

Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Date: December 15, 2012
Sermon Title: Something Happened That Day
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Something Happened That Day (Matthew 14:22-33)

Something happened that day
some wondrous surprise
that defies
the explanation
of mind or eyes
something beyond belief
but there it is
to be believed.

Something happened that day
some imagined possibility
brought concrete reality to its knees
Something unknowable got known
something undoable got done
something peculiar
made folks remember
something "passing strange"
as they used to say
happened that day
Something outside the normal range
of whatever
human endeavor
finds acceptable.

Lazarus raised from the dead
thousands fed
with little fish
and too little bread ...
Something happened that day

Some spoken word
some inner thought
some outward touch

a leper made clean
a woman redeemed
Legion set free
a blind man could see
all would say
Something happened that day
something came their way
a whisper of the Spirit wind
a little miracle within

From birth in Bethlehem
to victory in Jerusalem
and everything in between
calming troubled waters on the sea
walking on water in Galilee
it cannot be explained away
Something happened that day.

Nero's torches
Japanese crosses
Roman Coliseum
and tyrant's prison
tempted folks to weigh
carefully
whether something happened that day.

But something persevered
something rang true
something could not be denied
something that could not happen
happened some way that day
Something
took breath and doubt away.
Something
happened
that day.

"Something happened that day." Christmas is absolutely 100 percent the season of miracle, of wonder, of stuff that strains the bounds of belief. The Virgin Birth – you take one woman, no man, mix in a little Holy Spirit, and presto, you have a baby. The Virgin Birth.

Then there are angels conversing with Mary, Joseph, Zachariah, Elizabeth, angels everywhere, till finally you get an entire angel chorus appearing to the shepherds, announcing the birth of Jesus!

Then there are the Wise Men. That in itself isn't so miraculous, although nowadays we're all pretty cynical enough about politics that we probably would believe that the arrival of any Wise Men on the scene would be a miracle.

In fact, if we could choose any Christmas miracle to happen in our time, we'd probably choose to have more Wise Men rather than another Virgin Birth or angel choirs. But 2,000 years ago the miracle wasn't so much the Wise Men as the star that wandered across the heavens, leading the Wise Men from some mysterious land in the East, all the way to the stable in Bethlehem.

When I was a kid, my P.S. 90 in Queens took us to the Hayden Planetarium at the Museum of Natural History, and in the Planetarium they did a Christmas show that explained rationally, scientifically, how the star came to be. But even with that impressive evidence, it still seemed like a miracle, especially since no one else seemed to see it, just the Wise Men.

So that's a lot of miracles: angels and angel choirs, Virgin Birth, Wise Men and star. That's a lot to swallow, and that's only the beginning of Christianity.

This year, we are studying the Gospel of Mark, and we're only a few chapters in, but we've already had raising the dead, casting out demons, and walking on water! What's that old World War II movie, "A Bridge Too Far"? Christianity is built entirely on "a bridge too far," too far from our experiences, too far from our world, too far from our comprehension. By the time we get to Easter, the Virgin Birth is the easy part!

I wrote that poem, "Something Happened That Day," simply to recognize that there's a lot of stuff in the Bible that is hard to believe. I admit that. But in every instance "Something Happened That Day" made people stand up and take notice. Made people STOP ... and think ... even believe.

I was telling the Bible Study folks this week that I was watching "Fox and Friends" the other morning, and they had a conversation between one of their morning hosts, Gretchen Carlson, and another Fox host, John Stossel. Stossel was on to promote a special of his called "Doubt and Faith." It was an interesting interview. Stossel is an agnostic, not quite an atheist, but awfully close – there is no place in his life for religion,

belief, anything unprovable. Gretchen Carlson is an evangelical Christian, a staunch advocate of the role of faith, of believing the unprovable, the impossible, the unbelievable.

Stossel and Carlson live in two different universes, neither able to fathom the other person's worldview. They are professional colleagues on the same station. They often appear together. They are respectful, maybe even friends. But when it comes to all this Christmas stuff, I'm sure each befuddles the other. I bet every single person here this morning has been in the exact same situation. Whatever your beliefs, whether it's a little or a lot, I bet you've been with folks who can't imagine how you could believe so little ... or so much! Family members and friends have tried to argue with you, persuade you, to believe more ... or to doubt more. They may think you're too gullible to swallow all that Christmas story or too rigid to stretch your imagination in order to imagine more than is imaginable.

I love our church. I actually think this is the best church in the world, but that's a subject for another day. I'm proud of our church for lots of reasons. Big hearts. Big hands. Big wallets. Big hopes. Even big faith. I'm not suggesting we all believe the same things. I can't even get you to all sing from the same hymnbook! But I do know this – every person here works hard to imagine the unimaginable. That's the embryo of faith and, if you'll forgive a really bad pun, Christmas began with an embryo. All year long, I see practical evidence of your faith at work, digging deep into your pockets, or your time or your energy or your ideas to help the poor, feed the hungry, run this church, balance our budget, or strengthen our ministry. That's the practical side of faith.

But in our Advent Devotional, I see the faith side of your faith. Each year around September, we toss some Bible verses into the laps of 40 of our church members, and most of those verses can be found at the far edge of "a bridge too far."

Our Advent writers dare to wrestle with angels and demons, with kings and shepherds, with miracles and wonders, with promises and threats, with fear and doubt, with faith and trust. Nothing easy. Nothing routine or obvious. And given the luck of the draw and timing, our writers end up writing in the midst of their own sorrow and sickness and all the turmoil of life. Their world is real, even while writing about the unimaginable. And from that reality, they tackle the tough stuff of faith. And what they come up with, what you come up with, is powerful ... beautiful ... astounding. And real.

That's the test of faith, isn't it? Our church, our country, our state, our nation – we are all reeling from the sorrows of Newtown. We had a beautiful memorial service for the people of Newtown and Sandy Hook here on Friday night, and I told the people that today I was preaching on the unimaginable joys and miracles of Christmas, but Friday night I was preaching on the unimaginable horrors of such great evil up in Newtown.

When such unimaginable sorrows come our way, we find out pretty quickly whether our unimaginable faith can match up. Is what our faith tells us greater than the bad things that hurt us? Our Advent Devotional says, "Yes," loud and clear. People write about their lives in real time, through tough issues all blessed by the faith of the Christmas story. They make the Star of Bethlehem shine bright, they make the presence of angels feel real, they make the Wise Men wise, and they remind us of why the Holy Family was holy.

In short, they make the unimaginable ... imaginable.