

MIRACLE ON 35TH STREET
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1 Thessalonians 3:9-13 (The Message)

What would be an adequate thanksgiving to offer God for all the joy we experience before him because of you? We do what we can, praying away, night and day, asking for the bonus of seeing your faces again and doing what we can to help when your faith falters.

May God our Father himself and our Master Jesus clear the road to you! And may the Master pour on the love so it fills your lives and splashes over on everyone around you, just as it does from us to you. May you be infused with strength and purity, filled with confidence in the presence of God our Father when our Master Jesus arrives with all his followers.

(1 Thessalonians 3:9-13 NRSV) How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy that we feel before our God because of you? {10} Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you face to face and restore whatever is lacking in your faith. {11} Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus direct our way to you. {12} And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you. {13} And may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.

Miracle on 34th Street is one of my favorite movies of all times. As I watched it again this week, I was struck by the many, many positive messages that are in the movie.

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But have you ever wondered — just, what is the miracle on 34th street? I mean what do you think the director saw as the miracle?

I pondered that question repeatedly this week.

- was it the policy change that Macy's Department store took
- or Macy and Gimble shaking hands
- Kris being declared as Santa Claus by the courts
- or maybe it was Kris getting the X-Ray machine for his friend
- or at the end of the movie when Doris and Fred find the house

Today we embark on the season of Advent, a short four week period of time which is a time of repentance, preparation, and expectation.

But the strange thing is that it begins with a picture of the end of the world.

Listen to these words from Luke's Gospel (21:25-36)

"It will seem like all hell has broken loose—sun, moon, stars, earth, sea, in an uproar and everyone all over the world in a panic, the wind knocked out of them by the threat of doom, the powers-that-be quaking.

"And then—then!—they'll see the Son of Man welcomed in grand style—a glorious welcome! When all this starts to happen, up on your feet. Stand tall with your heads high. Help is on the way!"

He told them a story. "Look at a fig tree. Any tree for that matter. When the leaves begin to show, one look tells you that summer is right around the corner. The same here—when you see these things happen, you know God's kingdom is about here. Don't brush this off: I'm not just saying this for some future generation, but for this one, too—these things will happen. Sky and earth will wear out; my words won't wear out.

"But be on your guard. Don't let the sharp edge of your expectation get dulled by parties and drinking and shopping. Otherwise, that Day is going to take you by complete surprise, spring on you suddenly like a trap, for it's going to come on everyone, everywhere, at once. So, whatever you do, don't go to sleep at the switch. Pray constantly that you will have the strength and wits to make it through everything that's coming and end up on your feet before the Son of Man."

As we hear this story — there is little doubt that Jesus is thinking of his own demise as he preaches prophetically about the destruction of the world people knew.

And indeed, in less than forty years, about 70 A.D., the Romans put down the last Jewish uprising, destroyed the temple, and the world for the Jews ended. Remember, the Temple was the center of the world for Jews, who still today mourn its loss.

Jesus' words should give us a chill down the spine as we hear them today.

"It will seem like all hell has broken loose—sun, moon, stars, earth, sea, in an uproar and everyone all over the world in a panic, the wind knocked out of them by the threat of doom, the powers-that-be quaking.

It sounds as if Jesus was talking about today.

Trying to explain this passage as simply fixed in time is not a helpful exercise. It is just as relevant today as it was 2,000 years ago.

Sometimes you have to say things in a prophetic way to get people's attention. Sometimes you have to tell people the awful truth:

that things are a mess and we are all somehow responsible for it.

Sometimes you have to say disturbing things to get people agitated enough to change their behavior.

And that seems to be what Jesus was doing.

Not long ago a couple went to a church, a large and prosperous one, for the first time. As they walked down a corridor they smiled at a number of people, but no one greeted them. Everyone was preoccupied with herding the choir and acolytes, getting business attended to about the coming bazaar, and depositing their children in Sunday school. As they entered the church, an usher in the back handed them a bulletin while engaged in earnest conversation with someone else, his face turned away from them. Afterward, the couple agreed the congregation was too preoccupied to engage in the simple act of hospitality.

And so are we, too preoccupied. Eugene Peterson translates part of this passage from Luke today, "Don't let the sharp edge of your expectation get dulled by parties and drinking and shopping" (Luke 21:34). A season of preparation and expectation should permeate all that we do, from expecting and welcoming visitors, to focusing on what's really important: our relationship with God and the Messiah who is to come.

Advent is a season of miracles.

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That seems to me to be the real miracle that takes place on 34th street.

Fred learning to believe.

And when Doris writes her letter to Kris, she too learning to believe

Fred says:

Faith is believing in things when common sense tells you not to.

What miracle do you need this Advent season?

What do you need to believe in that common sense tells you not to?

I don't know about you, but as I think about all of the things that I have to DO

before December 25th, all the things that occupy my schedule and I begin to feel a little overwhelmed.

Common sense tells us to get wrapped up in all the holiday parties, the band concerts, the Christmas pageants, the shopping trips, etc, etc.

The miracle that I need, is to give me the change of attitude that Paul urges in Thessalonians.

May God our Father himself and our Master Jesus clear the road to you!
And may the Master pour on the love so it fills your lives and splashes over on everyone around you, just as it does from us to you. May you be infused with strength and purity, filled with confidence in the presence of God our Father when our Master Jesus arrives with all his followers.

What kind of attitude does Paul call us to?

An attitude of love that fills our lives and splashes over on everyone around us.

One of the most stirring indictments on the church ever penned was made by Charles Schultz many years ago. Snoopy is shivering out in a snowstorm beside an empty food dish. He was looking longingly, expectantly, toward the house. Lucy came out and said, "Go in peace, be warmed and filled!" And then she turned and went back into the house and slammed the door. In the last frame you saw a confused Snoopy looking toward the house, shivering and hungry and utterly baffled.

To make known the love of Christ takes more than words -- it takes action; it entails results. Sharing this "love-known" should take the form of a certain amount of sacrifice.

Part of what makes so annoying those people who buttonhole you on the street, or at a party, or in the middle of your workday to "share" with you -- either their failures or their faith -- is that they aren't "sharing" at all. They may be foisting. They may be dumping or unloading. They may even be exhorting. But they are not sharing.

Lucy didn't "share" anything with poor, shivering Snoopy. She did not have to sacrifice any of her time, her money, her space, her heart, her feelings or her needs in order to make that speech. To make the love of Christ known genuinely, to proclaim that love to the world accurately, means we must redound Christ's sacrificial nature in our own lives.

Let's play that scene from the church again: It's Sunday morning. A couple arrives for the first time and they are greeted at the door by someone who says, "Welcome. May I sit with you this morning?" After Church, they are invited to get a cup of coffee and introduced to the pastors, and others. It's all about them, and suddenly they're not

strangers, but part of a new community of welcome and light instead of the preoccupied one above.

That's the kind of Miracle that we need on 35th street.

Believing, do things, even when common sense tells you not too.

Story of Nancy Bassett.

I believe in miracles — How about you?