



What Do You Hope Will Happen This Christmas?

What's Your Opinion of Miracles?

Back in 1975, the band Jefferson Starship had a number one song entitled "Miracles". The singer asked his girlfriend if she believed in miracles like he did which is not exactly wondering if someone thinks the dead can be raised or the angels come to shepherds in the fields at night, but it still reminds us that it is almost universal the hope that miracles can still take place. The Christmas season brings out this longing and it is found in nearly all the stories that are told during this holiday. We can say they are fantasies but almost every time, a miracle is a major part of Christmas stories. Traditional and not traditional Christmas tales all have the supernatural in them. Last year my wife and I watched a movie about a young woman whose life was a wreck. Depressed and without purpose, she felt ugly because a heart transplant left her chest with a great scar running down it. Then she met a handsome young man who taught her about compassion and the value of considering the needs of others. She began to volunteer at a homeless shelter, and she found new joy and purpose. It turns out in the movie that the guy she met who changed her life was actually the one whose heart she received in a heart transplant after he died when killed as he was riding his bike. It was of course a supernatural story and doesn't try to be something else. The Nutcracker is a tale of toys supernaturally coming alive. Santa Claus himself is filled with the supernatural. How else could he get to every home in the world and somehow bring presents to every one of them if not for miraculous abilities? Frosty the snow man is the tale of three lumps of snow that come to life miraculously. Polar Express is about faith in the supernatural. A Christmas Carol is built on the premise that an old miser is transformed by a supernatural night. Christmas is the time when the miraculous is on the minds of everyone, believers, and unbelievers alike, children as well as adults.

When you study the two accounts of Jesus as a baby, you find that nearly in every way, they describe something that was if perhaps a bit extraordinary, not beyond reason. Take for example, the reporting of the historian Luke. He tells us that Mary, in the ninth month of her pregnancy had to go with her husband Joseph ninety miles south to Bethlehem due to the policy of the Roman government. **Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.** (Luke 2:4-7 NIV)

What strikes you here is that it is so very ordinary, perhaps not for us but two thousand years ago, it easily could have taken place without a scintilla of doubt that it really happened that way. Forced to leave home in Nazareth because the Romans demanded everyone at that time register in the town of their birth, Joseph and Mary followed the demands of the law and being poor and the town where they were having more visitors than beds available for travelers, the baby Jesus was delivered in a stable and a bed was made for him in a manger. It isn't like Mary gave birth to a dragon or a wizard turned the stable into a palace. The

narration is quite easy to accept as true. Luke then goes on to tell us that the young family had visitors. Shepherds were nearby. And that is when the supernatural came into play.

An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests." (Luke 2:9-14 NIV) In an instant, whatever unbelief the shepherds had about God or angels or even heaven was shattered by the miracle of the supernatural. Everything that was so normal and regular in every way suddenly wasn't and it is clear from the reaction of the shepherds, they knew it wasn't because they rushed off to see the baby in the manger that before this was completely uninteresting to them. It was so intense, this supernatural miracle, that the shepherds even left behind their sheep to see the newborn child.

Let's turn to the second account and see what you think. Matthew, who was one of the original twelve disciples and also privy to the witnesses who took part in the early hours and weeks of Jesus' life tells us that there were a small group of scholars living somewhere east of Israel who noticed something in the sky that caught their attention. **After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him."** (Matthew 2:1-2 NIV) We can't say exactly who these travelers were. Magi is not an easily translated term. Some have rendered it wise men and others kings. We really don't know much about their lives except they came from the east, maybe Persia or as far as India and they most likely were wealthy based on the gifts they brought. They certainly were stargazers as they noticed something it seems no one else gave much thought. The Magi saw a star that they guessed had two significant aspects to it. The star was associated with Judea and meant that a king of the Jews had been born, one important enough to make them willing to travel a great distance to come see. That in itself is not supernatural or even mind-blowing. Fascinating maybe. Inspiring even. It's not miraculous.

Matthew tells us that King Herod, who was always jealous for his throne and had already killed more than a few who he thought were threats to his rule tried to get the Magi to go see the baby who was to be the future king of Judea and then return and let him know where he was so he too could worship the child. Not recognizing the threat Herod was to the child's life, the Magi headed for Bethlehem after finding out that that was the location prophesied by the Hebrew Scriptures of where the promised king would be born. All of this, even if it is not very common or a normal part of your or my experience, is nonetheless still not astounding. What happened next is.

