

**The infinite Creator of the universe came to be with us as a tiny infant!**

Isn't that the most awe-inspiring thing you've ever heard? C.S. Lewis held the Incarnation in such high regard that he called it “A Grand Miracle.” Most of us are aware that miracles play a big role in the story of the Bible—from the Creation to the Resurrection. **But the grandest of God's miracles is sometimes understated.** I intend to correct this by **overstating** the Grand Miracle of Jesus' birth.

**Do you believe miracles happen today?** A Google search of “miracles all around us” will point you to plenty of people who are talking about miracles today. When I was in seminary, I had a friend named Jeff Japinga who was an editor at *Guideposts* magazine in New York City. I recall that *Guideposts* used to publish a book about daily, often unnoticed, understated miracles titled, *His Mysterious Ways*. Do you think we're often oblivious to God's mysterious ways because they are, well, mysterious? Merely mentioning miracles can make us a bit shy to discuss the subject. This shyness is often accentuated by the empiricism and skepticism of the “modern scientific mind.”

Must we drop all pretense of intellectual integrity if we believe that miracles happen, even if we're talking about miracles in the Bible? Almost every word in every human language has more than one meaning, so we have to be sure we're talking about the same thing. Definitions are crucial, otherwise we'll have to face the disapproval of Inigo Montoya (you know, from *The Princess Bride*): **“You keep using that word. I do not think it means what you think it means.”**

Well, when we use the word “miracle” we might be speaking of the “miracle” of modern technology, something impressive like the power of microsurgery or a brand-new therapy that heals diseases that would have—and did—kill our ancestors. **We sometimes call a sudden healing from cancer a “miracle,” which usually means we can't explain how it happened.** At the Winter Olympics in 1980, the U.S. Ice Hockey team defeated a superior Soviet team,

which led Al Michaels (the sports announcer for ABC) to ask the viewers, **“Do you believe in miracles?”** The United States and the Soviet Union played on February 22, 1980, during the medal round of the men’s ice hockey tournament. Although the Soviets were four-time defending gold medalists and heavily favored, the United States achieved an upset victory dubbed **“the miracle on ice.”**

In *The Princess Bride*, Inigo Montoya and his friend Fezzik go to a man called Miracle Max, because Westley, the Man in Black, is (mostly) dead and they need him resuscitated. **They want Max to provide them with a “miracle.”** What he does give them is a chocolate-coated pill that will revive Westley, but its effects are more in the category of medical hocus pocus. When Inigo and Fezzik carry the Man in Black away to give him the pill, Max and his wife Valerie wish them luck storming the castle. The extent of Max’s miracle working becomes clear when Valerie says, “Think it’ll work?” And Max replies, “It would take a *miracle!*”

Some theologians have proposed that a “miracle” is anything that impresses its audience with God’s presence and power. Some of them have suggested that we are wrong to suppose created things have any causal power of their own, because **everything happens by God’s direct action.** All human “events” are just “occasions” for God to exert his power. Yet other theologians suggest that the natural effects of created things are the bigger story in God’s world, even if we can’t explain how everything works. **For example, the crossing of the Red Sea was the fortuitous result of various forces that included an extremely strong wind,** at just the right time for the freed slaves! Cecil B. DeMille gave us a visual reference for this event in his 1956 film *The Ten Commandments*.

But if we follow what Christian (and Jewish) theologians have offered through the centuries, we get a sturdier way of thinking about these things. Traditional theologians have described the nature of things with these categories:

- *Creation*, by which God made all things from nothing, and imparted natural properties to the things he has made.

- *Preservation and concurrence*, by which God keeps his creatures in being and confirms the interaction of their properties.
- *Government*, by which God orders all things in his world according to his purposes. And...
- ***Supernatural occurrences, in which the outcome goes beyond the natural properties of the components involved. These are “miracles” in the proper sense.***

Karen Kingsbury's book *A Treasury of Christmas Miracles* contains a story about Katy and Steve, newlyweds who live near Billings Montana. Katy's mother is dying of cancer back home in Des Moines, Iowa. Katie drove to her mother's to be with her over Christmas, but Steve had only 5 days off work and the one-way trip to Des Moines took 3 days. **A local business executive from their church named Joe** found out the couple would be separated over Christmas, so he offered to fly Steve to Des Moines in his two-seater Cessna. Steve was overjoyed to go see his wife and his wife's mother at Christmas.

