Christmas Eve 1996
THE MIRACLE OF CHRISTMAS

The biggest miracles in the world are often described in simple language with few words. “And she gave birth to her first-born son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger because there was no room in the inn.” “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.”

The biggest miracles and saving events are born small, and at the time they occur, they do not attract attention or make headlines because they are not recognized as being anything special. When they happen, they are not thought of as miracles because they seem to be nothing out of the ordinary.

We often have trouble paying attention to the ordinary. Maybe that’s because we’ve seen too many movies, like those made by Cecil B. DeMille, where everything important is big, sensational, expensive, and with a cast of thousands. As a result, we miss the real miracles that are often hidden in the ordinary events of life.

We need a different definition or understanding of “miracles.” Willa Cather, in her novel Death Comes for the Archbishop, describes miracles this way: “Miracles seem to me to rest not so much upon faces or voices or healing power coming suddenly near to us from afar off, but upon our perceptions being made finer, so that for a moment our eyes can see and our ears can hear what is there about us always.”

Augustine put it another way many years ago: “Miracles do not happen in contradiction of nature, but in contradiction of what we know about nature.” Or as another observer said, “Our idea of how things work is based on too narrow a set of data.”

Perhaps the most practical advice about miracles came from Albert Einstein: “There are only two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as if everything is.” Choose!

The miracle of Christmas reminds us that the most influential events in this world turn out to be not the noisy affairs that split our eardrums and dominate the headlines, but rather the embryonic, little-known, almost imperceptible things that occur. A baby is born to a peasant woman in a stable in Bethlehem. What a change that has made in the world.

On December 1, 1955, a woman no one had ever heard of refused to give up her seat to a white person on a city bus in Montgomery, Alabama. She was arrested and taken to jail. No newspaper or radio station thought it important enough to mention. One ordinary, hardworking woman, Rosa Parks, refused to give up her seat because she had paid her fare. From that small incident came the Montgomery Bus Boycott, and a young minister became a leader — Martin Luther King, Jr. The movement for equal rights spread to every part of the country.

No magazine that year named Rosa Parks’ refusal to give up her seat on a public bus as one of the biggest stories. In contrast, I saw a magazine last week that named what it considered to be the 96 biggest stories in 1996. The editors claimed the number one biggest story was the announcement that Michael Jackson and his new wife were going to have a baby, and the

second biggest story was the birth of a child to Madonna. The other 94 biggest stories were also about celebrities.

God's miracles most frequently take place through the ordinary and unnoticed events of life. That's the miracle of Christmas.

God's chosen way of coming into the world and into our lives is always low-key, almost casual. That's why so many people don't recognize the true miracles when they happen.

God shuns the spectacular and prefers the ordinary. What is more ordinary and at the same time more miraculous than the birth of a baby? God has a way of appearing to be less than God really is, appearing as a child born in humble surroundings and obscurity.

As a young man, Jesus became an itinerant teacher, who was considered by the authorities and the powerful to be primarily a nuisance. Later, he was arrested, put on trial, and then executed. By many, he was forgotten. Yet the love of God present in Jesus could not be stopped by his death. Every time we kill God's love, it is resurrected and becomes more powerful than before.

God chooses and works through ordinary people and everyday events — that's the miracle of Christmas.

The miracle of Christmas is part of its mystery. Christmas reminds us again and again that God cannot be easily explained or contained in any formula, dogma, or creed. "God's ways are not our ways, nor God's thoughts our thoughts."

Children instinctively sense the miracle and mystery of Christmas. We adults know the mystery too. We know that the older we grow, the more mysterious life becomes. We sometimes tell young people that when they grow up, they will know more, but that is only partially true. A person might know more facts and may gain wisdom from experience, but it's also true that an increasing experience of life only deepens the sense of mystery. We realize that the more we know, the more we recognize how much we don't know.

The same is true of our relationship with God. The deeper that relationship becomes, the more we experience the mystery of God.

Miracle and mystery are present in all of life. Not too many years ago, space and time seemed relatively simple. Mystery was downplayed. Now we are told that space is curved, and we ask whether we are in time or if time is in us.

Causality was once thought to be straightforward, a chain of cause and effect. But now we are told that no new event can be fully explained by its antecedents, not even in nature. In every new event, there is evidence of unpredictable newness.

We can get so involved in day-to-day details that we not only miss the miracle of Christmas, but we also miss the miracles that surround us day after day.

On this Christmas Eve, here are three things you can do to let the miracle of Christmas come alive in your life.

First, let the miracle of Christmas — God in a baby in a manger — remind you of the miracles present in every aspect of your life. If you do nothing else this Christmas, take time to pause, stop, wonder, stand in awe, reflect, and be aware of God's miracles all around you.

Second, to be aware of miracles, you need to have a healthy distrust of dogmatism. By "dogmatism," I mean formulas or creeds that claim to contain all the truth. They may point to the truth, but that's different from having all the truth.

The miracle of Christmas says that whenever you see anyone standing over against the mystery of life, whipping off finalities as though they could explain all mystery and every miracle — be careful. In the field of religion, especially, there are always individuals and groups who claim to know completely and finally God's will for every situation. Those kinds of people missed the miracle of the first Christmas and still miss miracles all around them today.

God is working, but in God's own way and in God's own time. How much do we really know about life? Why is there so much good in the world? Why is it that those who seek to save their lives lose them, and those who give their lives away find them? It's a miracle.

The miracle of Christmas tells us that God comes to us in mysterious ways — in a manger and on a cross.

The third suggestion for rediscovering the miracle of Christmas is this: the story has as its main theme, God's unconditional and redeeming love. God works in quiet and humble ways.

God enters our daily life in the same way as each one of us came into the world: as a baby. The child grows up and speaks words that others had spoken before, but with new emphasis and authority. Then he is crucified. And his followers, who were loved by him and loved him in return, become convinced that he has overcome even death. Then a strange community called the church becomes the body of Christ. What a mysterious and yet miraculous way to change the world.

Who could have imagined such a miracle? But then, God's ways are not always our ways.

This Christmas, ponder once again the miracles all around you. Look carefully at each person in your household, from the youngest to the oldest — God's love is present in each one of them. Each one is a miracle of God.

Look at yourself — you too are a miracle of God. Amen.