

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,  
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, December 21, 2014**

**MYSTERY AND MIRACLE**

**John 1:1-14**

Mystery and miracle. Not every mystery is miraculous in nature. But every miracle, I think, has an element of mystery in it. This is undoubtedly true when we consider the message of Christmas. The message of the Incarnation – that God actually took on our flesh and blood in the person of Jesus Christ and came to live among us as a real human being who was like us in every way, except that, unlike all of us, He was without sin; and that Jesus, being fully God and fully man, came to save us from the hell of eternity cut off from God by willingly giving Himself as a sacrifice for our sins, dying in our place so that we may have true life through Him – contains both mystery and miracle.

The dictionary defines *mystery* as an unexplained or inexplicable event or phenomenon. It is something that is difficult or impossible to explain. Sometimes it simply refers to something that is kept secret, or something that is beyond our understanding. Sometimes *mystery* is used to describe a puzzle or problem that is yet to be solved, as in an Agatha Christie murder mystery with Miss Marple or Hercule Poirot. Or it may be used when you are on the receiving end of an anonymous gift. The identity of the giver is a mystery. Sometimes *mystery* is used in a religious sense to refer to a truth that can be known only by divine revelation. Which is certainly true regarding the message of Christmas and the belief of the Christian church that the baby born in Bethlehem two millennia ago was in fact the Son of God. *How* it can be so is beyond our understanding. It remains a mystery. *That* it is so, however, we believe and affirm with our entire being. Even if we cannot explain it to the satisfaction of the skeptical scientific mind, we have good reason to believe it.

A *miracle*, according to the dictionary, is “an effect or extraordinary event in the physical world that surpasses all known human or natural powers and is ascribed to a supernatural cause.” It is “a surprising and welcome event that is not explicable by natural or scientific laws and is therefore considered to be the work of a divine agency.” The resurrection of Jesus and the miracles described in the Bible fit these definitions.

*Miracle* is used in another sense to refer to “a highly improbable or extraordinary event, development, or accomplishment that brings very welcome consequences.” Think of the “miracle on ice,” for example, when the upstart U. S. Olympic hockey team upset the mighty Soviets and went on to win the gold medal at the 1980 Winter Olympics. (I was going to put the fact that the Redskins actually won a football game yesterday into this category of miracle. But I won’t. Actually, I just did.) Or, we might say when someone has narrowly escaped a disaster or tragedy of some sort: “It’s a miracle she wasn’t injured more seriously.” Or: “It’s a miracle they weren’t killed.” Or, in another context: “It’s a miracle I ever graduated.”

Two books I’m currently reading have converged in my mind, like the confluence or junction of two rivers. Just about anyone from western Pennsylvania can tell you about the confluence

of three rivers in downtown Pittsburgh, where the Allegheny and Monongahela Rivers meet to form the Ohio River. In a literary sense, ideas from these two books have intersected in a significant way. One book is brand new. It was published just a few months ago. The other is not old as far as books are concerned, but it is definitely much older. It was first published in 1973, the year I graduated from high school, which sometimes seems like a really long time ago. Whether it qualifies as old or not, its status as a classic book on Christian theology is well-deserved.

This older book is J. I. Packer's *Knowing God*, which Mary Sue and I first read in the '70s. Our copy of the book looks old. It is well-worn, with lots of passages highlighted or underlined. I am in the midst of re-reading it (again), this time with my son Nate.

The other book is the brand new book on *Miracles* by Eric Metaxas, the author of acclaimed biographies of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and William Wilberforce. Metaxas, a committed Christian, makes a winsomely persuasive and logical case for belief in miracles, offering strong evidence for belief in the miracles of the Bible. In addition, he recounts present-day miracle stories which, after investigating, he believes to be true miracles. By his own admission, Metaxas wrote this book to provide a more contemporary, anecdotal, and personal version of C. S. Lewis's book on the subject of *Miracles* published shortly after the end of World War II.

After asking and answering the question of whether miracles are even possible – he concludes that they are indeed possible (as do I) – he discusses the miraculous nature of life itself and the odds-defying miracle of the existence of the universe, which Metaxas believes (as do I) can only be explained by the design and creative activity of something or Someone outside of the created universe of matter and time. In other words, by the existence, design, and activity of a Creator. Of *the Creator*. Of *God*. Of *the God of the Bible*.

