

These Holy Days: *Expect a Miracle*

Rev. Scott McGinnis - First Presb. Church of Newton, KS - Nov. 28, 2021 - Week 1

I'd like you to rank a few Christmas characters for me. I'd like to know our congregations favorites and least favorites. So when I ask you if you like one, I'd like you to raise your hand. You can also give a So-So response.

Who likes the Grinch? _____

Who likes Santa? _____

Who likes Charlie Brown at Christmas? _____

Frosty the Snowman? _____ He's a very jolly soul.

Who likes Rudolph, the clay-mation Rudolph, not the cartoon? _____

Who likes Scrooge McDuck? _____

And finally, who likes the baby Jesus? _____

Jesus came all cuddly and wrapped in cloth and lying in a manger, but that really doesn't compete with jolly Santa and his red suit and a bag of gifts. But don't blame Hollywood for that. Maybe Kris Kringle should have thought once or twice about naughty and nice, and just prayed for people, instead of giving presents and lumps of coal.

You know when we look to people to answer our prayers or to fulfill our dreams, we sometimes lose sight of Jesus in our lives. Consider the primary things Jesus gave people. It wasn't wealth or power or fame that so much of our society esteems as the most valuable.

Jesus didn't come bearing gifts for us, He was given gifts of frankincense and myrrh. Jesus didn't come to be famous. He wasn't trying to make the newspapers or get a tv show.

Why? Because Jesus was not the messiah most people were expecting and hoping for. He resisted the world's obsessions with wealth, pleasure, power, and recognition.

Think about Jesus. He identified with the weak and powerless, the widow and the orphan. That doesn't make you famous. Jesus defended the sinner by taking the wrap for them. That doesn't win a lot of friends for you.

And the amazing thing is, if you think of Jesus hanging out with harlots and tax collectors, then the amazing thing is, Jesus was the embodiment of God's values and priorities. God loves sinners. Those are the kind of people Jesus came to be friends with, because Jesus wanted to do a miracle in their lives and then do miracles through them.

It's amazing, the people we might not want to associate with, Jesus did and because of that miracle, we celebrate His birth at Christmas. I don't know about you, but this gives me hope. Hope for myself and hope for friends who seem too far from God to know Him.

Christmas is about a miracle. And miracles don't just happen – they are born through labors and pain. A miracle is a unique event in the world that God does. And

so often, God does it through His people. Consider Moses in the Old Testament parting the waters of the Red Sea. God did the miracle, because Moses was faithful to follow God's lead. And even today, in 2021, God works in the same way through people like you and me. Very often when God wants to do something in the world, God does it through His people.

Next year we're going to participate in the Good Neighbor Experiment again, but now with some of the churches of the Southern Kansas Presbytery and some Newton churches will join us. We're going to be part of something God wants to do in the world: *He wants to love our neighbors.*

Jesus came 2000 years ago into the world at a time where there was great cultural upheaval. Things had changed and were changing. The Romans had taken over Israel and the Jews were a defeated minority believing in God amidst the pluralism of Rome. The time was dark, their hope was dim, and into that silent night a prophecy was fulfilled. A child was born. Let me read for you from Isaiah 9 about this prophecy.

Isaiah 9:2-7 (NRSV) The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness--on them light has shined. You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as people exult when dividing plunder. For the yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their

oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian. For all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood shall be burned as fuel for the fire. For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.

And from chapter 7, Isaiah 7:14 (NIV) Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.

You know, the Prophet Isaiah was a failed preacher. The sermons he gave were written down, but you know they didn't change the people of Israel when he preached to them. They didn't cause the Israelites to be more faithful to God. They didn't make them better stewards of the resources God gave them. They didn't restore the Temple during Isaiah's preaching.

But Isaiah faithfully preached and his words were written and then a few hundred years later his faithfulness paid off. Jesus quoted these Isaiah 61 words in the Temple in Luke 4:18-21.

Isaiah 61:1-3 NRSV

The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me,
because the Lord has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim freedom for the captives
and release from darkness for the prisoners,
2 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor
and the day of vengeance of our God,
to comfort all who mourn,
3 and provide for those who grieve in Zion—
to bestow on them a crown of beauty
instead of ashes,
the oil of joy
instead of mourning,
and a garment of praise
instead of a spirit of despair.
They will be called oaks of righteousness,
a planting of the Lord
for the display of his splendor.

We will be called “**Oaks of Righteousness**” because of Jesus.
I love that. Jesus brought God's light into the Roman
world and it still shines bright today.

I suppose that's why we like twinkling lights at Christmas.
Something in us is wired to like light and share God's light
into the world. Oh, sometimes we just mistake shiny cars
and diamond rings for the light we love.

But here's a question for you: Who do you know that brings light into the world at Christmas? Who shares God's love and brightens the world during the holidays? I can think of Penny Dugan at New Jerusalem Mission. I can think of many others here.

So many of you are good at card giving ministries. I know more than one of you is, because I've received some thoughtful and encouraging cards from you. You do it naturally. I want you to consider sending a card to invite someone to church this Advent. Tell them you'd love to invite them to church and then you'd like to take them to a Christmas lunch after, your treat. *Or my treat, if you bring them to church, I'll buy them lunch.* Just making sure you're listening.

This doesn't have to be the person who would never ever go to church, just someone who isn't here that you'd like to have lunch with and you're willing to take the risk and invite them to church first. Next week is our children's musical. Invite them to that and lunch afterwards.

Now here's some homework for everyone, what new traditions can you start this year to focus your attention on the light of Jesus this Christmas? Consider this, miracles are conceived and delivered through ordinary people who are willing to dream God's dreams and then act on God's vision.

Are you ready for God to create a Christmas miracle through you?