

The Miracles of Christmas: The Method

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[0 : 00] Well, thank you to Kathy and Vern for leading us in worship this morning. I hope you all really enjoyed it. They're always a blessing to me, I find. Well, I promised, and here I am, it's a special video that I've recorded because I can't be with you in person.

So it might be a little bit strange to see me up here on the screen instead of down there at the pulpit. I think I got that right. I hope I got that right. But sadly, as I mentioned last week, I have yet to master cloning technology.

And this weekend, Michelle and I are actually in Saskatoon where I'm officiating our nephew's wedding. So it's an interesting time, but here we are, and I'm delighted to be able to be with you in this way.

So I hope this is a blessing to you this morning. Fear not, we will be back next week. That's my plan. God's will will be back.

So let's open in prayer this morning. Lord Jesus, today we stand in awe with grateful hearts at the wonders of your promise to be Emmanuel, God with us, today, tomorrow, and forever.

[1 : 15] You're a God who truly understands our struggles because you lived in our world. You experience life in the same ways that we do.

And Lord, you have compassion on us. You recognize that we are sheep in need of a tender shepherd. Help us to have the same compassion for others, reaching out to love them just as you have loved us.

Lord, with your help, we will seek to keep the promises of Christmas, not just in this season, but in all of our days.

And it's in Christ's name we pray. Amen. Well, I've asked Vern to give me a hand because there are only so many things I can do virtually, right?

I am trapped in this screen, so there's nothing I can do in the church as needed right now. So I've asked Vern to give me a hand lighting the candles in person, our Advent candles.

[2 : 18] So I will lead us through this from afar as Vern lights the candles for you in person. This morning, as we continue in the season of Advent, we are lighting our first and second candles again, which represent hope and love.

And I'll give Vern a moment because I hope the lighter and the candles behave for Vern so that he can love the fact that I asked him to do this for me.

So God bless you as you see those candles lit in person. And this morning, we're also lighting our third candle. And that's the pink candle, which symbolizes joy.

And I'll give us a moment as we have that candle lit. Thank you so much for your help, Vern. Your task is complete, my friend.

You may be seated. Well, today we wish for the world to know the promise fulfilled in our King, the Prince of Peace, the Wonderful Counselor.

[3 : 31] And we declare in the words of Psalm 40, verse 5, Many are the wonders you have done, the things you planned for us, too many to declare.

As we reflect on the wonder of the promise of Christmas, we thank God that all his promises to us are fulfilled in the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

And we also rejoice in God's faithful love, which brings us immeasurable joy. God bless you.

As a child, maybe even still today, have you ever wondered about one of the most miraculous mysteries of Christmas?

Well, of course, what I'm talking about is, how is it possible for Santa to deliver toys to every boy and girl in one night? How does he manage to get it all done in one night?

[4 : 32] Well, billions of gifts to billions of children all over the world, maybe some good adults, too, if they behave, and they're not on the naughty list.

But billions of people all over the world in different time zones and climates, in urban and remote places, it's really quite mind-boggling when you think about it.

And maybe you've wondered that, too. Well, as we continue with a little bit of the backdrop of our sermon series, the movie *Miracle on 34th Street*, in that film, Kris Kringle explains how Santa, him in this case, how he is able to deliver toys to all children in one night.

Well, essentially, he explains that if you could slow down the passage of time, seconds and minutes could begin to seem like hours, hours could stretch into the equivalent of days, and so on.

Well, that's kind of cool, isn't it? That's kind of a neat idea. So, there it is. Now you know. Problem solved. Mystery solved. Now you know how Santa is able to accomplish that amazing distribution all in one night.

[5 : 46] Amazon would be jealous. And so, I'm not there in person, but I can just imagine the expressions on some of your faces. You're not quite sure how to take that explanation, perhaps, right?

I can imagine expressions of doubt. Maybe you think that this message is not only scientifically impossible, but also illogical. Maybe even completely ridiculous.

Bah, humbug, I say. Right? And some of you may even be thinking, okay, finally, here's the moment. We'll remember it forever. Finally, this is a moment where Pastor Kent has lost his mind. He's, all of his marbles have spilled from the bag. What in the world has this got to do with the Christmas story? Well, thanks for asking.

Because God's methods transcend us. Part of the miracle of Christmas is what we're covering in our sermon this morning, titled, *The Miracle of the Method*.

