

“That Your Love May Overflow”
Phil. 1:3-11; Luke 1:76-79

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‘I don’t know how to get ready for Advent. I’m distracted by all my busyness.

I ignore God’s promises. I have forgotten how to hope in miracles.’

Do these statements sound familiar? They should. You just said ‘em! These were all part of the **confession** we just lifted up to God of the ways in which we have fallen short of His Kingdom. And aside from our lack of preparation for this holy season, and the ways we get caught up in all of the ‘stuff’ of this ‘most wonderful time of the year’... rather than in the promised Messiah we should most be ‘busy’ with... perhaps the biggest tragedy is that last statement: **‘I have forgotten how to hope in miracles.’**

For there is perhaps no more fundamental aspect of being a follower of Jesus Christ than to be able to HOPE in **MIRACLES**. Perhaps that is why the first week of Advent focuses on HOPE. For it is the ‘hope’ that we can have in the miraculous power of God that is at the core of the Christian faith. To believe in the *miracle* of a supernatural God existing in human flesh. The *miracle* of that human flesh being born to a virgin. The *miracle* that God would **love** us enough to allow His Son to suffer an unspeakably horrible persecution and death. The *miracle* that for 2000 years men, women, and children would believe in this God-in-the-flesh that they could only *read* or *hear* about... a belief that often came at a great cost. Even their very LIFE. The *miracle* of broken lives (like yours and mine) transformed, revitalized, invigorated, all because of this simple son of a Middle-eastern carpenter.

So, just what IS a ‘*miracle*’ ... to us, more individually?’ We think of it most often in terms of physical healing, or averting disaster, or other inexplicable examples of needs being met. It is commonly defined as “*an extraordinary event considered to manifest divine intervention in human affairs.*” How God works in the lives of men and women in powerful, unusual ways. Like Jesus’ birth, for instance...

But how can you and I, in our limited human ways, adequately attest to the ultimate ‘Divine intervention’ of the Messiah’s birth? How do we demonstrate to others that we indeed ‘remember’ to ‘hope in miracles’ that are so much a part of the Christmas story? Well, for one, by showing them what might sometimes be considered the *greatest* ‘miracle’...

to **LOVE one another!** I don't know about you, but there have most certainly been people in MY life that required 'divine intervention' in order to love! Paul knew that his brethren in Philippi would encounter some pretty unlovable folks who didn't necessarily welcome the Christian faith with open arms. Heck, there were even those in their *own community of faith* that could be challenging to 'love' ... (tho WE wouldn't know anything about THAT...)

Anyway, there were a few things that Paul said that can help our love to 'overflow' more and more. A love that starts in the wellspring of your heart, blessing YOU... so that you can in turn SHOW that love to those closest to you... preparing you to then TAKE that love out to the world. So, in order that God's love might overflow from you, one very important way to 'prime the pump' is to grow in the discipline of...

PERSONAL PRAYER. In that opening verse of today's passage, which comes at the very beginning of Paul's letter to his friends, he says that ***"I thank my God every time I remember you..."*** (Phil. 1:3) The Great Apostle goes on to say that he is ***"constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you."*** (Phil. 1:4). EVERY time that Paul thinks about his 'co-laborers' in the church at Philippi, he is 'constantly praying with joy' in 'every one of his prayer'... for ALL of them. Sounds like a LOT of 'personal prayer,' wouldn't you say? How BIG was that 'church' anyway?! Don't think that they filed a 'statistical report' 😊, but like most 'house churches,' it would have started with a dozen or so (**12?!**), and grown from there. I would hazard to say that it grew to a number of 'satellite' churches in numerous homes, probably growing into hundreds of believers scattered around the sprawling economic hub of Philippi.

How many people in this church do YOU pray for? (No, I'm NOT asking for a *public* declaration...) Paul's practice of **personal prayer** should challenge us ALL to consider just how often we 'thank God every time we remember' one of our brothers and sisters in the church. His admission of 'constantly praying with joy in every one of his prayers' for ALL of his 'fellow parishioners' should make us think about both the **frequency** and the **content** of our prayers. How often during the day do you 'converse' with your Heavenly Father? How many times in the course of a day, or even the week, do you pray for ALL of the church? And NOT just the ones you see right now in the pew. How many 'parts of the church body' are

NOT here right now? And haven't been?! It is especially those 'missing body parts' we SHOULD be praying for!

Do you want to more fully experience the 'overflowing love' of God this Christmas season? One great way to do so is to PRAY for God's people RIGHT HERE... and particularly those who AREN'T here...

I would go on to say, however, that our concern for our fellow church members must not be limited to our internal times of personal prayer. That we must also SHOW ourselves to one another as a **Passionate People**. We must **communicate** our concerns, our LOVE to our fellow travelers on this journey. UN-like that 'joke' about the husband who didn't feel it necessary to say he loved his wife after having done so at the altar twenty years earlier... we must regularly **articulate** our love and concern for others. That they KNOW that they are NOT alone in their journey. It's like what Paul says about sharing the Gospel, ***"how will they know unless they hear... and how will they hear unless someone tells them?" (Romans 10:14-15)***

How do we know that the Philippian church had such empathy for one another? Well, for one, Paul says that ***"it is right for me to think this way about all of you, because you hold me in your heart..." (Phil. 1:7)*** What gave Paul the confidence to make the 'bold' statement that 'you hold me in your heart?' I would say because they 'demonstrated' it! They 'communicated' it! They had 'articulated' their willingness to be there for their brother Paul. He says that ***"all of you share in God's grace with me, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel."*** (Phil. 1:7)

Putting this in more relevant terms, how many of you have expressed your love and support to someone who is 'imprisoned' by their personal battles with illness and diseases... or with loneliness... or with other 'prisons' of physical, emotional, or financial hardship? How better could you 'share in God's grace' with those who are working in 'confirmation of the gospel'... those in our church who are teaching, tutoring, praying, distributing, selling, singing, leading, preaching...? Like I said to the young people earlier this morning, true love is much more than feeling on the inside... but something we must communicate with outward expressions as well...