Though the book is not and is not intended to be an exhaustive study of all the miracles in the Bible, he does address the subject of miracles in the New Testament, specifically the miracles attributed to Jesus in the Gospels, such as feeding the five thousand and the raising of his friend Lazarus from the dead. He offers credible reasons to believe that the miracles described in the Gospels really are miracles. Then he looks at the evidence for and the arguments against the resurrection of Jesus, which, if it is true, is a most amazing miracle that changed – and changes – everything for us. Like Metaxas and countless saints who have gone before us, like the writers of the New Testament (who wrote under the inspiration and guidance of the Holy Spirit) and the Christian church as a whole for the last two thousand years, I believe the evidence demands the verdict that Jesus really did rise again from the dead, that He really is the Son of God, and that, having conquered death in His own death and resurrection, He is alive forever “on the basis of the power of an indestructible life” (Hebrews 7:16). Amen?

What is surprising to me is that Metaxas does not deal with the miracle of the incarnation in his book. Which is where Packer's book *Knowing God* comes in, particularly his chapter on “God Incarnate” (chapter 5, pp. 45-56). It is so good, I wish I could just read the whole

chapter to you! I won't do that, but I do want to give you a taste of the spiritual feast it contains.

Packer acknowledges that many thoughtful people find the message of the gospel of Jesus Christ hard to believe. Some people, for example, have trouble with the doctrine of atonement, wondering how the death of one man – Jesus – on a Roman cross 2,000 years ago could take away the sins of the world. Or why it was necessary. And how it has any bearing on the forgiveness of our sins today.

Like Metaxas, Packer notes that the resurrection is a stumbling-block for some people. As is the doctrine of the virgin birth. And the miracles of Jesus to which the New Testament Gospels bear witness. How can one believe, they ask, that Jesus actually walked on water, or fed a crowd numbering in the thousands with only a few bread rolls and a couple fish, or raised the dead? “With these and similar problems,” writes Packer, “many minds on the fringes of faith are deeply perplexed today” (*Knowing God*, 45).

But Packer says the real difficulty for many people does not lie in any of these. The supreme mystery, he says, lies “in the Christmas message of incarnation. The really staggering Christian claim is that Jesus of Nazareth” – born in a dirty, smelly stable in Bethlehem – “was God made man ...” and that He was “as truly and fully divine as He was human .... It is here, in the thing that happened at the first Christmas, that the profoundest and most unfathomable depths of the Christian revelation lie. ‘The Word (became) flesh’ (John 1:14). God became man; the divine Son became a Jew; the Almighty appeared on earth as a helpless human baby, unable to do more than lie and stare and wriggle and make noises, needing to be fed and changed and taught to talk like any other child. And there was no illusion or deception in this; the babyhood of the Son of God was a reality. The more you think about it,” writes Packer, “the more staggering it gets. Nothing in fiction is so fantastic as is this truth of the incarnation” (45-46).

“This,” Packer says, “is the real stumbling-block” in the Christian gospel. “It is here that Jews, (Muslims), Unitarians, Jehovah’s Witnesses” and many others, including Mormons, have stumbled. “It is from misbelief,” Packer contends, “or at least inadequate belief, about the incarnation that difficulties at other points in the gospel (message) usually spring. But once the incarnation is grasped as a reality, these other difficulties dissolve” (46).

If Jesus really was “the same person as the eternal Word, the Father’s agent in creation, [the One] through whom He created the world” (Hebrews 1:2), “it is no wonder if fresh acts of creative power marked His coming into the world, and His life in it, and His exit from it. It is not strange,” Packer continues, “that He, the author of life, should rise from the dead. If He was truly God the Son, it is much more startling that He should die than that He should rise again. ‘Tis mystery all! The Immortal dies,’ wrote Wesley; but there is no comparable mystery in the immortal’s resurrection” (46). If Jesus was divine, it all fits together. “The incarnation,” says Packer, “is in itself an unfathomable mystery, but it makes sense of everything else that the New Testament contains” (47).

The point of the Christmas story, as we have it in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, “lies not in the circumstances of His birth (save in the one respect that it fulfilled prophecy, by taking place in Bethlehem), but rather in the identity of the baby” (47).

About this baby the New Testament makes these two assertions:

First, that *the baby born at Bethlehem was God* (47). He was – and is – *the Son of God*. Not a Son but *the Son*. John uses the Greek work *monogenes* four times in speaking of Jesus: twice in John 1 (vv. 14, 18) and twice in John 3 (vv. 16, 18). It is translated “only-begotten” or “only” or “one and only” to emphasize the uniqueness of Jesus. John 1:14 says: “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen His glory, the glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.” And John 3:16 says: “For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life.”

