow me." Now THAT would change the agenda. All of a sudden, you either have to (a) except what I say as fact and reply: "Yes, J.T. is God and I'm going to follow him," or (b) J.T.'s a demented fool and we need to run him out of town! Right!?

You see, I cannot be a good person or a good teacher and claim to be God at the same time. That doesn't make sense. Unless of course, the person claiming to be God actually IS God. And you know what: Jesus did claim to be God. In John 10:30 he says: *"I and the Father are one."* That is a declaration of divinity. And Jesus proved his divinity—he proved he was God—by the miracles he did, the most convincing of which was his resurrection.

You see, this is the first miracle of Christmas—that it was God Himself who came to earth about 2000 years ago. It was a miracle. It was God who came to earth.

But when he came, he didn't come conspicuously in a stretch limousine or with loud music and flashing lights. He came in a simple way. The first miracle of Christmas was that it was God who came to earth. The second miracle of Christmas was how He came.

Miracle #2 is: God became a man. He became like one of us. He became a human being.

In the book of Philippians the Apostle Paul tells us that: *“Christ gave up His place as God and made Himself nothing. He was born to be a man and became like a servant. And when He was living as a man, He humbled Himself...”*

Think about this miracle: Of all the ways God could have chosen to reveal himself to human beings, He chose to become one of us. Think of what He could have done. He could have used thunder and lightning. He could have used air horns, loud trumpets, fireworks, some kind of volcanic activity, anything. But he didn't.

If you were God, would you have come as a baby? I wouldn't. I would've gone for the dramatic. The spectacular. Kind of like the Old Testament when God appeared to Moses on Mt. Sinai. There was loud scary stuff happening on that mountain. The people were terrified. But didn't God do that this time? Why did God come to earth as a baby?

Think about it: Nobody's afraid of a baby. The reason God came to earth as a baby is because God said, "I'm sending Jesus Christ to save you, not to scare you." You see, many people are honestly afraid of God. They don't even like to talk about God. They get nervous when you talk about Him. If God had come in thunder and lightning and an earthquake, it would have scared a lot of people to death. But nobody's afraid of a baby.

The point is, God wants you to know Him. He knows all about you. He knows everything that's ever happened to you. He's watched every single moment of your life. He saw you in your mother's womb. He knew that you were going to be here today, a thousand years before you were born. And He wants you to know Him.

But there was a communication problem. God had to come in a way that we could understand. If God had wanted to communicate to birds, He'd have become a bird. If God had wanted to communicate to frogs, He would have become a frog. But He wanted to communicate to you and to me, so He became one of us.

In fact, the Bible says that Jesus Christ was tempted like we are. He had the same needs, the same desires, the same problems, the same pressures in life. The reason He went through all that was so He could relate to us. No matter what you're going through today, God understands because He's been there. He came and lived a human life. The Bible says that He was not only tempted but He suffered like we did. He experienced real pain. There were times when Jesus was lonely. There were times when Jesus was tired, fatigued. There were times when He was under pressure. There were times when He was disappointed, misunderstood, when people didn't treat Him right and He was criticized. He understands all that. The only thing we experience that Jesus did not is sin. That's because He was God.

Here's the point: God not only came to earth at Christmas, He came as a human being so He can understand us and so we can understand Him. That's the Good News. He wants to have a relationship to you. You were made for a relationship with God. You were made to know God.

That's what Christmas is all about. He came as a child so we wouldn't be afraid of Him. He came as a human being so He could relate to us. That's the second miracle. But there's a third miracle....

Miracle #3 is: He Came to Common People. When God came to earth, He came to ordinary people. When Jesus Christ was born, He didn't come to a select few. He didn't come to the privileged class. He came first to a young, unknown virgin girl. She was engaged to marry a blue-collar carpenter. They were common people—just like us.

And the Bible says that when Jesus was born, He wasn't born in a palace although He was the God of the universe. He wasn't even born in a nice hotel. He wasn't even born in a hospital. He was born in a barn. Today we tend to over sentimentalize the nativity scene. And we talk about how Jesus was born in a manger. Do you know what a manger is? A manger is a feed box for farm animals. It's where they put wheat and oats and stuff. The cattle stick their nose in it, their lips, their tongue, saliva comes out. It's not exactly a real clean place to lay a newborn baby. But that's where God was born.

When God came to earth, He was born in a stable with the stench of animals. You can't get any lower than being born in a barn. In fact, parents, when your kids use bad manners isn't that what you say to them: "Were you born in a barn?" It makes me wonder if Mary ever asked Jesus that when he burped at the dinner table. "Why, as a matter of fact mother, I was born in a barn!"

So Jesus was born in humble circumstances to very common people. And the first people who got to visit Jesus were not religious leaders. They were not royalty. They weren't political figures. The very first people who were invited to see Jesus were the shepherds. In those days shepherds were nobodies. They were considered outcasts of society because they did a job nobody else wanted to do. It was a very stinky job. As far as social status was concerned, shepherds were the lowest step on the social ladder. The people in those days called them low-life. That's who Jesus invited first to come to His birth. Later on, wise men from the east would come and they would bring rich gifts. So from the highest in society to the lowest, they were invited.

What that tells me is: Jesus is available to all of us. But He wasn't born up on a hill where we can't get to Him and He wasn't born behind a gated community. He was born right out in the open where anybody could come and see Him. That's the point. God wants to have a relationship with us. So He comes to our level.