After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. (Matthew 2:9-10 NIV) It is true that many readers of this account try to figure out some what to make this star guide natural and explainable by science. You may have heard it said that even now there is a star much like the one back then, a visual bunching of multiple planets together so that a great glow in the sky took place then like now and that was how the Magi were guided to Judea. That may in fact be true. It could have been a natural cosmic occurrence that grabbed the Magi's attention and pulled them to Judea. That does not however explain how a star could get them to a particular house at a tiny village in Judea. How did a natural phenomenon bring them to the exact spot where Jesus was with His parents? That is not natural or explainable without a supernatural component to it.

So we have this miracle, a star that situated itself on the precise house where the Magi needed to go, and it showed them the spot where the true King of kings and Lord of lords was staying. Out of all this activity that

can be explained as the stuff of human effort and natural circumstances and resources is this star that moves the Magi to the one location in the universe where they can find the proverbial needle in the haystack, the prophesied Savior of the world. We have recorded by two very credible sources a series of events that were natural and a part of the normal human experience. Both however add one very supernatural detail. A great host of angels in one account and a heavenly star in another. Let us consider one more detail that needs to be noted. The magi brought specific gifts to Jesus. Much has been made of their spiritual significance but lets just give thought to the very practical side of them. **On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh.** (Matthew 2:11 NIV)

Matthew gets it right about the presents. They were treasures. The gold, incense and myrrh were high end gifts, pricey and extravagant. This was a great fortune for impoverished peasants like Joseph and Mary and their infant son Jesus. They were much more than symbolic items intended to remind the family of the calling of the newborn. They were the means of survival. Immediately after the Magi were warned in a dream to stay away from Herod and go home another way, something similar happened with Joseph. **When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. "Get up," he said, "take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him."** (Matthew 2:13 NIV) Now we can argue the case that the dream both the Magi and Joseph had warning them of Herod's wicked plan was supernatural or not and I believe it was, but the point is that an impoverished family had to make the long journey, most likely by foot, to Egypt and settle there for what could have been quite a long time. How were they going to finance this trip? What were they going to do to pay for lodging in Egypt and get food to eat? We have our answer in the gifts of the Magi.

The miracle of the star, the supernatural guide to where Jesus was led to something quite earthy and practical. The Magi were able to finance the mad dash of Jesus and His family to safety. **So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: "Out of Egypt I called my son."** (Matthew 2:14-15 NIV) God did not send angel armies to the defense of His Son. No bolts of fire rescued Him from Herod. Just the very secular and common place method of giving the family of Jesus some extra money to hide out for a while in the obscurity of Egypt. Carefully consider God's normal way of dealing with crisis. He uses regular people like you to get done what needs to happen. The supernatural sight of the star grabs our attention but shouldn't the faithful actions of the Magi say much more to us of God and His work in the world. They brought the gifts that Jesus and His parents needed to escape the evil Herod.

Is it possible the Magi never knew what a critical part they played in God's plan to keep the family of Jesus safe? Do you ever notice how you fit into the supernatural designs of God? If you are aligned with God and your heart is devoted to Him, you can be just as important and equally supernatural in your daily activities. Think of it! God could use something you say, a kind deed you do, your attention to another person, a prayer you utter to save a life, to turn a family around, to push back evil. Do you believe in the miracle of you...of God in you? You could be someone's answer to prayer, the means by which a soul's cry to God for help gains relief. I find it amazing that nearly all of the most inspirational Christmas songs were written by those who never lived to see their phenomenal popularity and how inspiring they became to millions. A number of the Christmas carols we don't even know the name of who wrote them. Although they may have felt small and insignificant, their lives weren't because God had access to them. Perhaps the greatest miracle of all when it comes to Christmas is not the virgin birth, it is that Mary was willing to let God use her in any way He saw fit.

Keep your eyes open and your mind alert to Christ. You just might be the miracle someone is longing for today. You may not even know the impact you have made on others and yet you are a gift to someone; the

power of God come to life for someone. Your smile, your kindness, your generosity, your thoughtful care may be just what God has in mind to turn a life around and make this Christmas that person's miracle.