[6 : 55] God's methods, the way God acts, the way God accomplishes things according to his will, are generally beyond our comprehension, aren't they?

In our series, the two series we did on the qualities and characteristics of God, we recognize that fact over and over, that God is beyond our understanding in so many ways.

Paul writes in his doxology in Romans chapter 11, verse 33, Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God.

How unsearchable his judgments and his paths beyond tracing out. As he praises God in this passage, Paul's praise focuses on the greatness and wonder of God.

He reminds us that God's wisdom and knowledge are great beyond measure, and that we can't fully comprehend their depth and breadth. And as we've said before, we simply can't fully understand God, but we can get to know him better, and know him more.

[8 : 09] Paul says that God's judgments and his paths, God's ways of acting and making things happen, God's methods, in other words, are beyond tracing out.

I love that, those words, tracing out. And honestly, when you think about God's methods throughout history, throughout scripture, but in particularly in the Christmas story, does it to you make about as much sense as Kris Kringle's explanation of Santa?

And Santa's methodology? Well, friends, I honestly believe that if we were writing the script for the redemption of mankind, humanity, we might have planned it differently than God did.

Maybe. If God had chosen to reveal himself to us in the biggest, grandest, greatest way possible, with a huge fanfare, and a big reveal, well, that would have made sense, wouldn't it?

But defying our expectations, God came into the world as a helpless, defenseless baby.

[9 : 26] Wait, what? Well, God himself chose to be born to poor, humble parents. He wasn't born in a palace.

He was born in a stable. And as we talked about last week, that stable was more likely a cave than a barn, as we would understand it.

He was born to a young couple whose hearts were pure. They believed and trusted God, but they had no earthly power, no influence, no status in any traditional way.

They were plain, ordinary, obscure individuals. Yet they were the two people that God specifically chose to be the parents of Jesus.

This was an accident. This was intention. This was the plan. We've referred to the words of Isaiah 55, verses 8 and 9 before, as we've considered the way that God thinks and plans, and that it's nothing like the way we might do it.

[10:38] Isaiah 55, 8 and 9 says, For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord. As the heavens are higher than the earth, so my ways are higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.

God's methods, the ways that he accomplishes his will and his plans, are different than our methods. And I think it can be challenging, but we shouldn't be surprised by God's methods. We shouldn't be surprised by the choices that God makes when it comes to choosing the agents of his will. God chose Abraham to leave his home and travel to the promised land. God chose Joseph, the next to youngest son of Jacob, to save his own family. He chose Israel, the least significant tribe and nation, to be his special people. God chose David, the shepherd boy, not any of his more accomplished or skilled older brothers, to become the king of Israel.

[11:55] And God chose Bethlehem, a small, insignificant community in the grand map of Israel, to become his son's hometown.

Do you see that pattern being revealed? God's method being revealed here? Over and over again, to accomplish his grand and awesome plan for humanity and for all of creation, God has chosen plain, ordinary people.

Does that seem illogical or even impossible to you? How impossible is it, how impossible it is rather, for us to understand God's decisions and his methods?

As he tells the story of Christ's birth, Luke notes that Mary and Joseph traveled to Bethlehem to register for the census. And while they're there, the time came for the baby, Jesus, because Mary was pregnant, to be born.

She wrapped her son in cloths and placed him in a manger. You know, I've reflected recently on the word manger. This has struck me for many, many years.

[13:15] The word manger that we use to refer to a feed trough for animals is exactly the same spelling as the French verb manger, which means to eat.

Manger, I believe, was anglicized, English converted, into the word manger. Kind of interesting thought. Side thought.

But ultimately, a manger is a feeding trough for animals. Mary and Joseph stayed in a barn. And maybe you've stayed in some bad hotels before.

I certainly have. I could tell you some terrifying stories. But this place, folks, was literally a hole in the wall. I'm sure Joseph tried to make the best of it, tried to gather some hay for bedding. Maybe he nudged some animals out of the way. Maybe he even shoveled some manure. He probably did. But it was still, ultimately, a barn.

[14:22] Let's recognize now that God's methods, as unknown and as incomprehensible as they can be at times to us, include us.

Not surprisingly, God chose angels to announce the birth of the newborn king. But to whom did they go and share this wonderful and wondrous news?