John 1:14 says: ***"Christ became a human being and He lived here on earth among us."*** Underline the words: "among us." He didn't live in a palace, far away where you couldn't get close to Him. He lived among us. I love how "The Message" translates this verse: ***"Jesus became flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood."*** That's another way of saying that He came to our "turf."

Jesus Christ came to us because we couldn't reach up to God. You see, God's perfect and I could never reach high enough to get to know God. I could never know God on my own, so He comes

down to our level. And that's a miracle, that He would stoop so low that He would be born as a baby in a barn to be accessible to everybody.

But the greatest miracle of all about Christmas was not who came, or how Jesus came. It wasn't even who He came to. But the greatest miracle of all was why He came.

Miracle #4 is: He Came For Our Benefit. He came for you and for me.

Listen to these verses where Jesus explains why He came to earth.

John 18:37: *Jesus answered... "For this reason I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth."*

John 10:10; Jesus said, *"My purpose is to give life in all its fullness."*

John 12:47; *Jesus said, "For I did not come to judge the world, but to save it."*

It's these three verses that summarize the message of Christmas—the miracles of Christmas. Why did Jesus come? According to these verses, He came to bring us: Truth, life, and forgiveness—that's God's Christmas gift to you. That's why I came.

First He says I've come to bring you truth. Truth about what? Truth about ourselves, because we don't even understand ourselves a lot of the time. Truth about God, because there's a lot of misconceptions about Him. And truth about life, because there's a lot of phony philosophies that lead to dead ends. If you don't build your life on truth, you build your life on a faulty foundation. But when we follow the truth, life makes so much more sense.

Jesus said it like this in John 8:32: *"When you know the truth, the truth will set you free."* He sets you free to really live like God meant for you to live. That's the Truth.

Jesus also said, I came to give you life. Why did He say that? Because most people aren't really living. They're just existing. Most people get up in the morning, go off to their job, come home, eat dinner, watch television, go to bed. The next day they do the same thing. And every once in a while they take a vacation. And they think, "I'm really living!" you're not living, you're just existing.

In fact, you don't really know what life's all about until you understand why God put you here on earth. Jesus said, "I came to give your life purpose and meaning and significance. You're not here just to take up space." You're here to glorify God and to make a difference in the world.

Then Jesus said: I came to save you. What do I need a Savior for? I'll tell you why... The Bible says that heaven is a perfect place. There is no sadness in heaven, no sorrow, no sin, no sickness at all in heaven. Heaven is a place of absolute perfection. That means that only perfect people get to go to heaven. If God let imperfect people into heaven, then it wouldn't be perfect any more. Right? It would be like earth. Our earth is obviously filled with imperfect people.

So, you say: "If only perfect people get into heaven, then I don't stand a chance." You're right. Exactly. Neither do I. None of us stand a chance. That's why, after Adam and Eve chose to sin, God had to come up with "Plan B" and that's what Christmas is all about.

God said, "None of you are perfect so I can't let you into heaven. So here's what I'll do. I will come to earth in the form of a human being named Jesus. I will live a perfect sinless life. Then I will die on the cross to pay for all the imperfections YOU have and then, if you will trust in ME, I will get you into heaven on MY OWN goodness because you're not good enough." Folks, that is a great deal! That's the greatest Christmas gift you'll ever be offered.

You see, there are two ways to get to heaven. One of them is to be perfect. Never sin, never do any bad thing. That would be like playing professional baseball and batting 1.000 in your career. Never once striking out or making an out. Now if by chance, you were able to do that, to live an absolutely perfect life, when you died and you got up before God and He said, "Why should I let you into My perfect place called heaven?" you'd say, "Because I'm perfect." God would say, "You're right. You deserve it. Come on in."

But you lost that chance a long time ago. So did I. I've struck out so many times in life. I'm a sinful man. A fallen, imperfect human being.

So God's "Plan B" was to live a perfect life Himself on earth to show us what it's like and then to die for our imperfection and when I stand before Jesus one day and God says, "Why should I let you in, J.T. Bean?" I'm going to say, "Well, not because I've been perfect, but I put my trust in Jesus and He said if you'll trust in Me you will have eternal life." And God's going to say, "Well, since you've placed your faith in Jesus, come on in."

You see, this is part of plan "B" as well. Think about where the nativity—Jesus' birth would ultimately lead Him. One day after baby Jesus grew up, he stretched out His hands on a cross, they nailed Him to it and He paid for all my sins and yours. He said, in essence, with His arms outstretched, "I love you this much." That's God's Christmas gift to you. All you have to do, is unwrap it—open it up. And let me tell you: If you have never asked Jesus Christ to be a part of your life, if you've never had a personal relationship with him, and if anything I've said today makes sense to you. I'd love to share with you how you can be saved. In fact, any of the pastors or maybe a friend who invited you here today would love to tell you how you can become a Christian and begin to follow Jesus today. In fact, I'll be in parlor afterwards if you want to talk to me. (If you don't know where that is, ask an usher or at the information desk and they'll tell you where the parlor is at—that's where I'll be.)

But Jesus is why we're all here today. All because of Jesus. He came for our benefit. And because He came, you and I can thank Him for being such an honest and caring friend—He told us the truth. We can honor Him for being a good and giving God—He made our lives worth living. And we can praise Him for being such a strong and loving Savior—He brought us forgiveness and a chance to know Him and glorify Him with our lives here on earth and for all eternity.

Closing Prayer