Sermon by **Mike Kinman** from the virtual worship at All Saints Church, Pasadena, at 11:15 a.m. on the fourth Sunday of Advent, December 20, 2020. Readings: I Samuel 1:19-28, Canticle of Hannah (I Samuel 2:1-10), Titus 3:4-7 and Matthew 1:18-25.

**You are a miracle.**

I know you don’t feel like one.

I know I sure don’t.

That’s part of the problem, isn’t it?

We don’t feel like miracles … and so we think we aren’t.

We don’t feel like miracles … and so we forget we are.

Friday afternoon, I was going through a stack of things my mother had saved throughout the years … doing that work of sorting out all the stuff that tells the story of a lifetime .. and I came across this. Kaiser Foundation Hospitals – November 15, 1968. It’s the bracelet my mom was wearing when she gave birth to me. And with it was this booklet the hospital had given her on which she had dutifully recorded each contraction:

3:08 pm – 40 seconds

3:14 pm – 1 min. 20 seconds

3:20 pm – 1 min. 15 seconds

Now, mom always told me I was very considerate … arriving around 10:30 pm and not keeping everyone up until the wee hours of the morning.

I held this bracelet in my hand, and I imagined it on her wrist in that hospital bed. As she felt the pain of each of those contractions. As the afternoon turned into the evening into the night.

I imagined it on her wrist when I was first placed in her arms.

Somewhere in my brain, I suppose there is the memory of that moment. The first time skin touched skin. The first time we gazed in each other’s eyes. I’ll never be able to access it. But I know she never forgot it. I know at that moment, the world stopped for her.

I know it because that’s what happens when we are born.

Twenty-two years ago tomorrow, our son, Schroedter, was born. Outside, St. Louis was preparing for an ice storm but inside that room the world stopped as I reached out my hand and he grabbed my little finger.

Nearly four years later, the country was abuzz preparing for the first anniversary of 9/11, but inside that room the world stopped as Hayden entered the world and his mother held him as his brother climbed up on the bed to meet him for the first time.

The word miracle comes from the Latin *miraculum*, which means “that which causes wonder and astonishment.” Wonder and astonishment. We need those things as much as we need oxygen. And they are there. All around us.

Only we have come not to believe in miracles. The word “miracle” has come to mean something that the skeptic inside us can whisper that it is foolish to believe. Not “that which causes wonder and astonishment” but something that cannot be explained by natural means … and thus shouldn’t be trusted .. only history has told us that miracles are not really supernatural, they are just evidence of how limited our knowledge of how creation works really is.

Now, we understand how babies are born. Many of us have even had those rite of passage awkward conversations trying to explain that to our children. And yet the explanation of the science does not do justice to the wonder. The natural sense of it makes it no less of a miracle.

The explanation of the science does not tell the tale of the act somewhere on the spectrum between beautiful intimacy and brutal violation that begins the process that led to new life.

The natural explanation does not tell the tale of the excitement, the anxiety, the fear, the hope.

The natural explanation does not tell the tale of all the powerful feelings of when a pregnancy ends either willingly or unwillingly.

The natural explanation does not tell the tale of that moment when the whole world stops and skin touches skin, eye meets eye, cry meets ear for the first time.

Whether that child is destined to be raised by that parent, by others who will have their own wondrous moment of meeting … or by none at all … the miracle is still the same. There is still that moment of clarity. Clarity that in our arms, in our gaze is an astonishing wonder. That each of us is an astonishing wonder … that each of us … that you … are a miracle.

There is an ancient tradition in many cultures of miracle birth stories. They are not historical accounts but narrative devices used to indicate that *this* child is destined to be different, to be special, somehow to be touched by and possessing of a divine spark that sets them apart.

These stories, of course, are always told in retrospect. They are told after the fact by those who have either encountered the wondrous in this person or for whatever reason want to make a special claim for their wondrousness above and beyond everyone else. They are a way of saying “pay attention to this person … heed their words and deeds … because this is not an ordinary person.”

The community that wrote Luke’s Gospel was not there at the moment of Jesus’ conception or birth. There was no scribe present to write down Joseph’s story of an angel that came to him in a dream. The stories were written by storytellers well versed in similar stories like the one we heard this morning from first Samuel. Perhaps they knew of the birth story of Ra, the Egyptian sun god, born of the virgin mother Net, or Horus from Isis. Even more likely they knew the story of the legendary founders of the capital of their oppressors – Romulus and Remus – born of a Vestal Virgin, Rhea Silva.