That's right. Shepherds. Not the people that we would deem to be appropriate. Appropriate status. Appropriate stature to receive the news of the birth of a newborn king like other royalty or even religious leaders or military leaders.

God chose to make this eternity-altering announcement to some average shepherds just going about their daily routine caring for their flocks.

And the more you think about it, the more incredible the whole story becomes. It's really almost unbelievable. It's against all odds, against our expectations, against all logic.

[15:32] But God acts. And God acts in the most unexpected ways. My friends, part of the miracle of Christmas is the miracle of the method.

God uses ordinary people to accomplish extraordinary things. It sure, I don't know about you, but for me, it sure seems impossible at times to understand God's methods and His choices.

Right? At times, doesn't it seem hard to understand? Paul commented on this miracle of the method. He commented that God uses ordinary people to accomplish His extraordinary work in 1 Corinthians 1 verses 26-29 when he wrote, Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards. Not many of you were influential. Not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise.

He chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of the world and the despised things and the things that are not to nullify the things that are so that no one may

boast before Him.

[17:05] Interesting, isn't it? Paul is talking about God's intention of turning our expectations upside down. This upside down kingdom of God.

My friends, God's methods, these unexpected ways He uses people and He uses circumstances, they have not changed.

God still uses ordinary people to accomplish His extraordinary work. And our abilities are not as important as our attitude or our availability.

We need to recognize that. He's not looking for perfect. He's looking for obedient. God will work. God will use us if we are willing.

Just as He did with the early followers of Jesus, God has entrusted us with the good news of salvation. And isn't it a relief to know that God can and will use even the simplest of vessels and servants to accomplish great things?

[18:18] we also need to recognize that God's methods sanctify us. This is another aspect to the miracle of the method that we need to understand.

That just as God is at work in the world in ways that we don't understand or fully comprehend, He is also at work in our lives in the same way.

I think that just as we've recognized that we would write the script differently for how God would redeem humanity, I believe that we would also write the script of our sanctification, our journey towards becoming more like Christ.

I believe we would write that differently as well. Bear with me. If we could, don't you think we'd make it so that every day is a good day?

Every day that we follow Jesus, we are growing closer and closer in our love and devotion towards Him? Doesn't that sound good? I believe we'd make it always unicorns and rainbows, always sunshine and lollipops.

[19:29] We'd never have bad days, never have any problems if we could write the story. We'd be, life would be painless and easy. It'd be filled with the closest things to heavenly bliss that we could possibly imagine until the day when we finally arrive at our eternal home.

My goodness, doesn't that sound good? I don't know any, I don't necessarily know every aspect of your life. I'm not actually sure who will be in the sanctuary at this moment.

But I know many of you, I'm growing to know you more and more all the time and love you more all the time, by the way, as your pastor. But I don't know all of your stories, your personal stories, but I can speak for myself.

And speaking for myself, that's not my experience, that life is not perfect. Certainly doesn't describe my journey. We'd all recognize that we experience problems and pains and pressures.

We experience struggles and sickness. We experience temptations and failures. I don't know about you, but it feels like at times we take one step forward in our spiritual growth, and then at times we may follow that up with three steps backwards.

[20:59] In our lives, victories and celebrations can be followed by, or even accompanied by, defeats and despair. fear. This is not the way we would have it.

This is not the way we would write this. And as you've heard me say before, guess what? This is not how it is meant to be.

I likely can't explain many, if any, of the reasons for the things that have happened in your life, particularly the bad things, or the hard things, or the painful, grief-laden things.

But my friends, I can tell you that when you're going through these circumstances or trials in your life that you don't understand, you are not alone.

You can trust that God is at work in your life. You're also not alone in the fact that you're not the only person who's ever gone through what you're going through. Maybe someone else has come alongside you and said, you know what?

[22:09] I get this, and I'm with you. I will walk with you. I will hold your hand. I have your back. We need to recognize that we can trust that God is at work in our lives.

We can trust that God is at work ultimately for our good. No matter what good or bad things are happening to us, God will ultimately use all of it.

But we must choose to believe that God is working in and through the circumstances of our lives. It's not chance. It's not random. There is a plan.

That plan involves shaping us and molding us so that we can become more like God's Son, more like Jesus. And this requires us to believe that what God has promised us in Romans 8.28. Paul writes, and we know that in all things, God works for the good of those who love Him, who've been called according to His purpose. That doesn't mean that we won't have trouble in our lives. [23 : 20] It doesn't mean that God's ultimate goal is for us to be happy or be rich or be popular. If that's your expectation, I'm here to tell you, you're going to be disappointed.