The other distinctive word John uses in the opening or prologue to his Gospel is the word *logos*, which is usually translated “word.” *Logos* was an idea in Greek philosophy introduced by a philosopher in Ephesus named Heraclitus more than 600 years before the birth of Christ. Heraclitus understood *logos* to be that divine reason or word that governs all of life. In his thinking, it came to mean nothing less than the mind of God governing the world and the minds of mortals. (See James Boice, *The Gospel of John, Vol. 1*, 34-35).

John took this concept from Greek philosophy, with which Jews in his day were well familiar, and applied it to Jesus, declaring that the *Logos* of God, the divine Word, the perfect expression of God, had in fact come to earth as a flesh and blood human being.

This Word, John says, had no beginning. Contrary to Arius, the heretical 4<sup>th</sup> century teacher, there was never a time when He (Jesus the Son of God) was not. The Word had no beginning of His own. “In the beginning,” He was. From before the beginning of time, He was. From eternity past, He has always been. Without beginning or end. “The Word was with God,” in the fellowship of the Godhead. “And the Word was God.” Literally, what John says at the end of verse 1 is this: “And God was the Word.” It is an unmistakable declaration of the deity of Jesus. “He is divine in Himself, as the Father is,” says Packer. “The mystery with which this verse confronts us is thus the mystery of personal distinctions within the unity of the Godhead” (49).

There is more to glean from these verses, but I want to jump ahead to verse 14, where John says: “And the Word became flesh . . .” The baby in the manger at Bethlehem was none other than the eternal Word of God – God Himself in our own flesh and blood. The Christmas message, Packer writes, “rests on the staggering fact that the child in the manger was – *God*” (50). But there is another dimension to this story.

The second assertion of the New Testament is that *the baby born at Bethlehem was God made man* (50). Not just God, but God made man. Though He was a real human baby, He had not ceased to be God. He was no less God then than before the incarnation. But He had begun to be man. He was not now God *minus* some elements of His deity. He was God *plus* all that

He had made His own by taking our humanness upon Himself. Fully God. And fully man. Two natures – divine and human – united in one person forever (50).

“The mystery of the incarnation is unfathomable,” Packer confesses (50). It was an incomparable act of “condescension and self-humbling,” as Paul articulates so beautifully in Philippians 2:6-8, that Jesus, though He was in very nature God,

did not cling to His prerogatives as God’s equal,  
but stripped Himself of all privilege  
by consenting to be a slave by nature  
and being born as mortal man.  
And, having become man, He humbled Himself  
by living a life of utter obedience,  
even to the extent of dying,  
and the death He died was the death of a common criminal.  
(Philippians 2:6-8, J. B. Phillips)

And He did it for us. He did it for me. He did it for you. He did it for our salvation. He did it in order to do for us what we could never, ever do for ourselves. And that was the reason for the incarnation.

The incarnation, after all these years, is still as mysterious and as miraculous as when the angel Gabriel appeared to a girl named Mary and told her of God’s plan for her to give birth to the Son of God. And Mary, with a believing heart said, “How in the world can this be? How’s God going to do this thing?” And the answer given by the angel contained mystery and miracle, for Gabriel said that the Most High would come upon Mary and that she would be with child and the child would be known as the Son of God, which is just what He is, exactly what He is.

I imagine that this is, for most of you, perhaps for all of you, not new news, not a message you’ve never heard before. It strikes me, though, that what John says in verses 10 and following need to be heard again. Speaking of Jesus he says that “He was in the world and though the world was made through Him, the world did not recognize Him. He came to that which was His own but His own did not receive Him. Yet to those who did receive Him, to those who believed in His name, He gave the right to become children of God.” And I’ve got to tell you, that’s a miracle right there, that you and I can become children of God.

But it’s not sufficient simply to know the story. It’s not enough even to believe in your head all the facts. John says, “to those who received Him.” To those who believed in His name, not merely with their intellect, but embraced the truth of the gospel, embraced the Savior who is presented in the gospel, to these He gave the right to be God’s children.

I want to be sure, I want to be as sure as I can, that you understand that believing the words on the printed page, believing it intellectually, accepting its truth is not enough. It’s absolutely necessary to take that step of faith to receive the One who is the Truth, the One who is Himself the fullness of the gospel, as your own Savior and Lord. Until you do that, unless

you do that, it does not matter how many Christmases you observe, how many Christmas traditions you carry out. Until you do that, unless you do that, it will never, never really be Christmas in your heart. And I pray that it will be Christmas, that it *is* Christmas in your heart today.

Lord, let it be so to the glory of Your name. Amen.