

Again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD, so the LORD delivered them into the hands of the Philistines for forty years.

² *A certain man of Zorah, named Manoah, from the clan of the Danites, had a wife who was sterile and remained childless. ³ The angel of the LORD appeared to her and said, “You are sterile and childless, but you are going to conceive and have a son. ⁴ Now see to it that you drink no wine or other fermented drink and that you do not eat anything unclean, ⁵ because you will conceive and give birth to a son. No razor may be used on his head, because the boy is to be a Nazirite, set apart to God from birth, and he will begin the deliverance of Israel from the hands of the Philistines.”*

⁶ *Then the woman went to her husband and told him, “A man of God came to me. He looked like an angel of God, very awesome. I didn’t ask him where he came from, and he didn’t tell me his name. ⁷ But he said to me, ‘You will conceive and give birth to a son. Now then, drink no wine or other fermented drink and do not eat anything unclean, because the boy will be a Nazirite of God from birth until the day of his death.’ ”*

⁸ *Then Manoah prayed to the LORD: “O Lord, I beg you, let the man of God you sent to us come again to teach us how to bring up the boy who is to be born.”*

⁹ *God heard Manoah, and the angel of God came again to the woman while she was out in the field; but her husband Manoah was not with her. ¹⁰ The woman hurried to tell her husband, “He’s here! The man who appeared to me the other day!”*

¹¹ *Manoah got up and followed his wife. When he came to the man, he said, “Are you the one who talked to my wife?”*

“I am,” he said.

¹² *So Manoah asked him, “When your words are fulfilled, what is to be the rule for the boy’s life and work?”*

¹³ *The angel of the LORD answered, “Your wife must do all that I have told her. ¹⁴ She must not eat anything that comes from the grapevine, nor drink any wine or other fermented drink nor eat anything unclean. She must do everything I have commanded her.”*

¹⁵ *Manoah said to the angel of the LORD, “We would like you to stay until we prepare a young goat for you.”*

¹⁶ *The angel of the LORD replied, “Even though you detain me, I will not eat any of your food. But if you prepare a burnt offering, offer it to the LORD.” (Manoah did not realize that it was the angel of the LORD.)*

¹⁷ *Then Manoah inquired of the angel of the LORD, “What is your name, so that we may honor you when your word comes true?”*

¹⁸ *He replied, “Why do you ask my name? It is beyond understanding.” ¹⁹ Then Manoah took a young goat, together with the grain offering, and sacrificed it on a rock to the LORD. And the LORD did an amazing thing while Manoah and his wife watched: ²⁰ As the flame blazed up from the altar toward heaven, the angel of the LORD ascended in the flame. Seeing this, Manoah and his wife fell with their faces to the ground. ²¹ When the angel of the LORD did not show himself again to Manoah and his wife, Manoah realized that it was the angel of the LORD.*

²² *“We are doomed to die!” he said to his wife. “We have seen God!”*

²³ *But his wife answered, “If the LORD had meant to kill us, he would not have accepted a burnt offering and grain offering from our hands, nor shown us all these things or now told us this.”*

²⁴ *The woman gave birth to a boy and named him Samson. He grew and the LORD blessed him, (Judges 13:1-24)*

His Name is Wonderful

“It’s the most wonderful time of the year.” Do you have that song on one of your Christmas CD’s? Now it’s going to be stuck in your head for the rest of the night. You’re welcome. My parents visited over Thanksgiving and on Friday, we went to Frankenmuth and we shopped at Bronner’s CHRISTmas Wonderland. My mom loves Christmas. She loves the lights and the music and the decorations. *Wonderful* seems like a pretty good word to describe it all. But the guys who wrote that song weren’t the first ones to connect that word to Christmas. The Old Testament prophet Isaiah did that for them thousands of years earlier. Isaiah 9 says, **“To**

us a child is born, to us a son is given ... and his name shall be called *wonderful*. We're not quite to Christmas yet, but that word *wonderful* is the heart of our Old Testament lesson for tonight. The translation of the Bible we use for church, doesn't bring it out as clearly as I would like, but it is there in the words that angel spoke when he was asked about his name. **His name is wonderful.**

I.

