

Wonder!
Luke 2:1-14

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December 24, 2017

This week I conducted a *Wonder Audit*; what is wonder and where in life do I know it when I see it?

Wonder is not the same thing as a sensory spectacular or even sheer beauty. It certainly is not evoked by the tinsel of a commercial and cultural Christmas. It is not determined by who can string the biggest light display. It is not triggered by even some of the treasured traditions we continue to enjoy from year to year.

Wonder is that childlike sense of awe before the mystery of life and the universe. Wonder is feeling tiny before the immense or infinite. Wonder is our shocked amazement before the power of life that not only endures but overcomes. Wonder is our response to the impossible actually happening.

Wonder is experienced by the scientist who discovers the imperceptibly small under an electron microscope or the unimaginably large and distant

and ancient by probing the depths of the cosmos with the Hubble Telescope.

Wonder is experienced with the delivery of each baby. Wonder is breathed out when you encounter the unfathomable complexity and harmony of nature in its many forms. Wonder is known in the hushed silence that surrounds a soul departing this world for the next. For a few, wonder is tasted through prayer and meditation as it takes them to an unseen mystery.

Some have said that a sense of childlike wonder is the root of all religions – before they crystallize into systems with structure and doctrine and hierarchy. From the first conscious being who gazed into the depths of the starry night and sighed to the astronaut who looking back upon the earth from space slowly read, “In the beginning God created ...” they knew wonder.

We gather tonight to recite and re-experience a very *particular* form of wonder.

The only way for us to approach this wonder is to go out to the edge – the edge of the world, the edge of society, the edge of the powers of this world. This wonder is found out on the edge where God specializes. And this most recent incarnation of that wonder began with peasants out on the edge of Empire.

If you are thinking of *The Hunger Games* and how uprisings start in one of the districts far outside the imperial capital, you are getting close. Far from the centers of power, greed, and luxury, out where the lower classes scratch out a living and are controlled by force as the wealthy and powerful, that's where the revolution begins. It begins with people who know that when the Empire says all this is really for your own good, it's just the opposite.

Mary was one of those peasants out in the districts. She was a nobody among nobodies. She and her people would always be nobodies controlled by an occupying force of the Roman Empire.

So when Mary received a special angelic telegram telling her that she would bear the long-awaited Messiah, she was overwhelmed. She was struck first by awe and humility. How could this happen and in particular happen through her?

Her second response was to sing a song of praise and of revolution: the mighty would be tipped off their thrones and the poor and hungry would be filled with good things. Because that is what the Messiah is about – the Prince of Peace who would confound the kingdoms and rulers of this world by proclaiming their imminent demise.

Of course, those in power don't like to hear that sort of thing. In fact, when King Herod had just a whiff that there might be competition in town he asked the Magi where he might find the rising king to pay him homage. Oh, homage he paid as he gave orders to slaughter every boy in his age range.

Despots, dictators, and fascists do that when their power is challenged. They have to devise ways to silence and destroy the opposition.

In Herod's case he first conducted a program of misinformation about what he was actually up to and then laid waste the peasantry that might be a threat. And so the holy family escaped by night, becoming refugees, seeking sanctuary as they crossed over into a foreign country, depending on the good will of strangers, Egyptians, and stayed there until it was safe to return home.

Here is Mary, the nobody designated by God to carry the hope of the world, pursued by the armed forces of Empire, the holy refugee family running for their lives. How shall proud and arrogant emperors be knocked off their thrones at this rate? Indeed, as her boy grew and began traveling and saying all those dangerous things he did, what could protect him, what would keep Empire from silencing him because that's what arrogant power does?

So you see when we talk about wonder in this moment it is framed by all that. We have to dig beneath all the sentimentality of this season to find the truth.

When Joseph, Mary and their new baby gathered on the edge of the world, when they took shelter against an Empire that would snuff them out without a second thought, when other peasants and animals gazed upon this mystery, the rest of the world was blind to it, even as commercial and popular Christmas today is blind to it. And no amount of saying Merry Christmas will tip cultural Christmas toward this very different reality. The hope of the world has come into the blind world that knows nothing of it.

Strangely enough we have the ability to look back and see what they did not see. And only from this vantage point can we sigh along with those peasants. This is as far out on the edge as you can get without falling off. And that is where and how God comes and keeps on coming.

Don't look to the center. Don't go to the capital city. Don't wait for official endorsement. Don't wait for this birth to be trending. In the midst of all of the diversions and distractions, the real thing is happening out of sight.

The baby cries, the mother comforts, the father protects, the hidden angels sing, the strangers look on with their perplexed faces.

And so you might be wondering how you can find your way out to that edge, out where there is not a single strand of Christmas lights, no canned music in the mall, no vapid declarations about what this day should mean. How could you tunnel your way through all that to a still point in time and space?

Last year we travelled to northern Arizona and while we were in Flagstaff we visited the great Lowell Observatory. We took in a lecture on current astronomy that included star charts and projections of our universe and beyond. And in the middle of the lecture, following a pregnant pause, the presenter looked up and said, “You know when you look up into the starry night and see what you think is empty space between a few stars. Well, it’s only empty to your eye. In that seemingly empty space between the stars are myriad of galaxies beyond number. It just seems empty, but it’s actually densely packed with galaxies, full to overflowing.”

Sometimes we have to look between the stars we see, to the dark space, at the farthest edge, beyond what is seen and obvious, to find what God is actually up to.

In the middle of the night, offline, out of plain view, among unnoticed people, God is moving in a world that doesn’t notice. For those who pause, who dare to move beyond the hype and distraction, it is there sleeping peacefully between the stars. And if you do find it, don’t be surprised when you lose your breath, so full of wonder it is.