

PREPARING FOR THE MIRACLE

December 7, 2022

Rev. Richard Rogers

Okay, so I want you to be thinking about your Christmas disappointments. Anybody have any? Have you ever written them down?

"Oh, no, Richard; I don't like to think about that!" [Congregation laughs] *"That's not my happy thoughts! I only think of my happy thoughts!"*

See, I want you to think about your Christmas disappointments, and I actually want you to write them down. I want you to write them all down. And especially if you've had some big disappointments at Christmas. I want you to write them down. I want you to see what you're holding on to.

"Thank God for all my Christmas disappointments!"

Together: [with congregation] *"Thank God for all my Christmas disappointments!"*

I want you to get your arms around this one, because I think that we are resisting a higher level of good in the name of our disappointments.

Now, you know that I love Hallmark Christmas movies. I am man enough to admit it. And I will tell you that 99.9% of the Hallmark Christmas movies start with disappointment. The young man asks the young woman to marry him. And not only does she say "No," but she breaks up with him on the spot. He's devastated and has to move to Bugtussle to rebuild his heart and his life. [Congregation laughs]

Or the young woman is working in her career and she's promised that, if she gets this project done by Christmas, she will get the promotion. And instead of the promotion, she's fired. And she has to move to Bugtussle. [Congregation laughs]

And it is in Bugtussle that they find each other. They fall in love. And the Hallmark movie ends with one kiss underneath the mistletoe that is sweet, but not very passionate. [Congregation laughs] Just sayin'. It's Hallmark! [Congregation laughs] Right? Nobody's toes are curling up in their shoes, let me tell you that! Okay?

So every Hallmark starts with a disappointment. And I want you to be willing to own the disappointments that you've had in Christmas. Because I'm going to make a pretty bold statement.

I believe that most -- if not all -- the miracles I've experienced in my life started with a disappointment. When I thought life was going to go this way, and life threw me a hard curveball, and I had to go this way.

And the human part of us -- when we think we know how life is going to go, and then life shifts and it changes right before our eyes -- we get disappointed. We get mad. We get sad. We feel beat up. We feel like life let us down.

And what I want you to hear tonight is the miracle is the thing that the disappointment is trying to reveal to you.

How many of you know that you have a pretty good idea how your life is supposed to go? Right? It's supposed to go like this. And it's supposed to work out. And I'm going to do this, and then I'm going to do this, and it's all going to work out.

And have you ever been surprised that it didn't go that way? And would you be willing tonight to open a space, not to deny the disappointment, but to lift the disappointment higher so that you can have a miracle this holiday season?

"Thank you, God, for all my disappointments."

One more time. Together: [with congregation] *"Thank you, God, for all my disappointments."*

I mean, that takes us to a deep place! Because it takes us to that very place where we want to have absolute control over our lives. Where we know what's best. Where our ego is supreme and in charge and calling the shots.

But in my experience, my ego doesn't know how to do a miracle. It knows how to be in control. It knows how to figure it out; and manipulate and control situations. But that's what my ego does. That's the realm; that's the limitation. If I want to experience a miracle, I have to be willing to go beyond that.

Tonight I want to tell the Christmas story. And I want to tell the Christmas story from the place of disappointment. Because if you've read this story -- if you've heard the story -- and you haven't heard disappointment, I don't think you've been reading the right story. Because it is a story of disappointment. Okay?

We're going to start with a young woman who has recently been engaged. And she's been hoping and dreaming and thinking about her marriage and her life and maybe even her fiancé for years.

And then life begins to happen in a way that is radically different than that. And in my way of looking at it from my human ego point of view, I believe it would be impossible at some level for Mary not to be disappointed. Because her life got completely turned around.

Let me read from the Gospel. Luke 1:26-38:

In the sixth month, the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!" But she was greatly troubled at the saying and tried to discern what sort of greeting might this be.

And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God."

Now, if that statement doesn't scare you, you have not read the Bible. [Congregation laughs] Because the moment the angel comes and says, "God has found favor with you," you have just radically lost control of your life. Because we are now definitely on to at least Plan B, maybe a Plan C, D, E or F. Right? Because her plan is now over.

"Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and he shall be called Jesus. And he will be great and will be called Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

And Mary said to the angel, "Okay."

[Congregation laughs]

"How will this be, since I am still a virgin?"

[Laughs] Right? A fair question, right? A fair question!

And the angel answered, "No problem, Mary. The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Therefore the child to be born will be called holy, for he will be

the Son of God. And behold, your relative Elizabeth, in her old age has also conceived a son. And this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. For nothing will be impossible with God."

And Mary said, "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be done according to your word." And the angel departed from her.

Now I want you to see what level of faith it has for an angel to drop a radical shift in your life. Like, do you think -- as a little girl -- she woke up or dreamed about, "Oh, I want to be the Messiah's mama?" [Congregation laughs] Do you think any child -- any person -- would dream of giving birth to the Wayshower, to the Holy One, to the Enlightened One, whatever you call it. Do you think any girl wakes up dreaming, hoping, "Oh, maybe I'll give birth to the Messiah!"? No! I can't believe that! I just cannot believe that anyone mentally or emotionally was prepared for that message! Right?