The NIV translates the verse this way: **"Why do you ask my name? It is beyond understanding."** And there's a footnote there that says, **"Or is wonderful."** God was making a point that can be lost in English. If I say that something is wonderful, what does that mean? It was a wonderful party – doesn't that mean I had a really nice time? It was a wonderful Christmas present – that means, I really liked it. He's a wonderful husband – guys, if your wife says that, she's saying she really appreciates how you show love to her. But the Hebrew word that word the angel spoke here means more than special or nice or great. It means something that causes us to wonder at what God has done. It means "miraculous." That's what this angel claims. **His name is wonderful because he is a messenger of a miracle birth.**

The reading we have before us is probably the least well-known part of the story of Samson. Most of us probably know Samson as the man who had tremendous strength as long as his hair wasn't cut. So, Delilah, his Philistine wife, cut it while he was sleeping and then he was captured, blinded and imprisoned by his enemies. But once his hair grew back, he struck a final blow for his people and he died in the process. In some ways, it might seem like a story from a superhero movie. Samson has superpowers but he has a weakness that his enemies exploit. Except this isn't just a story. This is scripture. And tonight's reading points us to the much deeper truths in the Samson account.

The book of Judges records a sad cycle of events. The people of Israel would stray from the Lord because the gods of the people around them were just more attractive to their sinful hearts. So God would send an enemy to attack them. And when the people realized that only the true God could rescue them, they would repent and God would forgive them and send a champion to rescue them. Samson was one of those champions. To announce his coming, God sent an angel to a man named Manoah and his wife. The Bible doesn't tell us the wife's name, but it does tell us that she was unable to conceive or bear children. Yet, the angel promised her that she would give birth to a son.

This is one of a series of miracle births that the Bible records, starting with Isaac who was born to his mother when she was 90 years old. That miracle birth theme teaches us that God intervenes in this world to rescue his people and to accomplish his purposes. The series ends, of course, with the birth of Jesus. During this time of year when we're meditating on the details of Jesus' birth, the parallels between Samson and Jesus are pretty striking: the angel appears first to the mother – and the mother believes the announcement that a son is coming. The angel then appears to the men in their lives – to Manoah and to Joseph in a dream – and he repeats the promises. In both cases, the men were faithful believers but they needed more information. In both cases, the men stepped up and did the things God called them to do. The angel promises that both sons are coming to rescue God's people. It would be too much to call Samson a prophecy of Jesus. But God laid these parallels out to underline the fact that his purpose to save us began in eternity and runs all the way through the Old and then the New Testaments.

God wanted Manoah and his wife and everyone who would ever read this account to see that this was his doing. He was about to reach down into history and rescue his people from the consequences of their own sin and from all the enemies of the gospel. So he sent an angel to announce his plan in advance. When God sent an angel to tell Mary and Joseph that Jesus was coming, he was making a similar, but far greater announcement. God was sending a rescuer into a world that just can't break the cycle of wandering farther and farther from the one true God. God was sending a hero who would undo the results of this world's own sin – even the sin of his people. God was sending a conqueror who would defeat the devil and all his allies and who would at last bring his people true peace and security. But that's where the parallel ends. If you know the account of Samson, you know that he did not set an example of a pure and righteous life. And you know that the deliverance God sent him to work was bloody. Even the death that rescued Israel was a death that caused hundreds of other deaths. Samson waged bitter war against the enemies of God's people and he often made it very personal and even selfish.