**For the first hour the craft flew easily through clear skies, but as they neared their destination, they entered some thick fog.** The airport wasn't far away, so Joe immediately contacted the radio control tower for assistance. "We're closed because of the fog," the air traffic controller informed Joe. For a moment, the cockpit was eerily silent. They had no visibility, and Steve's eyes fell on the fuel gauge and the needle, which bounced dangerously over the E side of the fuel gauge. **Finally, a different voice broke the silence. "Okay. We'll get the ground crew ready. Come in on an emergency landing."** According to the map, they should be directly above the airport. Gradually, Joe began to descend through the fog toward the ground. **As he did, the voice of the controller entered the cockpit again. "Pull it up! Pull it up!"** They were not over the airport as they had thought. **Instead, they were over the lights of a busy interstate highway, and they missed striking an overpass by no more than five feet!**

Joe picked up the plane's radio and contacted the control tower. **"Hey, I just want to thank you for what you did. We couldn't have made it without those directions. You probably saved our lives."** There was a brief pause. "What are you talking about?" the controller asked. "We lost all radio contact with you after we told you we'd get things ready for an emergency landing." **In his heart Steve was certain God gave them a Christmas miracle that night.**

The idea that God orders all events to fulfill his purposes runs throughout the Scriptures—but not in a way that abolishes our personal responsibility. Biblical writers don't neatly resolve this tension. Instead, they invite us to embrace it, to trust that God's purposes and our lives are not incompatible. The biblical picture allows us to see the world as having a network of cause and effect, without falling into the trap of thinking that the network is closed, because God is free to do with his creation whatever he wants, but God chooses to pursue relationships with human beings. **Should God—the benevolent Maker and Sovereign of all things—choose to infuse new energies into his world in pursuit of relationships with us humans, why should that surprise anyone?**

The **miracles** of Jesus in the Gospels display his compassion toward human need and suffering, building our trust in the Savior we have learned to trust and follow. These **miracles** also give credit to Jesus as a divinely authorized spokesman for God, to whom everyone should listen. And his **miracles** reveal his unique person, with divine power over all the creation, even demons, building our confidence in the ultimate victory of the Lord's purposes in the world, so that the **miracles** of Jesus are inseparable from his saving work.

**Bodies that are "all dead"** (to use Miracle Max's classification) **do not rise, unless some great Power is infused into the ordinary natural processes.** For that to happen, it would take a *miracle* to be sure. But the event itself does not answer the question of who supplied this power. Most of us think that it must be the Power that created life to begin with! This is precisely where we find reassurance, if we already believe in God. Some remarkable events *should have* turned out otherwise, in view of what we know about the

circumstances involved, like the story of Steve and Joe flying to Des Moines. These are “miracles” in the proper sense, and our discernment of them depends on our faith. As C. S. Lewis puts it, “No doubt a modern gynecologist knows several things about birth and begetting which [Mary and] Joseph did not know. But those things do not concern the main point—that a virgin birth is contrary to the course of nature. And they obviously knew that.” (*Miracles*, chp 7). An astounding recovery from a deadly disease is certainly a welcome provision from God. **Yet, we may or may not recognize it as a miracle.**

From the two gospels of Matthew and Luke, we do know how the birth of our Savior happened. **And it was miraculous—in the truest sense of the word.** C. S. Lewis writes (in *God in the Dock* p. 80), “The Christian story is precisely the story of *one grand miracle*, the Christian belief being that what is beyond all space and time, what is uncreated and eternal, came into this life, into human nature, descended into His own universe, and rose again, bringing nature up with Him. **It is precisely one Grand Miracle.** If you take that away, there is nothing specifically Christian left.”

**C. S. Lewis loved the story of the birth of Christ.** He argued that the one “Grand Miracle” of Christianity is not the Crucifixion or Resurrection but the birth of the Lord Jesus Christ. **He saw every other miracle of Scripture as preparing for, demonstrating, or resulting from the Incarnation.** According to C.S. Lewis what exactly is a miracle? He calls it “an interference with Nature by supernatural power.” Thank God, that God did interfere in his world! God became one of us because he yearns to make us one with him.

**That’s why God has been miraculously interfering for millennia.** For starters, think of Abraham and Sarah becoming parents very late in life, the Israelites crossing the Red Sea, or the rescue of Daniel from the lion’s den.

**Perhaps you have experienced a “miracle” in your own life.** Though it may be truly remarkable to you personally, it can’t be as important to the whole world as **the Grand Miracle we call the Incarnation.** This is the miracle that we have come here to celebrate—on this Christmas Eve. Amen.