But Mary gathers herself. She does! She opens a space. According to Scripture, she just opens to that and she moves instantly beyond her disappointment. Beyond what she thought; what she expected; what she believed. She moves into a level of acceptance that allowed something greater to happen.

Now, I'm going to read from Verse 39 and 40, also from Luke:

In those days, Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a city of Judah. She entered the house of Zechari'ah and greeted Elizabeth."

Now, why would a young woman, whose now pregnant with God's baby, run into the hills? [Congregation murmurs] Any takers? Fear of ...? Being stoned. In this world ... Women have never had it easy, but 2000+ years ago, if you were pregnant in the village, and the village knew that you were unwed, and you started to show, there was now permission to stone you. Not the father, but the woman.

So when it says "*she went with haste*" into the hills, that was serious. That was life-sustaining. She had to run, because she had no idea if she was safe if she stayed in her own village. Because there are stories. There are stories in the Bible where they were stoning a woman and Jesus walked up. So this was real!

So do you think that was her plan? To be an unwed mother; to run into the hills; and risk everything for this? I just can't believe it. I believe it took every bit of faith on her behalf just to participate with what was next. And because she was willing to move beyond her disappointments; her fears; her concerns; or her authentic fear, something greater happened. A miracle happened!

And now from Joseph's point of view. Reading from Matthew 1:18-25:

Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother, Mary, had been betrothed to Joseph, before they had come together she was found to be with child of the Holy Spirit.

Now, that's kind of a tough sell. You know, if you're Mary and this is your sell to your husband: "Oh, don't worry about it; I was just with the Holy Spirit."

And her husband, Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly.

Right? He's going to wait until the baby's born, divorce her quietly, and move on with his life.

But as he considered this, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. And she will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. And he will save the people from their sins." And all this took place to fulfil what had been spoken by the prophet: "Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel" (which means God with us).

And Joseph woke from the dream and did as the angel of the Lord commanded him. And he took Mary as his wife, but he knew her not until she had borne her son. And he called him Jesus.

Okay, so do you think Joseph was at all disappointed that it went this way? I would say yes! Right? I would say that both of them could have come into this situation being very disappointed that it wasn't going the way they expected it. And yet, both the masculine and the feminine had to dig deep to go beyond their frustrations to embrace something to actually experience the miracle.

And I want you, for just a moment, to look at your own life. And where have you gotten stuck in your disappointments instead of going deep enough for a miracle? Like, where has your disappointment caused you to just shut it down? And saying, "Okay, this isn't what I wanted. This isn't the way I thought it was going to go. This isn't what I expected. And I am willing to open a space for the miracle anyway. Because if God is doing this in my life, there is something greater that's about to happen."

Now, the next level of the disappointment. Luke 2:

In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be enrolled. But it was the first enrollment, when Quirin'ius was governor of Syria. And all went to be enrolled, each to his own city. And Joseph also went from Galilee to the city of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be enrolled with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. And while they were there, the time came for her to be delivered. And she gave birth to her first-born son; wrapped him swaddling cloth; and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

Alright. So she's approximately, we understand, nine months pregnant. And the decree came out that they had to go be taxed. And that meant they had to -- whether it was on donkey or by foot; there's a whole lot of speculation about that. But that doesn't change the story. It was 88 miles; 88 miles! If you think writing a check and putting a stamp on your taxes is tough [congregation laughs], try to have to walk 88 miles and then write the check. That changes the game completely!

Has anybody traveled with a pregnant woman? I have! [Congregation laughs] You don't get very far before you have to stop for a potty break. Right? Pregnant women have a bladder retention area about that big [forms a tiny circle with his fingers]. Just sayin'. Right? Email me: Richard Maraj at unityphx.org. [Congregation laughs] Right? They have the smallest little bladders at this point. Right? And so they're stopping every five feet. If they walk nine miles a day, it was a 10-day journey to pay their taxes.

Can you imagine that, when the decree came down, and she realized that she had to walk 88 miles, that there may have been a whole 'nother level of disappointment? Okay?

So they go off, 88 miles. They walk it. How they got there -- donkey, by foot -- imagine: they walked it. They get there, and the room at the Ritz Carlton [congregation laughs] for their afternoon pedicure was not quite ready. Right?

And it says that she gave birth in a manger. Now, when we -- in this culture -- think of a manger, we think of a big, red barn ... you know, where all the little animals are in a hay, and everything's happy. A manger in Biblical times was a feeding trough. Mostly had just one wall, and it rarely -- if ever -- had a roof. Sometimes it had two walls just to block the wind. But it was usually made out of stone or block, and it was one little beat-up structure.

So when they say that she gave birth in a manger, don't think, like, a cute mid-West red barn. Think of a food trough. That she's literally spending the night in a food trough. Okay?

