

O THAT WE WERE THERE

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Grace Church in New York
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The shepherds said one to another, "Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us." (Luke 2:15)

What is a family to do with vacation time to burn and nowhere to go in a pandemic? Such was our dilemma last August. Normally we'd visit family in the Midwest, but this year if we left New York State we'd have to quarantine upon returning and miss two college drop-offs (which didn't matter in the end since both of our sons' schools went remote). But at the time we didn't know they would, so we narrowed our options and finally declared, "Let us now go even unto Lake Placid and see what things might come to pass." What we found was a picturesque village with lakes to enjoy, mountains to climb, and open-air restaurants where we might safely graze. Most notable of all is the arena built for the 1980 Winter Olympics. You can't miss it. It looms over the town as a cathedral might dominate a medieval city. It is a sacred space. A miracle happened there.

Now, before you roll your eyes and think, "here he goes again with another sports analogy," let me confess that I am not much of a hockey fan at all. In fact I would struggle to name five current players in the NHL. But the hockey miracle on ice that occurred at the Olympic Center in Lake Placid NY shocked the world, fans and non-fans alike. In those days the Soviet Union produced hockey teams of hardened professionals who masqueraded as Olympic amateurs. They were practically unbeatable, easily defeating NHL teams in exhibition games, and winning the previous four Olympic gold medals. But they met their match right there in February of 1980. Halfway through the third period of the medal round, a collection of college players who comprised Team USA took the lead, 4-3. Then with ten long minutes to go the Americans managed to hold off a furious Soviet assault and win the game. The victory galvanized the nation and even hastened the demise of the Soviet Union.

And so it was last August that we had to see the very spot where the miracle transpired. When looking down on the arena itself people actually spoke in hushed tones. Then in the Winter Olympic Museum a replay of the miracle hockey game runs on continuous loop. Americans never tire of seeing it. We stood there amidst a socially distant crowd and watched the entire second and third periods, hanging on every moment, even though we knew what was going to happen. Finally, the announcer Al Michaels began his famous countdown, and when he asked his immortal question: "Do you believe in miracles?" the crowd chimed in – Yes! It was as if forty years had melted away and we were there.

Later on as I reflected on reliving the miracle on ice in the place where it happened, you'll never guess what came to mind. I thought of the famous Christmas carol, *In Dulce Jubilo*. Congregations know and love the tune as "Good Christian friends, rejoice with heart and soul and voice." It's the hymn we just sang. But the lyrics to the choral setting are quite different. Two of the verses end not with "Christ is born today," but with "O that we were there!" Alas, the choral setting requires too many singers in a proximity that is too close for Covid-times, so we won't hear it this year. Still, the haunting phrase rings in my ears: *O that we were there!* We know how the Christmas story unfolds. At this time of year it practically runs on a continuous loop in pageants and carols and on cards. But we never seem to tire of it. We yearn for its essence and innocence to be a present reality. In heart and mind we want to join the shepherds and *go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us.*

Suppose we could do just that. What would you find in Bethlehem? Well, the writer of Luke's Gospel would say you'd see Mary and Joseph arriving in town for the census. You'd see the overcrowded inn, the makeshift shelter, the swaddling clothes, and the manger. You'd see the shepherds appear and press in close to behold the newborn Savior. But the writer of Matthew's Gospel would disagree with Luke. Matthew would tell you that Mary and Joseph didn't travel to Bethlehem, they already lived there. Mary gave birth in their house, not a stable. The strange visitors weren't shepherds, they were wise men from the East. The heavenly sign was a star in the night sky, not a choir of angels. Nevertheless, we take the stories Luke and Matthew tell and mash them together into one happy pageant, with shepherds, wise men, friendly beasts, and choirs of angels all together crowding in and craning their necks to see what the angels announced was a miracle. Why is it a miracle? The Scriptures go on to explain that right there in Bethlehem, God became one of us. God became human. It's called the miracle of the Incarnation. *O that we were there* to see it.

Do you believe in miracles? Before we go on we might want to clarify what we mean by miracle. To be sure, the US Olympic hockey team's victory was unlikely, even improbable. But a miracle? Earlier this week we learned that on any given Sunday any team – even the Jets – can win. So surely we have to mean something more than the outcome of a sporting event. To verify a miracle we would need to see evidence of God's intervening in the laws of nature. But the skeptics would insist that the laws of nature are unbreakable, unbendable, inviolable. If we were there in Bethlehem, they would claim you'd see nothing but a quite ordinary 1st century birth. If wise men saw a star, it was probably the alignment of Jupiter and Saturn, the likes of which is appearing in the night sky this week. If the shepherds saw a choir of angels, it was likely due to a bad batch of shepherd's pie for dinner that night. Everything has a natural explanation. No place is any more charged with heaven than another, whether it's a stable in Bethlehem or an arena in Lake Placid.

