

December 25, 2005

THE MIRACLE OF CHRISTMAS TRANSFORMATIONS

Luke 1:26-38

INTRODUCTION

When Scrooge awoke from his sobering encounter with the spirits of Christmas, he revealed a remarkable change of heart. It is that transformation of heart that is at the very center of our Christmas Celebration.

John D. Rockefeller, Sr. determined early to earn money, and drove himself to the limit. At age 33, he earned his first million dollars. At age 43, he controlled the biggest company in the world. At age 53, he was the richest man on earth and the world's only billionaire.

Then he developed a sickness called alopecia, which caused his hair to fall out and his eyelashes and eyebrows to disappear, and he was shrunken like a mummy. His weekly income was one million dollars, but he could digest only milk and crackers. He was so hated in Pennsylvania that he had to have bodyguards day and night. He did not sleep, did not smile, and did not enjoy anything in life.

The doctors predicted he would not live over one year more. The newspaper had gleefully written his obituary in advance--for convenience in sudden use. One sleepless night set him thinking. He realized with a new light that he "could not take one dime into the next world."

The next morning found him a new man. He began to help churches with his amassed wealth, not overlooking. He established the Rockefeller Foundation, whose funding of medical researches led to the discovery of penicillin and other wonder drugs. John D. began to sleep well, eat, and enjoy life. The doctors had predicted he would not live over age 54--he lived to 98. In coming to the end of himself he discovered a transformation was possible.



CHRISTMAS BRINGS WITH IT THE MIRACLE OF TRANSFORMATION.

We read in Luke's Gospel: 1:26-38

In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you." Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end." "How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?" The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month. For nothing is impossible with God." "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May it be to me as you have said." Then the angel left her (Luke 1:26-38).

T.S. Today we will remind ourselves of three principles of change from Mary's story.

I. Change comes when we receive God's Word with humility

The first impression we have of Mary is of a pure and delightful humility.

- She was dumbfounded by the angel Gabriel's visit (Luke 1:29).
- When she heard the message that she would conceive and give birth to the Messiah, she responded, "I am the Lord's servant; may it be to me as you have said" (Luke 1:38).

She simply accepted God's plan and her role in it.

Humility is the prerequisite to change:

- Humility knows how to say, "I am a servant," without degrading itself.
- Humility knows how to say, "I was wrong," without self-despising.
- Humility knows how to say, "Please forgive me," without groveling.
- Humility knows how to say, "Let me have another chance to make things right."

The promise of the gospel is that God makes us new creations!

We are not self-made people, but God-made people. It makes me think of 2 Corinthians 5:17, "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!" We are qualitatively different people because of the power of the gospel.

T.S. The second principle we learn from Mary is that God's power works through our availability, not our ability.

II. Change comes when we make ourselves available to God

Mary simply made herself available as the servant, or (as the King James Version says) "the handmaid" of the Lord.

Luke 1:38

"May it be to me as you have said." NIV

At 9:04 a.m. on September 2, 1945, aboard the battleship USS Missouri in Tokyo Bay, World War II officially ended. Signing on behalf of Emperor Hirohito, the Japanese foreign minister inked his signature to the document declaring Japan's complete, unconditional surrender to the Allied powers.

You know what followed. With occupation aid and tutelage, Japan emerged from the ashes of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Recovery, though slow, was steady. It has become one of the most productive, peaceful countries in the world. Placing itself at the mercy of the prevailing powers allowed Japan to renew itself.

In a similar way we are transformed when just submit to what God wants to do.

This gives us great hope and a clear purpose. We need not spend all our time anxiously striving to "make something of ourselves." Our greatest purpose is simply to make ourselves available to God.

III. Change comes by faith, when we believe that nothing is impossible with God.

It's not a "what" but a "Who!" The truth is that God loves us. God loves us just the way we are--but he also loves us too much to leave us as we are. He wants to change our lives in ways we can never imagine. He wants to give us gift that are "immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine" (Eph. 3:20).

Jesus Christ came to earth because God believes you and I are worth it! We often emphasize the need to believe in God--and I will never minimize that. But it's also incredibly true that *God believes*

in us! Jesus Christ proves it. God believes we are of infinite value, and he sent his own Son on our behalf.

You see, the annual retelling of stories like Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* should not be limited to a fictional account. It ought to be a part of real life, as well. We ought to be able to annually share with one another how God is transforming our humbug attitudes into hallelujah dispositions. This becomes a way of identifying contemporary Christmas miracles. You might want to do that publicly in this service, through a testimony. Or you might want to simply express your thoughts in a thank-you note to Jesus.

Tomorrow, people will start asking you how your Christmas went. This time, think before your usual reply: "It was OK." Be ready to tell your friends why this year's celebration was special. Share your hallelujah experience, and in doing so, encourage them to anticipate journeying from humbug to hallelujah next year.

Have you given up on trying to get a life? Have you given up on hoping positive change could happen in your life? Have you given up on hoping for positive change in the life of one you dearly love, or someone you see in great need? Don't give up! Humility, availability, and faith--these are the keys to a getting a Life--Life with a capital L. Don't give up--because God hasn't.

Closing prayer: *Almighty God our Father, blessed Jesus our Savior, and gracious Holy Spirit our Fortifier, we bless you for the wonder we celebrate this night: that you came as a child into the world so we might become your children forever. Lord, we confess that we have often lost sight of your presence, your power and your purpose for our lives. We have doubted, we have drifted, and we have been distracted and deceived. Lord, have mercy on us. Call us home to yourself. Change our lives and help us to be part of your life-changing work in this world. And like the angels we will sing, "Glory to God, Glory to God, Glory to God in the highest! And peace on earth." Amen.*