

**“Of Myths and Miracles”
A Christmas Eve Meditation**

**Hyattstown Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
December 24, 2018**

Among recent religious inquiries is a bestseller entitled “Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth”, by Reza Aslan. I have previously mentioned Aslan’s provocative work from this pulpit. A voice from Roman Catholic criticism, he maintains that *“no historical figure is more deeply mired in legend and myth than Jesus of Nazareth. Outside of the Gospels—which are not so much factual accounts of Jesus but arguments about his religious significance—there is almost no trace of this simple Galilean peasant who inspired the world’s largest religion. But there is enough biblical scholarship about the historical Jesus to raise questions about some of the myths that have formed around Him over the past 2000 years.”*

It is neither heretical nor misleading to acknowledge, even on Christmas Eve, that one such myth surrounding Jesus is that he was born in Bethlehem. A sentimental carol memorializing the “Little Town of Bethlehem” notwithstanding, the fact that Bethlehem is the cradle of Christianity is a fictionalized version of events. In today’s terms, it is “fake news”.

Except that Nazareth was his hometown, almost nothing is known about Jesus’ young life. To build the credibility of their nascent community, Jesus’ early followers, including the Gospel writers, filled in the enormous void of Jesus’ first thirty years by aligning his existence with the traditional prophecies from Hebrew texts, about the Messiah who had long been anticipated by devoted Jews. The prophecies of Jewish tradition required the Messiah’s birth to occur in Bethlehem--the City of David!

Undisputed history counters the claim that Bethlehem was where Mary and Joseph welcomed their first born. First, one must take into consideration that there was no worldwide census under Octavius Augustus. Second, one must take into consideration that though Luke begins his version “in the days of Herod, King of Judea”, Herod had died ten years before. Third, one must consider that for taxation purposes, individuals were usually registered where they currently lived, not in their ancestral home.

Every day, you and I find ourselves recounting stories pulled from the bookshelves of our lives. Any such narrative has some elements of fact, but often some degree of embellishment as well. My impressive reputation on the basketball court has only grown over time.

Spiritual truths must always be squared with historical realism, and doing so does not have to negate the spiritual truth. In the end, whether Jesus was born in Bethlehem or in Nazareth does not matter to the discerning follower. What matters is that Jesus is Immanuel—“God with us”! That is not myth. That is miracle!

The television journalist Larry King was once asked whom from the annals of history might he most like to interview, and he named Jesus Christ. King said: “I would like to ask him if he was indeed virgin-born. The answer to that question would define history for me.”

I spent hours one night in 1972 discussing that issue with Frank Rice, a member of the congregation in Ohio that I served immediately upon seminary graduation. Any such narrative has some elements of fact, but often some degree of embellishment as well. Spiritual truths must always be squared with historical realism, and doing so does not have to negate the spiritual truth. In the end, whether Jesus was virgin-born or

otherwise conceived does not matter to the discerning follower. What matters is that Jesus is Immanuel—"God with us"! That is not myth. That is miracle!

So...what of miracles?

The "Miracle Mets" of 1969? The "Miracle on Ice" of 1984? The rescue of a young soccer team from deep in an Indonesian cave? The rescue of three young adults from deep in a cave in West Virginia? Any such narrative has some elements of fact, but often some degree of embellishment as well

No...we're talking here about miracles of a much more elevated dimension. Let me offer just one example, referred to as "a colossus of unimpeachable moral character", among other accolades:

Nelson Mandela. "Madiba".

On an occasion in Washington DC, I was within reach of the flowing vestments of Desmond Tutu, Mandela's friend, bishop, and fellow honoree of the Nobel Peace Prize. Tutu's words upon the death of Nelson Mandela articulate the kind of miracle of which I speak, the kind of miracle so representative of a God as active in the world today as in the world of 2000 years ago: *"Never before in history was one human being so universally acknowledged in his lifetime as the embodiment of magnanimity and reconciliation as Nelson Mandela was. He set aside the bitterness of enduring 27 years in apartheid prisons—and the weight of centuries of colonial division, subjugation, and repression—to personify the spirit of 'ubuntu'--human kindness. He perfectly understood that people are dependent on other people in order for individuals and society to prosper."*

A miracle!

Mandela invited his jailer to be a guest at his presidential inauguration.

A miracle!

Mandela invited to lunch the attorney who tried him for the death penalty.

A miracle!

Mandela went to the white-only neighborhood to visit the widow of apartheid's leader.

A miracle!

While Nelson Mandela was courageously enduring imprisonment, the government of South Africa was prohibiting blacks from singing Christmas carols in the villages "because Christmas carols are too emotional to be sung in a time of unrest, and candles have become revolutionary symbols."

In silent defiance, Christians began placing candles on their windowsills, and lit them at dusk. Police came to the doors of the houses, demanding that the candles be extinguished. More candles were lit, on more windowsills, in more villages, by more Christians.

Think of it: Police arriving at the doors, entering the houses, blowing out the candles, night after night, until they had to retreat in embarrassment and shame that the government had stooped so low.

That is not myth. That is miracle!

God-with-us! Immanuel!

So light a candle on Christmas Eve, and let its glow be inspired by the **myth** that is so central to your faith: That Jesus was born to Mary and Joseph in Bethlehem!

But even more so, light a candle on Christmas Eve, and let its glow be testimony to the **miracle** that is so central to your faith:

That Jesus, the Christ child, was born! God-with-us! Immanuel!