

“The Grand Miracle”
Is 9: 2-7, Lk 2: 1-20

Mary and Jesus: The Madonna and Child - one of the most painted images in history. They're always captured in a, well, “picture-perfect” way. Florentine Central Casting must've had a field day. Imagine the ad:

Seeking a woman of luminescent qualities: Brown flowing hair (with highlights just where a star might shine), porcelain skin and pale, rose-colored cheeks, blue eyes with just a hint of contemplation near the corner, and ability to communicate joy and wonder in her facial expression without cracking a smile. Must be able to sit peacefully with a newborn boy of similar qualities and sooth him if he wakes. Experience changing swaddling clothes a must.

Seeking a newborn who can act like a god: Blonde hair, blue eyes, porcelain skin just like his acting-mother (Remember: we're painting the Florentine Jesus and not the real Israeli), Able to sleep through anything – including bleating, whinnying or moos and certainly a series of unannounced visitors to the set...

One of my favorite Madonna and Child paintings is called “Adoration of the Child”. It was painted by the Hungarian artist identified as *The Master of the Trebon Altarpiece*. *The Master* is believed to have painted in Prague in the last decades of the 14th century. No one knows his name. As much as his painting is one of my favorite paintings, it can put me in a strange, unsettled place with its unusual confluence of mystical qualities and earthy richness.

With their idyllic imaginings of the miracle child, come to earth as God-with-us, artists probably succeeded in defining a visual experience of the Christmas Jesus for most of us. But the most blessed imagining of God's-gift-as-Jesus is God's presence in the world extending far beyond any lovely image of his miraculous birth as the Christ to become the Grand Miracle of all. The real miracle of Christ – the Grand Miracle for the World - is the multiplier effect of the first miracle set free. This Grand Miracle of Christmas is when the miracle of Christ's life-with-us emboldens you and me to realize that through the power of the Holy Spirit we have the ability to make miracles, too. By the power of the Holy Spirit, you and I seize the opportunity – or, dare I say, responsibility - to bring Christ's peace and hope, joy and love to people who are in such need of these gifts of grace. These become what might feel to us like small gifts to others but what soon accumulate to become something that is, indeed, Grand and Miraculous.

The Grand Miracle becomes fueled by one of the most exciting elements of any miracle: It's staying power in the world, since once a gift of Christ's grace is put in motion, it can't be taken back. Any extension of Christ set into another person's life immediately and necessarily changes that person for an instant. Likely that instant will change the person in some way forever in a way that can neither be predicted nor cast aside but in a way that necessarily perpetuates more miraculous changes in his life, then his community, and eventually throughout the world, since once a miracle is put out there it begets another miracle. Through its living example of the grace of Christ one miraculous response after another sets in motion another miracle about to take place. This chain of miracles

becomes the present day embodiment of Christ coming again and again, such that one person's prayer for a newborn child soon becomes a thick blanket of prayer for one who didn't even know how to ask for prayer at all. (This blanket of prayer never leaves her regardless of the circumstances or time gone by and never loses its insulating power, no matter how many powerful experiences try to penetrate it); One offered sandwich eventually becomes a church's new soup kitchen for a community so hungry on every level that it hurts all of the time so that nutritional needs are met as spiritual ones are filled, so that the downtrodden have newfound hope in God's grand and miraculous world; One neighbor's well-placed call becomes a refurbished house for a veteran home from Afghanistan no longer able to navigate the stairs, making national news and encouraging others to make well placed calls, or contributions of their own.

Such becomes the Grand Miracle in our midst. Beginning with God's grand and miraculous entrance into this world as one with us taking on the image of man in order that mankind might imagine grand and miraculous things, our omnipotent God does, indeed, show us the miraculous and transformative events that need to occur in the world around us. These are events that then do occur because of the force and intention of God's presence, purpose and power, becoming miracles released on the world for us to embrace with what has been labeled "abiding astonishment."¹

As we've been saying through Advent, what we believe about miracles says a lot of what we believe about God. And if we believe in an all powerful God, we know that God is capable of making miracles happen in a manger stall, or in one small life yet to be fully lived, or in a difficult community in need of something to sustain them, or in a household that has experienced a terribly sad change of circumstances. If we can allow ourselves to accept God's powerful truth that miracles do happen, then we need to confront the equally compelling truth that miracles happen in as many forms as there are people to experience them. Our opportunity – yes, our responsibility as children of God– is to participate in this great unfolding of miracles – in the Grand Miracle - in small ways and large ones in order to unleash upon the seemingly hopeless, joyless, disturbed or angry a grand increase of hope, joy, peace and love. We are not to believe for a moment that God's bucket of miracles ever runs out or that one person's miracle cancels out another person's ability to receive one some day, too. But we are to have confidence that Christ's Grand Miracle will bring this same goodness to our lives in whatever mysterious way God has intended since the foundations of the earth were drawn.

Somewhere in between the artist's renderings and our lovely recollections of the miracle birth, the real meaning of Christmas comes to life as a kind of humanization of our faith and the Grand Miracle continues to happen. If you know someone who could use a miracle, may you continue the chain of miracles in this world and participate in the great unfolding that begins. If you're feeling like you need a miracle in your life, participate in a miracle for someone else and watch how that begins to affect your own world. If you're feeling like you're too small or the needs of the world are too big for you to make or have any difference at all, remember that it all began not with a grand delivery in a cold and dirty barn. It all began with a young Jewish girl, kneeling in prayer and listening to the voice of God.² That Grand Miracle unfolding becomes what Howard Thurman wrote as a poem:

The Work of Christmas

When the song of the angels is stilled,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flocks,
The work of Christmas begins:

¹ Martin Buber, *Moses, The Revelation and the Covenant*, pp 65-75

² Reference "The Grand Miracle," an essay written by C.S. Lewis

To find the lost,
To heal the broken,
To feed the hungry,
To release the prisoner,
To rebuild the nations,
To bring peace among brothers,
To make music in the heart.

Amen