

Middle East Miracle

(sermon for December 25, 2011 – Advent Sunday 5)

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Text: Christmas texts from Matthew and Luke.

Subject: Middle East Miracle.

Desired Response: Say yes to God's invitation to labor with Him.

How To: Decide on your level of involvement in prayer-and-fasting movement.

How Long: Until we see God in spectacular fashion.

Sermon in a Sentence: God once again invites us to labor with Him in birthing another Middle East Miracle.

At the time of the birth of Jesus, Rome was the center of the world. If you were a Roman, Palestine was a little nowhere place you probably hadn't even heard of.

I believe I was first made aware of this juxtaposition years ago when watching the old movie *The Robe*. One of the Roman army officers, whose career eventually touches on the life of Jesus, was assigned duty in Palestine. "Palestine," he responds, "where's that?"

Egypt—yes. Greece—sure. Persia—okay. Countries like these had a great past and also a present. But the Jews were never a world power.

When you read the Bible, the entire Old Testament centers on the nation of Israel. One would be hard-pressed to miss that the Jewish people are the focus of the 39 Old Testament books. But if you study ancient history, the part the nation of Israel plays in that broader topic is hardly front-and-center.

Even so, it's in the ancient land of Palestine, in a small village south of the city of Jerusalem, that a unique birth takes place. Unlike any baby before or after, this little boy will be born to a mother who is a virgin.

Here's how Matthew the apostle explains what happens:

This is how the birth of Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."

All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: "The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel, which means "God with us."

When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. But he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus. (Matthew 1:18-25)

Again, to fulfill Old Testament prophecy, the place this miracle baby needed to be born was King David's small hometown of Bethlehem. However, this wasn't where Joseph and Mary happened to be living. They were quite a bit north, up by the Sea of Galilee, in the town of Nazareth. But God had worked everything out. Listen to these words from Luke's gospel, chapter 2, verses 1-7:

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. ... And everyone went to his own town to register.

So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for him in the inn.

I suppose to their parents, *all* babies are a miracle. But this one was unlike any other infant. He was conceived of the Holy Spirit, the third Person of the Holy Trinity. Now note what happened next:

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch on their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

*"Glory to God in the highest,
and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests."*

Allow me to bring up another most-unusual related incident. This is Matthew once again, chapter 2, verses 1-12:

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him."

When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born. "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written:

*"But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for out of you will come a ruler
who will be the shepherd of my people Israel."*

Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him."

After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

Finally, because of yet another dream, Joseph and Mary, in the middle of the night, leave Bethlehem and flee to a foreign country. Here's how Matthew tells it:

An angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. "Get up," he said, "take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him."

So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: "Out of Egypt I called my son." (2:13-15)

So for a period of time Egypt became a sanctuary, or a safe place, for Joseph and Mary and her firstborn.

In reviewing these well-known accounts, I'm underscoring the fact that God invited others to labor with Him in this unbelievable happening. Whether those individuals were Joseph and Mary, the shepherds, the Magi, unknown Egyptian neighbors, or other men and women we find in texts

I didn't take the time to read, they all played a part in this pivotal point in the history of the world. It's when God took on flesh in order to be our savior. And because of the incarnation, when the Lord Himself became a man and walked this earth, the nowhere place that the big-shots never heard of, became the ultimate geographic location, because that's where this Middle East Miracle happened.

In today's world one might say that the United States is the nation most like ancient Rome. By that I don't mean we rule like the Romans did with their legions situated everywhere. I'm only suggesting that we are the new superpower that other nations look to as the leader in many ways.

The American dream that "all men are created equal" first captured the attention of the world in the late 1700s.

Less than 100 years later, what we stood for was tested in a traumatic civil war. As bloody as that was, we survived that ordeal with our principal beliefs intact.

As the years progressed, America grew strong and became a place where many wanted to come because we stood for freedom. We said, like the words on the Statue of Liberty, "Give me your tired and your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free..."

By 1945, with much of the globe having been decimated by the Second World War, we emerged with our infrastructures still in place and soon knew a standard of living unlike any this planet had ever seen.

We became the world-shapers. Especially this was true after the collapse of the former Soviet Union. We were the only remaining superpower. That U.S., we're number one. Numero uno!

