

Sunday, December 12, 2021
“The Birth of Wonder”
Luke 2:1-7

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Humility allows us to see the miracle of Christmas in the wonder of a manger—little arms and legs swaddled in bands of cloth, offered to us in love.

And it came to pass, King James reminds us. Luke is direct and straightforward, directing our eye toward a young couple on a journey. Like every pregnancy, it is a journey of wonder mixed with anxiety and fear, but Luke tells us none of that. He does not show us a silhouette of Mary in discomfort, nor does he offer us a look at the worried face of Joseph. She is only “great with child,” and that is all we need to know. As the story goes, here is a couple fulfilling their obligation to Caesar. They are carrying with them not only the weight of pregnancy but the stiff heel of emperor against their neck.

Luke stays focused on where they are going, up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judea, unto the city of David, called Bethlehem. The story is surfeit with images of wonder: a young couple, perplexed by all that has happened, waiting for the birth of their child.

And as the momentum builds, as the labor pains begin, the mysteries and wonder continue. “And so it was that the days were accomplished that she should be delivered.” Joseph, she murmurs, it’s time. Joseph, go and fetch some warm water. Joseph, what are you waiting for? Find us a place to stay. Joseph don’t just stand there.

And so, it was. No matter how many times we have heard these words, they kindle the flames of joy and wonder within us. We know this story well, perhaps even by heart. We have placed ourselves inside of this living nativity many times. We have seen this birth from the point of view of Joseph, of Mary, of the shepherds, and all the other heavenly host, and still, it fills us with wonder and awe, capturing what theologian Karl Rahner calls, “the mystery we call God.”

And so it was: mystery and wonder sweep through the story of Jesus’ birth. As Tim Mooney writes in his wonderful book, “Like A Child,” moments that are filled with “thrilling juiciness of wonder” cannot be encountered by video game controllers or managed with remote controls. They are, instead, received unencumbered, with renewed capacity for gratitude and wonder.

Mooney’s book made me remember the time when I was leading a Christmas Eve service at one of the churches I served as a seminary student. Like many churches, this congregation’s Christmas Eve service included a re-telling of the story of Jesus’ birth. As sections of the story were told, kids wandered into the sanctuary, where a little girl playing Mary held a baby doll,

and a little boy playing Joseph tried to not look like he was mad at his mother for making him be in the service. As readers told the Christmas story, the rest of the children made their way to the chancel where they had been instructed to stand still, to not move or play around until it was time to sing “Silent Night.”

My sole job at this point was to stand in the midst of this heavenly host holding a large candle. When the choir began singing “Silent Night” my job was to navigate my way through this teeming herd of angels and shepherds to light the candle so that we could begin lighting the congregation’s candles. The problem I faced was that standing directly between me and Advent wreath was an obedient eight year old shepherd who had taken to heart his instructions to NOT MOVE. Meanwhile, the time had come for Mary to be delivered, and even the shepherds were getting ready to return to their fields, but while we had all heard the angel’s pronouncement, “I am bringing you good news of a great joy,” this little boy froze in place. I tried gently tapping him on the shoulder, I tried making a hand motion. He was not moving. Meanwhile, the pastor was shooting daggers at me because we were now well into the first verse of “Silent Night” and I had yet to begin lighting candles. Finally, I assumed pastoral authority and stepped in front of the boy to light the candle, while also stepping on his foot in the process. It was only then that the boy moved, looking at me with absolute indignation while shouting in a not-so-silent voice, “Hey! He stepped on my foot!”

To become like a child means reclaiming the mind of a child, which is to say that when it comes to Christmas, far too often we have settled for a version of Christmas that has lost the wild edge faced by Mary and Joseph. Too often we have ironed out all the wrinkles and wonder of Jesus’ birth. Even before the pandemic reduced our enthusiasm, we had somehow managed to reduce the wonder of Christmas – either by over inflated expectations, or by over romanticized visions of what we think Christmas should be, or by getting stuck in a bog of activities spruced up with so much glitz and glamor that they look more like a Hallmark movie and less like a feeding trough turned into a makeshift crib.

One December, I planned a trip to a dairy barn for a group of middle school students. The thought was we would visit the barn in the evening and read the story of Jesus’ birth, sort of a variation on the idea of a living nativity. So, we gathered up these sophisticated southern Californian middle school students and drove them out to a nearby town known for its dairy farms. On paper this sounded like a wonderful experience—but since none of us had ever spent much time around cattle, we forgot some of the more pungent realities of cows. Needless to say, it was hardly a moment of transformative spirituality!

But it did remind each of us of the wonder that permeates this story—a wonder that reminds us of the mystery of faith. It reminded us that the birthplace of Jesus, wherever it was, was not a high-tech birthing suite, nor was it attended to by nurses, midwives and physicians. In those days, the days were accomplished that Mary would give birth. In those days, a child came into the world that evening in the ordinary, offering anything but ordinary grace.

It makes me wonder if that little boy in that Christmas pageant may have had it right. He couldn't move, wouldn't move, not because he feared being read the riot act if he moved, but perhaps because he was transfixed by the wonder of it all: to you is born this day in the city of David, a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord." God slips into the world almost unnoticed, and from that makeshift crib God's arms reached out to all creation in love.

The longer I am in ministry, the more convinced I am that to grow in faith is to grow in our capacity to sense wonder around us, and that the only way to do really deepen our sense of wonder is through humility. Theological humility knows that not only does God work in mysterious ways, sometimes God works through circumstances beyond our control. Humility acknowledges that there may be several ways of answering difficult questions. Humility understands that some questions have multiple answers, or no answer. Humility accepts that God's love slips into our world in astonishing, delightful, and sometimes even inconceivable ways.

Humility understands that the son of God was placed in a manger, not only because that was the only crib they could find, but also to remind God's people that one day this child would become for us the bread of the world.

It is an ever-deepening sense of humility that allows true and deep joy to emerge in our lives. It is humility that fuels this candle – the humility of Mary of who sang of the wondrous things that God had done for her, the humility of Joseph who was willing to face ridicule and shame in claiming Mary as his wife, the humility of God incarnate, God who comes to us not in displays of power and might but in the red-face of a newborn, shivering and vulnerable.

If your sense of wonder has dwindled this Christmas, then perhaps it is time to be pulled away from the distractions that push us away from wonder. If sadness and grief have filled our lives, dulling our senses and evaporating our delight, the way back is not ignoring those pains, but instead discovering the wonder of the grace of one who walks with us in those pains. Our invitation to wonder is to know that on the darkest of nights, a baby was born. Love was wrapped in swaddling clothes. Love was placed inside a manger.

On Christmas Eve 1914 during the chilling moments of World War I, wonder stepped across the boundaries of war. It started as German soldiers began singing Christmas carols, followed by American and British soldiers singing carols in English. And then both sides joined in singing "O Come All Ye Faithful," followed by "Silent Night." In the morning, both sides crawled out of their trenches, calling "Merry Christmas," trading cigarettes, and food. Both sides used the truce to bury some of their comrades who had died. In some accounts, the truce widened to include pig roasts and soccer games.

It was only a truce, not peace, and fighting resumed the next day. But it was a moment of wonder, a time of grace, a reminder of the possibilities that exist when grace slips into our world. In those days. Humility and wonder danced. Amen.