Largely. Because it's God's will at work, not yours. God's will but what this does mean is that no matter what happens to us, good or bad, God will use all of it according to His will for the perfect plan that He has at work for us.

Even when the angel appeared to Mary to tell her she would give birth to the Son of God, there is no way that Mary could have predicted everything that revelation would mean to and for her. Joseph had no idea what would ultimately be involved when he obediently responded to the angel's message not to divorce Mary but to make her his wife.

Joseph and Mary endured shame and accusation and embarrassment and ridicule but they also experienced the miracle of seeing God become flesh right before their very eyes.

[24 : 42] Have you ever considered that? Joseph and Mary were there when Jesus took His first breath and likely cried in that cool night air. That audience of two unremarkable humans they saw God.

I believe that shame and humiliation that Mary and Joseph endured the cost of obediently following God's plan was ultimately worth the honor and the wonder of drawing near to God.

Well as many of you know I'm a visual thinker in lots of ways and I often picture that God is at work at the loom of our lives.

that He's weaving together everything into what will ultimately be a beautiful tapestry. Question for you have you ever looked at the back of a piece of needlework needlepoint artwork or the backside of a beautiful sweater?

Well often it can be difficult to appreciate the artwork from a limited perspective from perhaps an incorrect perspective but the front reveals a beautiful image.

[26 : 06] Well from our limited perspective here on earth at times I believe that we can get caught up in our perception that things may look ugly. We may get caught up in our circumstances seeming bleak or confusing.

Can you relate to that at times in your life? Has that ever happened to you or is it happening to you now? It can be difficult if not impossible for us to gain an overall perspective on the seemingly random directions our lives have taken.

But my friends one day one day I know we will finally be able to see the beautiful tapestry of our lives that God has been weaving since the beginning.

And when that day comes I believe we may be able to better understand how seasons of pain or struggle brought richness to our lives or helped us to better relate to or care for someone else who is struggling.

Sometimes the worst experiences in our lives God can and will use to bring comfort to someone else who are going through the same kinds of circumstances.

[27 : 28] I believe that ultimately we will see the depth of character and growth revealed through the times of testing and trusting.

Friends we're running a race and the end is in sight but it's not over yet. We must continue to trust that God is at work and that he's working for our good.

So continue to trust even though you don't understand how he is at work in your life. Continue to follow him and your life will be richly blessed.

I promise you that. Friends the miracle of the method is that God uses ordinary people like you and me to accomplish extraordinary things for the sake of his kingdom.

The miracle of the method is that God is also at work in our lives in ways that we do not understand. So in recognizing that choose to trust what we know to be true because of what God has revealed to us through his son.

[28 : 45] choose to believe that God is working in us and through us weaving the beautiful story of our lives into something truly amazing that will ultimately be for our good and for his glory.

Let's pray. God of the universe, heavenly father, oh how wonderful you are. how great are your riches, your wisdom and your knowledge.

We admit that it's impossible for us to completely understand your methods. Your ways are not our ways and your thoughts are not our thoughts. Lord, forgive us for so often trying to fit you into a neat, convenient little box.

we confess that many times we feel frustrated and confused by the things that happen in our lives. Help us to remember that you love us and that you are at work in our lives for our good and for your glory.

Help us to continue to trust that even when we don't understand how you're working, you are working. Lord, you've chosen to use ordinary people to accomplish extraordinary things for your kingdom.

[30 : 15] Please use each one of us. Lord, please use our lives in whatever way you decide to extend your kingdom here on earth.

Thank you for the confidence you have placed in each of us by entrusting to us the responsibility of sharing the good news of salvation with those around us.

Thank you for loving us through all you do in and through our lives. And it's in Jesus' name that we pray. Amen.

Well, we're going to do things a little bit differently this morning as I want to proclaim this benediction over you before I turn things back over to Kathy and Byrne to bless you with a sending song.

My friends, may you go from this place with the hope, the love, and the joy of the Advent season, bringing you comfort as you head off into your week.

[31 : 20] Go in the peace and blessing of Emmanuel, God with us, and God with you. God bless.

God bless. God bless. God bless.