CHRISTMAS EVE 1996

THE MIRACLE OF CHRISTMAS

The biggest miracles in the world are 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 do not attract attention or make the 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 much attention to the ordinary. Maybe that's because we have seen too many Cecil B. DeMille movies and others like them, where everything that is considered important is big, sensational, expensive, with a cast of thousands so 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 in 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. He said, "Miracles do not happen in contradiction of nature, but in contradiction of what we know about nature." Or as another observor 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 ear drums and dominate the headlines, but rather the embryonic, little known and almost imperceptible things that

occur. A baby is born of 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, and 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 from that a young minister became a leader--Martin Luther King, Jr., and the movement for equal rights spread to every part of the country.

No magazine that year named the refusal of Rosa Parks 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 of the magazine claimed the number one biggest story of 1996 was the announcement that Michael Jackson and his new wife are going to have a baby, and the second biggest story was the birth of a child to Madonna. The other 94 biggest stories also are 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

in 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 a as 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 and by many he was forgotten. Yet the love of God present in Jesus could not be stopped by his death. Everytime we kill God's

love, it is resurrected and is 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 the mystery of Christmas. We adults know the mystery too. We know that the older we grow the more mysterious life is. We sometimes say to young people that when they grow up, they will

know more, but that is only partially true. A person might know more as far as facts are concerned and may have gained the wisdom of experience and perspective, but it's also true that an increasing experience of life only deepens the sense of mystery. We know that the more we know the more there is that we don't know.

The same is true of our relationship with God. The more we deepen that relationship the more mystery there is about 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 of time if we are in time or if time is in us?

Causality was taken to be a straight-forward affair, a chain with alternate links called cause and effect. But now we are told that no new event can be fully explained by its antecedents, not even in nature; for 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 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 that are present in every aspect of your life. If you do

nothing else this Christmas, take time to pause, stop, wonder, stand in awe, reflect, to be aware of God's miracles all around you.

Second, to be aware of miracles, you need to have a distrust of dogmatism. By "dogmatism" I mean those formulas or creeds which claim to have all the truth contained in them. They might point to the truth but that's different than 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 he or she 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 kind of people missed completely the miracle of the first Christmas and they 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, in all our knowledge, know about life really?
Why is there so much good in the world? Why is it that those who seek to save their lives will 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 about 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 this world in the same way as each one of us came into the world, in a baby. The child grows up and speaks words which others had spoken but with a new emphasis and authority. Then he is crucified. And the conviction is given to those who followed him and were loved by him and loved him in return, 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've 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.