



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
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DECEMBER 24, 2014
CHRISTMAS EVE
CHRISTMAS REFLECTIONS

Reflections of Wonder: Mary Isaiah 9:2-7; Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-20

Last Saturday morning I was in the back yard trying to get a few outdoor chores done before the rains came. As I pushed the lawnmower over damp oak leaves and resilient weeds too stubborn to know they should die in winter, my mind was on the next day's sermon and the long list of things that needed to be done before Christmas. As I reached the end of the yard and turned the mower to carve another swath, I felt wetness on my face and hands. An involuntary lament went up as I feared I would not finish my work. I looked up and then out over the yard. There it was—not rain, but tiny, light, almost imperceptible flakes of snow! Lament gave way to euphoria! Instinctively I reached out my hand to catch a few flakes, all of which were far too small to survive. My immediate thought was to share the news, so I called Deborah in the house to let her know. That was not enough, so I sent a text to my children because I wanted it known in New York and Slovakia that it was snowing in Rocky Mount!

Snow sends us to the windows and out into the frigid air to experience it for ourselves. It is not the falling precipitation or the freezing conditions that cause our eyes to open wide. It is wonder. Something about snow causes wonder, and aren't we glad!?

Many things cause us wonder. A fellow told me last week that he took his five year old daughter to a mall for a surprise. As they walked in, Santa was over to the left and the little girl gave him a polite wave. She stopped in her tracks, however, when Elsa, the Snow Queen from Disney's *Frozen*, walked up and gave her a hug. She was completely awe-struck and filled with wonder.

Flying back from London last year, I remember looking out of the window as we crossed the Atlantic. Just off the coast of Ireland, I could see clear down to the water and noticed a perfect circle of rainbow colors. I could never quite figure out what caused it, but for thirty or more minutes I was transfixed by this circle of color floating on the ocean below.

I recall sitting in St. Elizabeth's Cathedral in Košice, Slovakia where our son and his family live, my hand running over the centuries old pew back in front of me, thinking about the thousands of worshipers who had offered prayers in that sacred place. Somewhere in a transept that was closed off for repairs, a stone mason working with hammer and chisel, tapped out a perfect rhythm that became a holy song. I was wrapped in wonder.

I remember holding my children for the first time and feeling such wonder that this tiny human could come into the world and be ours. I know that next week when I hold my granddaughter for the first time, I will be swept away with wonder.

Several years ago, the recently deceased John Mogabgab, wrote, "On the seismograph of the soul, wonder registers any experience that immeasurably transcends commonsense expectations." Then he added, "Usually this signifies God is nearby."¹

That is why the Christmas story is filled with wonder. God is nearby. Angelic messengers are giddy with world-changing news. Shepherds are awed by angels and their heavenly music. Magi are starry-eyed as they discover the baby-king. Joseph is silent. We do not hear from him at the stable, likely because, as with most fathers, he is speechless in the presence of new life. Then there is Mary. We do not hear her speak from the stable, either. Earlier, she had plenty to say as the wonder of her choice to bear the Messiah erupted in praise of God. Yet, Luke knew something about Mary's response to her first child's birth. Had Mary talked about it with other people later in life? Was it something Luke had observed with other women after childbirth? As if he were inside the stable and inside Mary's mind, Luke wrote, "Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart" (Luke 2:19).

When I think of Christmas and wonder, I think of Mary. This young woman, swept up in a drama for which she did not audition, carrying a child she did not willingly conceive, nonetheless accepted God's choice of her to bring heaven to earth in the form of a baby. Few parents are able to wrap their minds around all that the birth of a child means, but for Mary and Joseph, this child belonged not only to them but to the world. "Jesus" was not a family name chosen with pride and nostalgia; it was a name given because

¹John S. Mogabgab, "Editor's Introduction," *Weavings* (January/February 2005): 2.

he was born to be the long-awaited Savior. Talk about a Jewish mother's dreams for her child!

When the angels had tucked away their harps and the shepherds had returned to their sheep, when the innkeeper had brought extra blankets and nourishment to Joseph and Mary, when the baby slept and Joseph nodded off on the pallet beside her, Mary thought about it all. She recalled the moment Joseph proposed to her and the excitement they shared. She remembered the visit of the angel and the fear and thrill that swirled in her soul. She shuddered to revisit Joseph's reaction when she told him the news and how shattered her heart was when he stormed away, but she smiled and shed grateful tears when she remembered his return the next day to apologize and ask her to forgive him and accept him as her husband.

Mary remember her time with her cousin Elizabeth and the hopes and fears they shared about the sons they carried. She thought of the difficult trip to Bethlehem, the pain of childbirth, and the joy of seeing Jesus for the first time. Her mind still reeled with the visit of the shepherds and their news of angelic choruses. She still could not quite believe that this wrinkled little fellow next to her was the Messiah! Wonder washed over her as she held her son close and offered thanksgiving to God.

Mary reflected on it all and then she tucked those thoughts into that safest of places where she stored all of her treasures—her heart. There it was secure and readily available, especially in those moments of life that were not so wonder-filled.