And finally, if our love is to truly 'overflow more and more,' it must NOT be limited to the interior of our hearts or of the church. But we must ... wait on it... **Practice** what we **Preach!** And by that, I mean OUTSIDE these walls as well as inside! Paul, in speaking to his 'evangelical church,' challenges them, ***"so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced a harvest of righteousness."*** (Phil. 1:10-11) ('Harvest,' eh? Hmm... I think I've heard that word... ☺)

Just what IS that ***'harvest of righteousness'*** that we are called to 'produce?' Well, let's consider our passage from Luke's Gospel. It says that ***"you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people... to give light to those who sit in darkness."*** (Luke 1:76-79)

Now, I know that these words were first used to describe John the Baptist. But I believe that they are also intended to describe 'Joe and Jane the Presbyterian!' We TOO are called by God to be a 'prophet of the Most High'... to 'prepare the way' for the Lord... 'to give the knowledge of salvation to his people' ... 'to give light to those who sit in darkness.'

And just who ARE 'those people?' NOT just the people 'in HERE!' Consider once again that 'congregation' at 'Philippian Presbyterian.' ☺ Who WERE they? A very diverse group. Male and female. No doubt children too. (No paid Nursery worker!) Ranging from a wealthy business owner like Lydia, to a 'blue collar' Philippian jailer... Who also represented a very **devout** religious **believer** (Lydia) to an **'unchurched non-believer'** (jailer). This wide-range group of socio-economic status and religious beliefs should convict us of the 'harvest of righteousness' that awaits us... not merely in some far away 'pie-in-the-sky,' or in some empty lot in SE L.C. next year, but right outside that door... TODAY! You are I are called by God to be his prophets, NOW, to men, women, and children, rich and poor, believer and non-believer alike, of the overflowing LOVE of Jesus Christ. That there are MANY out there, believe it or not, who are 'sitting in darkness'... who need to KNOW the 'light of salvation.' There are MANY who, as we talked about at the beginning of our time together, have ***"forgotten how to hope in miracles"***...

With this thought of 'miracles' on my mind this week, you might imagine my great surprise and joy to enter the living room of a church member and notice this magazine cover: *"Reader's Digest: Believe in Miracles."* And though this is not on a theological par with other periodicals like *Christianity Today* or *Presbyterians Today*, I was certainly intrigued by this article... especially when the other prominent cover story – "The Church That Wouldn't Burn" (in upper left) – was one of those 'miracles.'

That 'church that wouldn't burn' is the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary Church in Centralia, PA. Originally built in 1911, it was one of many Ukrainian Catholic churches in that Appalachia region of NE PA. In 1962, an underground mine caught fire, its fumes and heat slowly choking the town. Over the next 20-plus years, all but 5 of the town's residents left. Most of the homes and businesses that weren't destroyed by fire were leveled by the government, and more than 56 years later, the fire still smolders below ground.

But thanks to, in the words of the article, an 'accident of geology,' the church was spared from the flames and bulldozers. Its sky-blue dome still pokes up above the trees, and its pews still fill with parishioners every Sunday. The church's priest, Fr. Michael Hutsko, had a little different 'take' on this so-called 'accident': *"There are many different types of miracles. The flash of lightning kind, the sick person who was suddenly healed after praying, these are easy to identify. But there's the other, not-so-evident miracles that take place, that perhaps you don't even realize until you arrive at a certain place and say, 'I was praying for this,' and you realize that God's hand is in it."*

And THAT is the type of miracle that you and I must believe in. The kind of miracle that allows a church ... 'smoldering' in a declining neighborhood, with dwindling membership and finances... to 'rise from the ashes,' so-to-speak, and SURVIVE. No, not just to 'survive'... but to THRIVE! How can such a 'miracle' take place? One that is 'clothed' in '**overflowing love**' by its people. LOVE displayed by **prayerful and compassionate people who practice what they preach**. A people who believe in 'not-so-evident miracles' that 'you don't even realize until you arrive at a certain place and say, 'I was praying for this',' and you KNOW that God's hand is in it. To **believe in 'extraordinary Divine intervention.'** **Let us be that people!** And may ALL God's children say... AMEN!

'Christmas Bonus' –

As I read the lyrics of a popular song of this season, "I Wonder as I Wander," by John Jacob Niles, I was particularly 'grabbed' by the phrase of the last line:

"I wonder as I wander out under the sky, How Jesus the Savior did come for to die.

For poor on'ry people like you and like I...I wonder as I wander out under the sky."*

That word 'on'ry' is an Appalachian contraction for either 'ornery' or 'ordinary.' As we 'wonder' just how and why that 'Savior' would 'come and die' for us, we know that both 'translations' apply... we are both 'ordinary' and 'ornery.' Some days more than others...
