

Nativity of Our Lord (Christmas Eve): "The Rest Is Tinsel"

Luke 2:1-14

December 24, 2022

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

The Christmas season didn't start out so well this year. I realized in mid-November that I'd forgotten to mark my calendar for the first Saturday after Halloween so Pastor Mark and I could go to the Christmas tree farm, Facetime Kristiane, and choose a tree to reserve for cutting in December. We have a tradition of going there early on the first day it's open so we'll have the pick of the litter: a grandfather Christmas tree that reaches to the ceiling and spreads its boughs wide to hold lots of our precious ornaments. It's a point of pride that we reserve a beauty and don't have to settle later in the season for a Charlie Brown Christmas tree.

Because of my oversight Pastor Mark & I didn't go to the Christmas tree farm 'til December 2nd, a month after it opened. We chose the best of what was left.... I looked at it and announced, "It's going to be fine, if we angle it **just right** so that section of bare trunk isn't **too** noticeable ☺."

Many if not most of us have lived long enough that we don't expect our Christmases to be perfect. The last 2 pandemic Christmases have driven home **that** lesson, especially the first one in 2020, before the COVID vaccine came out. No Saints & Sinners Christmas party, no Advent pageant, livestreamed instead of in-person worship, or for the hardiest folks, the option of **outdoor** worship, even in December.... Out-of-state folks missing from the celebration, because it was too risky to fly.... Local family members missing because they'd tested positive. (Actually, that last part is current and not just old news.) Remember the mad scramble for an appointment to be tested at urgent care or to purchase a home testing kit? A memory I have of Christmas Eve Day, 2020, is of a line snaking all the way around the Campbell's Pharmacy building, masked folks waiting in a very long line, because word had spread like wildfire that they'd gotten a new shipment of COVID tests.

This year the bomb cyclone storm which sent the polar vortex barreling all the way down to Texas has prevented a lot of people from reaching their Christmas destinations. The “triple-demic” of flu, RSV and COVID has hospital ER’s jammed and pharmacies running low on fever and cold meds. The economy has made it a challenge for many to pay even basic bills. The War in Ukraine, political upheaval in South (and North) America, Congressional hearings, Supreme Court rulings: take your pick of the many international and domestic situations that may have robbed you of peace this past year. And none of that is to mention personal or family crises that may have been taking a daily toll on your body and spirit.

A church friend recently asked me why Jesus has to come again. I could only say: there’s still so much that’s wrong and needs to be forgiven, that’s broken and needs to be made whole, so many who are sick and need to be healed, so much in our natural world that’s withering and needs to be revived, so much that’s dead and needs to be raised. These are the reasons our Lord has to come again and why He came the first time, too! It all falls under the umbrella of the glad and perfect fulfillment of God’s promise, to send a Savior in the fullness of time.

We see miracles as the breakthrough of God’s love and power in “can’t-be-missed,” newsworthy, huge kinds of ways, right? Miracles are signs, reminders, wake-up calls to recognize God’s blinding light illuminating our lives, God’s eternal love for us, God’s limitless power to save us. Christmas is often a time for the press to give shout-outs to miracles: ‘must be the influence of the holiday spirit ☺. Acknowledging one miracle opens up our hearts and minds to detecting and embracing others. I googled “2022 miracles” and came up with stories of physical healings and spiritual apparitions. (Comically, the search also turned up an article about **Miracle-Gro’s** quarterly dividends!) My favorite 2022 miracle story, though, came from the Rosamund Gifford Zoo in Syracuse. It has to do with babies, and so does Christmas, so here goes ☺.

Asian elephants Mali & Doc were the expectant parents. The blessed event happened just past “a midnight clear,” 2 a.m. on October 24. Their bouncing baby boy calf was safely born and weighed in at a whopping 220 pounds. 9 hours later, surprise, surprise! Not the placenta, but another set of rear feet appeared, to be followed by the entirety of another baby elephant, also a male, weighing in at 237 pounds. This 2nd, not-so-little guy was weaker, needing oxygen and 40 minutes of intense care to be stabilized.

The safe birth of twin elephants in the U.S. has been met with sheer amazement, worldwide. It has been labeled a miracle. “You can’t get rarer than this,” said one elephant expert.¹ Twins occur in less than 1% of all elephant pregnancies. Most often 1 or both of the calves arrive stillborn or die shortly after birth, and not uncommonly the elephant mother dies as well. Not so this Oct. in Syracuse, by God’s grace. This unheard of, unexpected set of births, previously on **no one’s** radar, has caused rejoicing among animal and elephant lovers everywhere. The two calves, named Yaad and Tukada, Hindi for “memory” and “chip,” are precious additions to an endangered species of just 20,000 Asian elephants, worldwide. These little guys have beat the odds, and are receiving lots of TLC as well as press up in Syracuse, in hopes they will live long and thrive. Mali’s first 2 calves (born as singletons) both died in December of ’20. Those of us who love animals know that they are capable of grief. So they must also be capable of joy. I for one am betting Mali & Doc are taking great joy in their giant babies. Christmas miracles come in many sizes. The first and best one was nowhere near 220 or 287 pounds. He was probably closer to 6 or 7 or 8 pounds.

Toward the end of 9 months, Mary, the mother of our Lord, may have felt her pregnancy seemed endless, like many other human mothers do. But the gestation of Asian elephants is at least twice as long: 18-22 months.² Long time to wait. But **worth** the wait. For 9 months Mary

awaited the birth of a child, a son, and for 1,000 years the Jewish people awaited the arrival of a Messiah. They waited and hoped for 1,000 years for the fulfillment of God's promise: One who would deliver them. **The Incarnation of our Lord, twinned with His Resurrection, are the greatest miracles of all:** in this world, in this universe, in all the galaxies. The story is so familiar, we **could** lose our sense of awe, unless we enter the story fresh each year, bringing our evolving story, our updated autobiography to the One who lies in the manger: the story of this year's victories, crash-and-burn episodes, exciting and nerve-wracking beginnings, sad or satisfying but necessary endings, public joys and private sorrows, shining moments and shameful interludes, Charlie Brown Christmas trees and award-winning efforts.

As I write this, what I **thought** would be the Charlie Brown Christmas tree stands in the parsonage living room. It reaches the ceiling. It is softly lit with a garland of lights. Its boughs are long and loose in a lovely sort of way. There is room for ornaments to breathe and dangle freely between and among the boughs, though thus far only 1 glass ball adorns it. Its beauty is a blessed surprise to me. As is my Savior's love. "Everything else is tinsel," except for my Savior: who forgives what I have forgotten and also forgives what I have remembered too well for too long. Who loves me and gave myself for me. Because of whom I can say, along with St. Paul, "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me." That is a Christmas miracle, indeed. Amen.

¹"Miracle elephants at the Rosamond Zoo," localsyr.com, Dec. 13, 2022.

²Martin Montague, "Elephant gestation period longer than any living mammal," bbcearth.com.

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