

St. James' Episcopal Church Cindy Baskin
Christmas 1, December 26, 2010 – one service at 10:30 am

Texts: John 1:1-18

Introduction

Every year when I've come to preach at Christmas, I have found that a particular phrase in Luke's account of Jesus' birth will stand out and sort of grab me. One year it was the angel's announcement to the shepherds: "*I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people*" – the key word was "joy" – and that year I preached about "joy." Another time, the phrase that popped out was from the song the angelic host sang: "*Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those whom he favors*" – **Peace** was the key word that year. But one year what caught my attention comes near the end of the story in Luke's gospel. Luke tells us that the shepherds made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it **were amazed** at what the shepherds told them.

Were amazed! What was it that everyone found so amazing? And is there anything here that can still be amazing to us during this Christmas tide?

Help me out here . . . what do you think they found so amazing? (*Allowed time for congregational responses; there were several but one congregant commented that what amazed her were that miracles that were occurring.*)

Christmas Miracles Still Happen

This comment reminds me of an incident that occurred on Christmas Eve just two days ago. At 2:00 in the afternoon, I got a call from Debbie Hokanson, our Sunday School Director. Debbie had absolutely no voice and told me she was quite sick and would not be able to make the Pageant rehearsal, which was due to start at 2:30 pm. She was calling some other parents to see if they could help out, but . . .

When our Grace Lo, our office administrator heard of the dilemma, she suggested that we call Janice Genter to see if she might help (as Janice had worked with Debbie for many years on the pageant and certainly would know what to do). I advised the Grace Lo and Emily Roegner, who was volunteering in the office that afternoon, not to bother because Janice usually goes out of town on Xmas Eve. But both Grace and Emily ignored my directive and tried calling Janice anyway. Of course, they found her at home making preparations for her grown children to arrive. Janice stopped what she was doing and headed to church. Then other parents showed up and jumped in. The stage set was created; the children arrived; we conducted the rehearsal with a large number of children in attendance; and the service began promptly at 5:00 pm as scheduled.

Afterward, I had to chuckle when John Eisold, who was serving as a Lay Eucharistic Minister at the altar, commented, "I think that's the smoothest the Christmas Pageant has ever gone!" Janice later added: "Anyone who doesn't believe in miracles ought to come help with the Children's Christmas Pageant – it's a miracle every year."

Segue

Miracles indeed still occur and yes we still see angels, but usually in the ongoing, everyday events of life. But perhaps the biggest miracle of Christmas is what we call the Incarnation – that God loved us enough to become a human being. This is so powerfully conveyed in today's gospel from John 1: *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God . . . And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us*"

A favorite story of mine, which I have told before, conveys I believe the remarkable nature of this incredible truth of Christmas.

Story: *The Parable of the Birds*¹ (by the late journalist, Louis Cassels)

Once upon a time, there was a man who looked upon Christmas as a lot of humbug. He wasn't a Scrooge. He was a very kind and decent person, generous to his family, upright in all his dealings with other men. But he didn't believe all that stuff about an incarnation which churches proclaim at Christmas. And he was too honest to pretend that he did. "I am truly sorry to distress you," he told his wife, who was a faithful churchgoer. "But I simply cannot understand this claim that God became man. It doesn't make any sense to me."

On Christmas Eve, his wife and children went to church for the midnight service. He declined an invitation to accompany them. "I'd feel like a hypocrite," he explained. "I'd much rather stay at home. But I'll wait up for you."

Shortly after his family drove away in the car, snow began to fall. He went to the window and watched the flurries getting heavier and heavier. "If we must have Christmas," he reflected, "it's nice to have a white one." He went back to his chair by the fireside and began to read his newspaper.

A few minutes later he was startled by a thudding sound. It was quickly followed by another, then another. He thought that someone must be throwing snowballs at his window. But when he went to the front door to investigate, he found a flock of birds huddled miserably in the snow. They had been caught in the storm and in a desperate search for shelter had tried to fly through his window.

"I can't let those poor creatures lie there and freeze," he thought, "but how can I help them?" Then he remembered the barn where the children's pony was stabled. It would provide a warm shelter. He quickly put on his coat and galoshes and tramped through the deepening snow to the barn. He opened the doors wide and turned on the light. But the birds didn't come in.

"Food will bring them in," he thought. So he hurried back to the house for bread crumbs, which he sprinkled on the snow to make a trail into the barn. To his dismay, the birds ignored the bread crumbs and continued to flop around helplessly in the snow.

He tried shooining them into the barn by walking around and waving his arms. They scattered in every direction . . . except into the warm, lighted barn. "If only I could be a bird myself for a few minutes, perhaps I could lead them to safety," he thought.

Just at that moment the church bells began to ring. He stood silently for awhile, listening to the bells pealing the glad tidings of Christmas. Then he sank to his knees in the snow. "Now I understand," he whispered. "Now I see why You had to do it."

Conclusion

That God loved us enough to become incarnate is truly amazing. Somehow the shepherds and those gathered around the manger on that first Christmas day began to glimpse just how **amazing** God's action on our behalf really is. And John in today's gospel begins with the WORD in heaven, with God, who was GOD, who now becomes flesh and dwells among us. This is the truly amazing miracle of Christmas!

¹The following short story is effective for helping kids to better understand the Incarnation and the meaning of Christmas or to open up a Bible study on John 1: 1-18. It was written by the late journalist Louis Cassels and is here with permission.