But when we look at the words that the angel spoke to Manoah and his wife, we New Testament Christians can't help but think of that other baby whose birth we will celebrate in just a few weeks. We can't

help but reflect on the greater rescue he accomplished, not by slaughtering Philistines, but by living a life of perfect love in our place. By laying down his life on the cross so that we will live. By rising from the dead and conquering all that death is, so that sin and death have no hold on us. Like the children of Israel, we needed that rescuer to come. Like them, our own sin buries us in misery and oppression. Day after day, we, the people of God, fall into an endless cycle of committing the same sins over and over again. I don't have to list them for you – you know the sins you just keep committing. You know the price you pay and that your family can pay for that sin. If you've tried to change that pattern of sin, you know just how helpless we are in the face of those sinful hearts that we were born with. God's price to enter heaven is perfection – a truly holy life. And we can't even come close. So he sent a rescuer, a hero, a conqueror, to be perfect in our place and lay down his life for our sin, and then to rise and forgive us. Now we are in.

II.

God sent an angel to announce all that. And Manoah didn't realize who he was really talking to – although he had to realize he was talking to an angel. His wife had described the man as having the appearance of an angel and Manoah had prayed for God to send him back, so I think he understood that much. But he wanted more specific information, so he asked, **“What is your name, so that we may honor you when your word comes true?”** That's when the angel said that his name was wonderful. And then he did a dramatic miracle to show what that name means. He had Manoah offer a burnt offering to the Lord. And the Bible says, **“As the flame blazed up from the altar toward heaven, the angel of the LORD ascended in the flame.”** This is the only time this happens in all of scripture. While angels often do amazing things in the Bible, it's also true that many times, they simply deliver messages from God. But this angel was special. **His name is wonderful because he is the Angel of the Lord.**

What does that mean? Well, look at what happened after the angel did that miracle. Manoah and his wife fell down with their faces to the ground. That's when the text says, **“Manoah realized that it was the angel of the LORD.”** Then he cried out, **“We are doomed to die! We have seen God!”** He realized that this was not a created angel, like Gabriel who came to Mary. This was God himself. This isn't the only time this happens. Several times in the Old Testament, the Angel of the LORD comes and speaks as God. One of the most famous times is at the burning bush when God called Moses.

Why does God appear as the Angel of the LORD? The answer is in the meaning of the word “angel.” The Hebrew word simply means messenger. So to Hebrew speakers, whenever we hear, “the Angel of the LORD” they hear “the Messenger of the LORD.” The one who speaks on God's behalf. Does that remind you of anything? The gospel of John opens with the words, **“In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God.”** He goes on to make clear that “the Word” is Jesus before he came into this world. And why does John call him that? He finishes the section by saying, **“No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has made him known.”** Jesus is the Word – he is the one who communicates all that God truly wants us to know. In the Old Testament, the Angel of the LORD communicates what God wants his people to know. He is Jesus before he entered the womb of Mary.

That is the point of his name. I already reminded you of Isaiah's prophecy: **“To us a child is born, to us a son is given. ... And his name shall be called Wonderful.”** In Hebrew, that's a noun, not an adjective. Sometimes people want to put two words together, “wonderful counselor.” But you could translate the Hebrew, “His name will be called Miracle.” And you could translate the Angel's words here, “Why do you ask my name? It is miraculous.” It's not a noun here, but it is the same root word that means something beyond our understanding.

Long before Jesus was born in Bethlehem, long before he was conceived by the Holy Spirit, Jesus took the form of an angel and came to speak to his Old Testament people. He personally announced a miracle birth that reminds us of his own miracle birth. But there is one difference: the Angel of the LORD was just a form Jesus took temporarily, when it suited his purpose. God became man in the womb of the Virgin Mary and he entered this world to save us. Jesus will always have his human nature. He assumed it forever so that we will live forever. During this Advent season, we're preparing our hearts to celebrate that great miracle. It's the celebration of the endless love of God that he would hide himself in the flesh of helpless human baby. A being that could rise to heaven in the flames of a sacrifice is wrapped in strips of cloth and laid in a manger so that thirty years later he could die on a cross and rise to save us. My friends, that is truly wonderful. More than just

precious or special, it's the very power of God. Jesus is truly wonderful – a miracle that we will wonder at all our lives here and for all eternity. Amen.