

December 27, 2020

*“Everyday Miracles”*

John Wesley United Methodist Church

Luke 1:39-44

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“I’m dreaming of a white Christmas.” (sung) Well, we didn’t get that this year. Although I am grateful to God for the warm weather he gave us the day before Christmas, Christmas Eve, so we could have our outdoor service, with so many people attending. That was truly a gift. But I’m sure many would like to have seen at least a little snow for Christmas. Why? Well, think back a couple of Thursdays ago when we got our first significant snowfall of this season. We didn't get much snow last winter, so wasn't it rather enjoyable seeing the landscape covered in a blanket of white, bringing a sense of beauty and even peace to the world. Despite all the troubles related to the snow; the shoveling, the accidents, the closures, in truth, there really is something mysterious about snow. How so? Because it's just one of the everyday, God-revealing miracles we encounter.

So, let me share with you some facts about snow: “From ten thousand feet above the earth, a snowflake falls. Its journey starts when ice forms around the tiniest particle of dust that is blown by the winds through clouds. Formed from the dust. It weighs effectively... nothing. (That is until it starts piling up!) And a snow crystal may take hours to fall to the ground. One of the mysteries about snowflakes is how they are fashioned into such complex and symmetrical shapes. Snowflakes are just simple bits of frozen water, flecks of ice that tumbled down from the clouds. And as incredible as it seems, no two snowflakes are exactly alike. Somehow, they all develop into completely different and intricate six branched structures.”<sup>1</sup> That's right, no two snowflakes are the same. Now in the early 1900’s, a man named Wilson Bentley who lived in Vermont, was so fascinated by snow, he found a way to capture individual snowflakes on a black velvet backing and he photograph them. He photographed and published more than 5000 snowflakes. Bentley would examine the snowflakes outside, so they wouldn't melt, and through a microscope, would take a picture. Just look at some of them. (Photos) Each one is, in a sense, a tiny miracle, wouldn't you agree? A miracle that reveals a God who has the power and creative genius to take a particle of dust and transform it into something unique and beautiful. Snowflakes are indeed God’s handiwork. But I want you to think about this... if God cares so much about the creativity and beauty he puts into snowflakes, think how much more God cares for and has put into us, his children. For, we too, are his handiwork.

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<sup>1</sup> The Snowflake. Kenneth Libbrecht

In fact, like snowflakes, we too were formed from the dust. Genesis says, “The Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life.” Yes, God has the power and creative genius to take two dust particles, two tiny cells from a man and woman, and miraculously transform them into an infinite variety of human beings that are unique and beautiful. “Fearfully and wonderfully made,” as the psalmist says. And I believe God really wants us to look at ourselves and others in that same way – as God-created miracles. Unfortunately however, we don’t always see it that way. Sometimes we have a tendency to look at ourselves, and others, like we do when all that snow piles up and gets dirty along the side of the road. We no longer see the beauty, the uniqueness, the perfection, the miracle God has created in us, around us, and for us. Instead, we have the tendency to only focus on those imperfections in our lives - our troubles, the difficulties life brings us, the frustrations others cause us, and, on a deeper level, our past, our fears, our mistakes, and our sins.

But that's why I like today's scripture so much. Because it takes us to another miracle that we don't often consider that addresses these feelings. Let me explain. Now St. Luke was not only a physician, but also a gifted writer who had a flair for the dramatic. And as only a masterful story teller can describe, he paints a beautiful human interest story. Mary, unmarried, but pregnant by the Holy Spirit with Jesus, comes to visit Elizabeth, well past child bearing age, now pregnant with John the Baptist. It is here that the messenger meets the Message, for the very first time, in their mother's wombs. And what happens? The baby inside Elizabeth leaps for joy! In the coming together of the two women, the births of John the Baptist and Jesus the Messiah, fulfill the prophesy of Isaiah, “Behold, I send my messenger before you, who will prepare your way, making straight your path, the voice of one crying in the wilderness.”

Now why is this so important? Well, as Pastor Fred Craddock says, “On our way to Bethlehem for Christmas, we really need to go through the wilderness where we hear John the Baptist preaching.” You see, John the Baptist came to prepare the way for Jesus by preparing our hearts and minds. Remember Jesus came as Savior – “to save his people from their sins.” And so John the Baptist’s preaching is meant to convict us, so that we might repent for those parts of our lives where we have missed the mark. Because how else can we really appreciate and accept Jesus as our Savior? Luke tells us that John preached things like, ‘If you have plenty, like two coats, give one of them away to a person who is cold and poor.’ He said to the powerful Roman soldiers, ‘Don't be violent. Don't intimidate people. Don't throw your weight around to subsidize your salary. Be content with what you have.’ He told the greedy tax collectors, ‘Do not collect any more tax than is due. Don't add on anything, and keep yourself free of corruption.’ There was probably a lot more he said, but I'm sure all of us could probably fill in the blanks. Yes, to really understand the Message, you first have to listen to his messenger.

Because what was the message of Jesus Christ? Well, there were many, but all can be summed up with his command from the Sermon on the Mount: “Therefore you must be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.” But, wow – is that kind of perfection even attainable? Who can meet such a standard? To be perfect like God? Well, there's a humorous story about Pope John XXIII, (23<sup>rd</sup>) one of Catholicism's most beloved popes. At the Second Vatican Council – where he made a number of positive and modern changes to the Mass and to the church – he would often mix up the names of Richard Cardinal Cushing of Boston with Francis Cardinal Spellman of New York. Finally, after doing this a number of times, the Pope found himself to be greatly embarrassed and offered up profuse apologies to both of the men. To set the Pope at ease, Cardinal Cushing said in his wonderful, calming Boston accent, “Don't fret, Holy Father, no one is infallible.” Yes, no one is perfect, and that is the charm of the story, is it not? No one. Not Pope John XXIII, or your wife, your husband, your friend, or even yourself? No one is perfect.<sup>2</sup>

Yet, John and Jesus urge us on to repentance and perfection. And herein lies the real miracle – that God calls you and me and entrusts us with his work in this world. Even in our imperfection, God puts his trust in you and me to be a force in making this world a better place. As Rev. Peter Gomes says, “Jesus is no utopian idealist here. His injunction to be perfect assumes that people will continue to be killed despite the commandment otherwise. And even hate and anger will not go away. When he talks about lusting, he doesn't assume we will see many men walking about with one eye. When he tells us to turn the other cheek, to go the extra mile, to love those who hate us, he assumes the continued existence of the evils and the violence his words are intended to overcome. And he says more. If you love those who love you, if you're good when it's easy to be good, what reward have you? Any person can live in that kind of paradise. But this world we live in is not paradise. And we are called to make our way about, making the most out of less than the best. The perfection we are encouraged to imitate will not reward us with a perfect world for our efforts, but the real virtue, the real miracle, (like I said) is that we are called to fulfill the will of God. And both John and Jesus remind us that that work is never done, but that is why we must always be about striving for it.”

Let me go back to that snowfall two Thursday's ago. It was garbage day in my neighborhood. As I drove home Wednesday night a lot of people had their overflowing garbage cans out along the road way. Plus, there were a number of plastic sacks full of junk sitting around those cans. The bottom line is that it wasn't a particularly pretty sight. But during the night the snow came, and all that garbage became mounds of pure white. And the Bible tells us, “Your sins - your imperfections shall become as white as snow.” That's what John preached and that's what Jesus promised. Thank God for everyday miracles.

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<sup>2</sup> The Trouble With Perfection, Peter Gomes