The virgin birth story we followers of Jesus tell … one that takes linguistic liberties with the quote from Isaiah that uses a word that has no connotations at all of virginity … is not meant to be history but Luke’s community’s way of saying “I’ll see your Romulus and Remus and I’ll raise you a Jesus.” A kind of ancient “my savior can beat up your founder” oneupsmanship.

And while that served a powerful purpose in its day, it has had unfortunate consequences for those who even still today are unable to distinguish the power of story from the science of history.

The story … the poetry of the incarnation, of Jesus’ birth, is exquisite. It is the song of God so longing for humanity, so deeply desiring no longer to be separate from us that she had to become one of us. And yet, the idea that the only way this could happen is somehow outside the natural order flies in the face of that poetry. That the very flesh, the very desire that God created and herself desired union with was somehow not worthy of her.

Virgin birth stories, however powerful they were in their day, are rooted in two fabrications that have done untold albeit unintentional harm.

The first fabrication is that somehow our sexuality is shameful and dirty – unfit for the divine to touch.

The second is that an “ordinary birth” … as if there could ever be such a thing … is not wondrous and astonishing enough.

The Gospel we hear this morning was written to communicate that Jesus was special. Fair enough. But what made Jesus special was not that he was somehow miraculously wondrous but that he understood as fully as anyone that everyone is. That every single person … every single one of us is a miracle. A wonder.

We all glimpse this in brief moments. Those thin places where we see the divine wonder that is in and on each one of us. The moment of birth. The moment of death.

That moment where we see a child take their first step.

The jolt in our heart when we meet someone whose body and spirit ignite a fire in us.

There are moments … brief moments of wonder … where we see another and remember they are wondrous. That they are miracles. And yet there are precious few moments where we glimpse that of ourselves.

From that first moment of our birth when we are gazed upon, no matter how briefly, in awe and wonder, we proceed into a world bent on convincing us we are anything but astonishing and wondrous. That we are ordinary and common. That we should be ashamed of our bodies and our sexuality. Of who we are and who we are becoming.

From that moment where we are looked on in awe and wonder, we proceed into a world that tells us we are no better than the worst thing we have done.

And so, we forget and we learn.

We forget that moment where we were first gazed upon with wondrous adoration. We forget how each of us was held so gently and carefully. How even if just for a moment, the world stopped because it was so obvious that our entry into this world … that we were sacred.

We forget … and we learn.

We learn not to trust our own wondrousness. From the secure arms of wonder and love we proceed into a world that tells us that we have to produce and accomplish to even be acceptable much less wondrous. That tells us that love and wonder are a scarce resource and others’ wondrousness is a threat that must be feared and defended against … lest by comparison we are shown to be as dull and ordinary as we increasingly fear we just might be.

The irony of Jesus’ later followers choosing a miraculous birth story somehow to proclaim him as special is that what actually made Jesus special was his ability somehow to resist the rest of the world’s denial that everyone is special. His ability to remember that every birth is a miracle, that every life is a wonder – and to treat everyone as such.

The revolutionary power of Jesus is not summed up in a virgin birth story but in how Jesus lived what we proclaim every time we gather … that God dwells in YOU. That every time we meet each other we are meeting a miracle. That every time we look in the mirror, we are looking at a miracle.

We hear the story of Jesus birth and we marvel at the miracle of it all … and yet the central truth is the truth of every birth, of every moment when skin first touches skin, gaze first meets gaze, cry first meets ear.

You are a miracle.

This Christmas, disconnected as we are from one another, full of anxiety and fear. Grieving those we have lost and facing an uncertain future … I’m not sure I know anyone who feels like one right now. I sure don’t.

And that’s the problem. That’s the challenge.

We don’t feel like miracles … and so we think we aren’t.

We don’t feel like miracles … and so we forget we are.

I hold this bracelet and I remember that one day, 52 years ago and beyond my memory, I was held and beheld as a wonder. And even though I have long forgotten that moment and I have struggled mightily to trust that each of the more than 19,000 days since, it remains true … for me … for you … for all of us.

Imagine the world that would become if we believed that about each other.

Imagine how we would treat each other if we could somehow see in each other’s eyes the magic of that first miraculous gaze?

Imagine the world that would become if we could remember that about ourselves.

There was a moment in each of our lives … no matter how brief and no matter what followed … where we were gazed on and the truth was known:

You are a miracle.

Not just then. But now.

You are a miracle.

Not just sometimes. But always.

You are a miracle.

It’s OK. I know you don’t feel like one.

But you are.