About the time of the miracle on ice, I was in high school, working weekends at a large, busy suburban supermarket. I was the lowest of the low in the pecking order of who was who in that place. It was not a job I enjoyed, although I needed it. I had an attitude, and I spent most of the days watching the clock and wishing that the time would go faster. But I remember going to work one day with a strange idea building in my mind. Why not throw yourself into the job and see what comes to pass? Why not really learn where things are stored on the shelves, rather than sending all the customers to aisle-five whatever it is they need? Why not serve the people there, and treat them all as if they were Jesus? Why not? It was as if the Spirit of the Lord was upon me, offering to transform an ordinary place into a sacred place. Would you like to go there? Let me tell you, it had to be the Spirit of the Lord, because at the time my natural brain could not possibly have generated such elevated, ethical thought. So I considered the proposal for a while, and then I finally concluded ... *nah*. Can you believe it? I said no to the gift of God. I continued punching in, punching out, watching the clock in between, and rejecting the notion that perhaps I had been visited by angels. I had signed on as a skeptic.

Do you believe in miracles? In the year 1897, 8-year old Virginia O'Hanlon of 115 W. 95th St. wrote to the editor of the New York Sun because her little friends were teasing her about believing in Santa Claus. So she asked in her letter, "Please tell me the truth, is there a Santa Claus?" Francis B. Church, the editor of the paper replied promptly with a column so profound that he not only answered a child's question, he also imparted rich wisdom to adults. He began: *Virginia, your little friends are wrong. They have been affected by the skepticism of a skeptical age. They do not believe except they see.* Church went on to remind us all that to pursue truth as whole persons, with all the gifts that make us human, involves bringing faith, poetry, love, and romance to the quest. Sometimes only these can push aside the veil covering the unseen world.

Now, I leave it to you to cross the bridge between Santa and God. Suffice it to say, it is a bridge worth crossing. Likewise, it should come as no surprise when I say that long ago I repented of my supermarket skepticism. I do believe in miracles. I believe that behind all of creation is a Mind and a Love and Spirit whom we call God. To me, the laws of nature are merely a reflection of the Mind of God. They bear witness to God's creative, steady presence since the beginning. But God is more than mind and thought. God is love, and love seeks a beloved. God wants to be known, and therefore creates and is involved in the affairs of humanity. God works miracles. How? By merging his Spirit with any nation or individual of his choosing. God called Israel into a close, personal, relationship. God spoke through the prophets. Above all, through the miracle of the Incarnation, God became one of us. God became human. God so merged his Spirit with Jesus that in short order, those who witnessed his life declared that he was God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God. No words of praise were too high for him. The cross and Easter Day would attest that this is God in man, made manifest. *This, this is Christ the King.*

Do I believe in miracles? Yes. I believe that God continues to send his Spirit abroad to fall afresh on the likes of you and me. *And his name shall be called Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us.* So spoke the angel to Jesus' father, Joseph. God is with us. It could be that you've said no to God in the past. You were too much affected by the skepticism of a skeptical age. Remember how the writer of John's Gospel described it: *He came into his own, and his own received him not.* But today and every day God gives the wondrous gift again. John went on: *To all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God.* Understand the scope of the Incarnation. God's power working in God's children can do infinitely more than they can ask for or imagine, even if they don't attribute it to divine inspiration. They might become scientists and engineer new vaccines. A miracle indeed! By the power of the Spirit they might face off against a bully and prevail, overcome impossible odds, reach across the aisle, or simply treat everyone they encounter with extraordinary respect. It's no wonder why we want to go to Bethlehem and appropriate its treasures. *O that we were there.* If only we could get there, to the place of miracle, where heaven and earth intermingle and overlap.

Many of you know the saying, "You can't get there from here." The phrase originates from a comedy skit called "Which Way to Millinocket?" by the rural Maine storytelling duo, *Bert and I.* The gist of the skit is simple. The narrator is standing outside a store when a man in a car calls to him from the road, "Which way to Millinocket?" The narrator tries to talk through several sets of directions, but stops in the middle of each one because he realizes it won't work. He finally concludes, "Millinocket. Come to think of it, you can't get there from here."

We can't get to Bethlehem from here, not by our own strength. But the Christmas miracle is this: God brings Bethlehem to us. God wills to make Bethlehem a present reality from this time forth, even forever. Indeed, the miracle can run on continuous loop in your life and mine. It is a gift, pure and simple, for us to receive *in dulce jubilo* – which being interpreted is, *in quiet joy.* Do you believe in miracles? Say yes.

O holy Child of Bethlehem,
descend to us, we pray;
cast out our sin and enter in,
be born in us today.