Europe's heyday was past. Russia was still in a freefall. China was on the rise, but had a long way yet to go.

And the Middle East **[note: said with a not-too-smart, "we're #1" attitude]** ... well, that's where most of the world's oil is. Lucky guys. But then the Arabs can't get along with each other, so why worry? Their camel culture is backward and hard to understand. I mean, everyone knows they treat their women badly.

And Islam is an extreme religion—okay, okay, radical Islam is! You know the suicide-bomber guys! Besides, all Arabs hate the Jews. Always have and always will. They want to wipe Israel off the face of the earth, and the Bible says the Jews are God's chosen people.

What's that? Can I show you where Libya is on a map?

Maybe ... if I'm lucky.

Tunisia?

Syria?

Yemen?

Saudi Arabia?

Afghanistan?

Iraq?

So, I'm not into geography all that much. And what's the deal, you name a bunch of small Arab countries and you don't even include Iran.

What do you mean, "Iran isn't Arab." Of course it is. They worship Mohammed, don't they?

(PAUSE)

All right. They worship Allah. So I made a dumb mistake!

Anyway, the point I am wanting to get across is that even most American Christians don't know all that much about the Middle East. And because they aren't well-informed, the Middle East isn't on their prayer lists, either. It should be, however.

Why? Because this past year, some truly significant events took place there. Early on in 2011, in the so-called Arab Spring, huge changes occurred, starting in Tunisia and spreading to Libya and Egypt. Now strongman Ben Ali is out in Tunisia, Libyan Moammar Gadhafi is dead, and Hosni Mubarak is on trial in Egypt. In Syria, Assad is in trouble not only with his own people, but with other Arab nations as well.

What's ahead for Yemen is anybody's guess. Iraq is once again on its own. We have yet to see what will happen there. American troops are starting to withdraw from Afghanistan.

And Egypt ... well, Egypt is the largest of the Arab countries. However, it's unusual in that it has a significant Christian population—maybe as high as 10% of the nation. And Egyptian believers have been teaching God's people around the world some valuable lessons about the power of united prayer.

I shared in earlier sermons how Coptic Christians and Roman Catholics and Evangelicals joined together for 40 days of prayer and fasting and the end of 2010. That's in the context of a setting where the Egyptian government has been notorious for time and again overlooking violence committed against believers—violence that continued against churches right into 2011. Even so, Egyptian Christians continued strong in their prayers all through this year. In fact, just last month a great joint-prayer rally was held at the Cave Church with an estimated 70,000 Christians gathering and praying throughout much of the night. It was the largest Christian gathering in 1000 years in Egypt.

Maybe most significant in this story is the fact that by their example, our Egyptian brothers and sisters in Christ have been the catalyst that has sparked the beginning of a large-scale prayer movement here in the States. Multiplied thousands of American Christians are now praying for God to work miracles in this nation as well. Along with interceding for the situation in

Egypt, these American believers are boldly asking the Lord for another powerful spiritual awakening to touch this needy country.

I believe this stateside movement will gain momentum as we move into 2012. That's because I know this land is close to God's heart. So once again, the Lord invites individuals like you and like me—like us—to labor with Him in birthing another Middle East Miracle. He has used a land that the so-called big-shots see as second- or third-level to spark a movement of His Spirit here in the powerful United States.

Is this miracle as momentous as the incarnation we celebrate on this Christmas Sunday? We know that nothing compares in scope with that. But to see the Holy Spirit work anew in America in this day would be nothing to make light of. To me, anyway, it would still properly fit into the “miracle” category.

You who have listened but not yet participated in the call to prayer and fasting that has been issued recently—between now and the start of the year, can you get alone with the Lord and say, “I don't want to be left out. I want to be a part. Here's how I wish to participate as the new year unfolds.”

As you believe in the Middle East Miracle of the incarnation, believe that this same God can use the Middle East Miracle in Egypt to spark a heaven-sent revival in our land of America—a land that God has always held close to His heart. This would be a revival that first sets you on fire spiritually, along with hundreds of thousands of other Christians who need a new work of grace in their lives, and then eventually reaching millions of fellow citizens who have yet to know the one who changed your life for the best.

May all these thoughts become reality in the near future. And all God's people said... **(Amen)**