So she's pregnant, not because she thought it was a great idea. She rises to the occasion; her husband rises to the occasion. They walk 88 miles from where they are to where they have to go pay the taxes.

They get there. The next day – she's pregnant -- she delivers a baby. And I cannot imagine how much they must have felt like, *"Holy cow! This was a bad idea!"* [Congregation laughs] Bad! Bad; bad! Bad idea!

Like, how many of you -- at this point in the story -- would think, *"There's a miracle coming!"*? [Congregation laughs] *"Like, there's a miracle. I know there's a miracle coming! Because this has been bad for so long."*

Like, do you know that story where the kid runs into a room, and it's just filled with horse manure. And the guy goes, *"Why are you so happy?"* He says, *"With all this horse manure, there's got to be a pony in here somewhere!"* [Congregation laughs] Right? Like, that is the supreme optimistic, faithful individual, right?

So they do this. They give birth to this gorgeous son. Everything they wanted; it's glorious. And then ... Well, let me just read it from Matthew 2:1-12:

Now after the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came saying, "Where is he who was born to be king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose, and we have come to worship him." And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. And they saw the star, and they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. And going into the house they saw the child with Mary, his mother, and they fell down and they worshipped him. And then they opened their treasure and offered him gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country a different way.

And so it wasn't until the story was pretty much completely over -- from inception, to the journey, to the birth. I'm not sure along the way they had a lot of signs that this wasn't a train wreck. I don't see them! It wasn't until it was all over, and the wise men walk in and offer them gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh -- all incredibly valuable! All of great value! And it was only at the end that they finally got to experience and got the affirmation that everything that they had to go through was to bring them to this moment: to the miracle.

And I want you to see, in our lives, sometimes ... How many of you would like to go receive the gold halfway? Like, as a little parting gift? Or a little, *"Just keep on going; it's going to be okay!"*? Or even a little frankincense! I'm not sure what I would do with it, but if some guy stopped me in the road and said, *"I know your journey's hard, and I know this isn't what you wanted, but I have this gift of frankincense, so go be it! Go be brave; go be faithful; take this to the end!"* Right?

But they didn't get any of that! It didn't happen until the end -- the very end! And then they realized that they were witnessing a miracle.

And what I want you to see today is: I believe that some of us are walking through some stuff in our life. And we want a sign that there's going to be a miracle at the end of it. And there's a human part of us that's just disappointed that life is hard; that it shouldn't be hard; that this shouldn't be my life; or I shouldn't have to have this much faith; or I shouldn't have to walk in this much.

And yet, if we keep on keeping on ... If we don't let our disappointments drag us into the darkness ... If we have the faith to take the next step and the next step ... That we move from disappointment to miracles. To miracles!

And when you're walking the walk, believe me that you're walking to a miracle. It takes all the faith that we have; it does!

So you ready for your homework? No? Good point, right? Right? Good point! No! Like, is there a Plan B here? Right?

I want you to really look. If you honestly look at your life right now, are there things in your life that have disappointed you? Are there things that haven't gone; that don't look the way "they're supposed to"; that haven't turned out the way you thought they were going to turn out. And there's a human part of us that thinks, *"That's unfair! That's not right!"*

And what I want you to open a space to is: What if that very thing that looks the most unfair -- the most wrong -- really is the place where God is setting you up for a miracle? It is the very thing that, if you want to keep taking the next step -- keep listening and trusting God and letting the angels speak to your heart and your soul -- is the place that's going to be a breakthrough to something greater than you can imagine.

See, miracles don't always come the easy way. Sometimes they come in a way that's really hard. And it really takes all of our faith to keep on keeping on. And that's what I think the Christmas story is all about. It's not easy! It wasn't easy! Jesus' life wasn't easy. He kept being pushed to the farthest point and taking the next step.

Today I want you to trust that, in the place where you feel the most disappointed, God has a miracle right there. And it won't go the way you think it's going to go, but it's going to happen if you trust. If you don't get locked down in the smallness of the moment, it will happen.

Will you pray with me?

I invite you to open your mind, your heart, your soul to your own disappointments. And see them all kind of scurrying around in your life: all the things you're a little cranky about; all the things you're a little disappointed in; all the things that are just not right. And instead of just pretending that you don't notice them, I want you to gather them all up. "Oh, this is my disappointment. And this, and this, and this." And I want you to give them all to God. I want you to lift them up and to see if God has miracles for you in your life. To see if those situations aren't truly the very thing you're asking for, even if they're happening in a way that you could have never imagined.

God is good! But that goodness doesn't always happen the way your ego thinks it should. So tonight we open ourselves to the miracles of the holidays. Christmas. To a life that's greater than we know. To a life that's greater than we expect. To a place where God wants to be made manifest in you, through you, as you.

So in the name and through the power of the Living Christ, we give thanks. And so it is. Amen.

Copyright 2022 Unity of Phoenix Spiritual Center/Rev. Richard Rogers