

The Miracle Worker
A Message by Rev. Dr. Richard Lapehn
First Presbyterian Church of Barberton: December 2, 2018

Scripture: Isaiah 53:1-6; 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13

I. When my wife and I took our daughters on a side trip to visit the home of Helen Keller many years ago, I was surprised by several things.

I was surprised by how close the cottage was where Helen's teacher took her for her critical lessons. The cottage is simply in the backyard of the main house, some 50 feet from the back door.

I was surprised that the actual pump where Helen first communicated a word into the hand of her teacher is still there. It's not trapped behind a wall of Plexiglas or caution tape. You can walk right up to it and get a picture.

I was surprised by the determination of her teacher, Anne Sullivan, whom we think of today as "The Miracle Worker." I was surprised by the cottage, the pump, and the teacher, because they were not as I expected.

II. Jesus was not what most folks expected. When you think about God, adjectives like powerful, majestic, and almighty come to mind. Yet, Jesus' birth brings none of those adjectives to mind.

On the contrary, everything about Jesus' birth stood in stark contrast to power and majesty. Jesus arrived on the scene not in strength but in weakness. The real Christmas was a snapshot of poverty and anxiety, not feel-good warm and fuzzies.

From Isaiah 53 I read this description of the long-awaited Messiah: he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him (Is.53:2).

People did not choose to follow Jesus because of his great looks, or his ability to help them make a lot of money. His background was humble, simple, decidedly not Hollywood.

He was born a Palestinian Jew, into a community of marginalized, oppressed people, spending his early years as a refugee in Africa, eluding political genocide.

His formative years were spent in a nondescript, underserved village, as a member of an ordinary working-class family.

Nazareth was an insignificant village off the beaten path. Nazareth was an isolated community that would not have exposed Jesus to a great breadth of educational, cultural, or religious experiences.

This is why people questioned the possibility of Jesus' messianic office: "He can't be the messiah. What good thing could ever out of Nazareth?"

As a man, he lived in tension with the organized religious system. He resisted the world's obsessions with wealth, power, and recognition.

He identified with the weak and powerless, the widow and the orphan. He did not condemn but defended the sinner.

So what does God look like? All we have to go on is the image of Jesus, who was the embodiment of God's values and priorities. Jesus is Emmanuel, "God with us."

In Jesus, we see not only the face of God but also the fullness of his humanity, whom you and I are created to be. Paul wrote to the Thessalonian church how the increase in their love for others was due to God's work in their midst.

"And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all" (1 Thessalonians 3:12). That's the image of Jesus' life to which we aspire.

III. This Advent/Christmas season is the celebration of the miracle of Jesus.

It seems to me that our surrounding world is doing its very best to try to edge the miracle worker out of his own birthday. It's time for us to take back this day to focus on the Savior of all.

The dictionary defines a miracle as "a visible interruption of the laws of nature, understood only by divine intervention and often accompanied by a miracle worker."

In other words, a miracle is a unique event in the world that God does through people, people like you and me. That's right – you are God's miracle worker!

God uses our hands and feet and minds, our energy, strength, and presence to effect change in our world. God wants to birth a miracle through you.

Who can tell us the cumulative effect of this congregation caring for those in our community who struggle? The warm meal and friendly welcome that we will again offer this Thursday at Soup Kitchen offers hope.

The many diverse communities that meet here at our site create loving bonds that help people move forward in a healthier way from one day to the next. You are making those life-sustaining bonds possible by opening the doors of this church to all who wish to enter.

The Christmas presents lovingly wrapped, and generously offered, will be received by a family in need of a Christmas blessing.

God delights in birthing miracles through willing followers of Jesus Christ.

IV. The only qualifications necessary are your availability to be used by God and your commitment to follow God's prompting.

Jesus said, “Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him” (John 7:38). Jesus was speaking of the Holy Spirit, the living water. The same Holy Spirit that conceived the miracle in Mary’s womb indwells every devoted follower of Jesus.

God will bless our efforts as we follow the path of God’s choosing. May we grow in faith and make ourselves available to become the miracle workers God wishes us to be. Amen.