We each experience wonder in different ways depending on our interests, our personalities, and the things we deem important in life. There is no question that for people of faith, tonight is filled with wonder. Scripture, music, and prayers remind us that everything that happened over two thousand years ago was for us—for you and me. The witness of the faithful through the ages, the ministry of the church all over the world, and the persistent nudging of God's Spirit keep us mindful of the meaning of this night: Christ the Savior is born. Emmanuel—God is with us!

Mary reminds us that it is important to open our eyes, our ears, our arms, and our hearts to the wonder of Christmas. Do not think that she spent the rest of her life in a transfixed state, glowing and gushing about this special child of hers. I doubt her pondering that night lasted very long for soon the Baby Jesus wanted to be fed and needed to be changed and decided to cry

simply because he had lungs that he wanted to exercise. The wonder of Christmas is not a starry-eyed nostalgia to make Christmas last all year long. The wonder of Christmas is the dynamic realism that God cared enough about this world to come and live among us and help us learn how to take care of it properly. The wonder of Christmas is that the hope, love, joy, and peace Jesus offers are still possible, indeed are very much present, if we will bring them out into the open.

You have probably heard something about the Christmas Truce of 1914. In the early days of World War I, British and German troops faced each other along the border of France and Belgium. Fighting was fierce and casualties mounted, but on Christmas Eve the fighting gradually stopped. Eventually enemies met in the “no man’s land” between them. They exchanged gifts, food, and pictures. In some areas, the two sides took up soccer games. They sang the songs of their shared faith, chief among them, the German carol we all love, *Stille Nacht*,” – “Silent Night.” The wonder of those days is that for a time, the dream Isaiah saw thousands of years before was realized. Enemies became friends. They ate and played together. They shared their faith in the One who came to put an end to all hostility. The tragedy of the story is that a few days later the fighting resumed and thousands of soldiers died day by day for the next four years.

We have serious problems in our world. We have serious problems right here in our community. We have serious problems in our own lives. I believe that if during that Christmas season a hundred years ago, soldiers on both sides of the line who shared a common faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and were, for a time, caught up in the wonder of his birth, had said “No!” to war and put down their guns, the war could have ended then and there. I believe that today, if people of faith will reach into the treasure chests of their hearts where they store all that is dear to them and revive the wonder of Christ’s coming to us, we can find peaceful solutions to all of our problems. We cannot squander the wonder of Christmas. We have to find it, hold it, save it, savor it, and live it. Only when we see Christ born into the world each and every day can we discover the hope, love, joy, and peace he brings to us all.

Charles Wesley captured this spirit in his great hymn which sings:

Love divine, all loves excelling, Joy of heaven, to earth come down,
fix in us thy humble dwelling; all thy faithful mercies crown.
Jesus, thou art all compassion; pure, unbounded love thou art;
visit us with thy salvation; enter every trembling heart.

Christ is indeed “Love divine,” the joy of heaven come to earth, especially when we allow him to take up residence in our lives. The last stanza of Wesley’s hymn is the prayer which Christmas answers:

Finish then thy new creation; pure and spotless let us be;
Let us see thy great salvation perfectly restored in thee:
Changed from glory into glory, till in heaven we take our place,
Till we cast our crowns before thee, lost in wonder, love, and praise.²

This night and every night which follows, may we discover evidence of God with us wherever we are. And, “lost in wonder, love, and praise,” may we live faithfully as Christ has called us to do. The blessings of the Christ-child who dwells among us and within us be yours this night and forevermore. Amen.

²Charles Wesley, “Love Divine, All Loves Excelling,” 1747.

December 24, 2014

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

As darkness falls upon our city, we rejoice that the light you have shined upon us in the Christ-child can never be extinguished, O God. O this night, we rejoice because once again we celebrate the longing of the ages, heaven and earth are united. Christ is born and we are granted life eternal.

In the radiance of that light, O God, we admit that there are hopes and fears which we hold close to our chests, not daring to share them with anyone lest hope vanish or fears become realized. Shine your light into the deepest shadows of our souls and bring us fully into the radiance of your salvation, we pray. Fill us with the wonder of your Gospel so that, like the shepherds, we will have Good News to share which can change life for the good.

On this night, O Lord, as your children gather in worship across the globe, unite us in the spirit of kinship so that we might recognize the familiar faces our brothers and sisters though we may not understand their language or their customs. Unite us in your Spirit, O God, so that we might clasp hands of friendship which will overcome misunderstanding and ignorance and bind us in the power of your love. Grant us the grace to rise above our petty distinctions to claim the privilege of being your children who live in the light of your love and act with the compassion of your mercy.

Dozens of prayers are bottled up within us, O Lord, prayers which seek healing and health, prayers asking for forgiveness and reconciliation, prayers begging for a new start and fresh opportunities, prayers appealing for help and relief, and prayers seeking salvation in many ways. All these prayers we bundle into one, O God, a prayer seeking peace for the world. We long for wholeness of body, mind, and spirit. We long for completeness and becoming the persons you long for us to be. We pray for peace, O God, that gift promised to the shepherds and given in Jesus the Christ. In his name and for our sake, we ask these things of you. Amen.