

Wonder of All Wonders

John 1:1-5, 14-16

Christmas Eve/ 2021

Early this morning, before sunrise, I put the kettle on in the kitchen and thought about all that still needed to be done today and what this evening might look like, our second COVID Christmas. I thought ahead to our Family Service, which we held outdoors in our pavilion this afternoon, a first for us (and it was wonderful), and I thought about this service. And then, from out of nowhere, these words surfaced from someplace deep in me, “Don’t let anything steal your joy.”

Our lives are full of fear and anxiety these days. Sadness fills the air. It’s been a challenging year on many fronts. I know, and I’m sure you know too, many people who are carrying many burdens which have nothing to do with the pandemic; the pandemic only makes matters worse. It’s vital for us to be honest with our feelings, acknowledge where we are, and be real and not lost in denial. And yet, at the same time, we must not ignore what the mystery of this night proclaims. We need to hold it in tension. There is a deeper joy, a deeper reality, a deeper truth, a deeper “magic,” as C. S. Lewis (1898-1963) would say, revealed in the life of the baby born in Bethlehem. Yes, the “hopes and fears of all the years,” as Phillips Brooks (1835-1893) wrote, “are met in thee this night.” The babe of Bethlehem—he knows our hopes and fears; he’s the one who bears us through our hopes and fears.

On Christmas Eve, 1865, Phillips Brooks rode on horseback from the heights of Jerusalem down to Bethlehem, which is about six miles away. Phillips Brooks was a highly accomplished scholar and Episcopalian priest who served churches in Philadelphia and Boston. On the way to Bethlehem, he stopped in Shepherds’ Field before going to the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, built on the traditional site of Jesus’ birth. He went into the church and during the service and had something of a religious experience. Several years later, he wrote a poem. Brooks asked his organist at Holy Trinity, Lewis Redner (1831-1908), to compose a tune. After several weeks struggling to come up with one, Redner awoke on Christmas Day 1868 “with the melody ringing in his ears, fully formed and harmonized.” We know it as “O Little Town of Bethlehem.”

Religious experience, inspired creativity, imagination soaring, senses confounded, reason forced to bow before the limits of human knowledge and knowing, awe, wonder—all these, too, “met in thee tonight,” they are all directly connected to the divine at work in the world and within us. For “This is the irrational season,” the poet and author Madeleine L’Engle (1918-2007), perhaps best known for her work *A Wrinkle in Time*, once said, “This is the irrational season /When love blooms bright and wild./ Had Mary been filled with reason/ There’d have been no room for the child.” L’Engle’s not knocking reason here. We all know what happens when we give up on reason and science and the terrible harm, even death, that can result. But L’Engle is wise to remind us what if Mary let reason guide her, she might have said no to Gabriel. By “irrational,” L’Engle means that which is beyond reason, something other than reason, something more like mystery and wonder and awe. Mystery, wonder, awe—this is how we encounter the Holy in the world.

If you go down into the undercroft of the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, there is an altar set against a wall surrounded by candles. The front of the altar doesn't come to the ground. There's a niche, with a marble floor. This space has lots of candles. Set back in the niche is a metal star welded into the marble. At the center of the star is a hole which marks the spot, tradition has it, where Jesus' manger was located. If you wish to see that holy space, you have to kneel. You have to yield your ordinary viewpoint and position and perspective. Mystery. Awe. Wonder.



It seems to me that this is why this is night is so holy to both Christians and even non-Christians. It speaks to our hearts and minds, to our hopes and fears, that sense of enchantment the world used to have, all that we've lost in our cynical and suspicious age. Our hearts long to waken again to wonder; indeed, the future of humanity and the planet at some level depends upon wonder, both human and divine. I agree entirely with Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907-1972) who said, "Wonder rather than doubt is the root of all knowledge." He prayed, "Dear Lord, grant me the grace of wonder. Surprise me, amaze me, awe me in every crevice of your universe. Each day enrapture me with your marvelous things without number... I do not ask to see the reason for it all: I ask only to share the wonder of it all."

My inspiration for tonight comes from something that Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945) wrote decades ago during another dark time, in 1930s Germany. Lutheran pastor, theologian, spy, martyr, he died at 39. I've learned much from him in my journey. He's one of my heroes. Bonhoeffer reminds us, "No priest, no theologian stood at the manger of Bethlehem. And yet all Christian theology has its origin in the wonder of all wonders: that God became human. Holy theology," not as an academic discipline but an articulation of Christian faith and experience,

“arises from knees bent before the mystery of the divine child in the stable. Without the holy night, there is no theology. “God revealed in flesh,” the God-human Jesus Christ—that is the holy mystery that theology came into being to protect and preserve” and I would add, *serve*. “How we fail to understand when we think that the task of theology is to solve the mystery of God, to drag it down to the flat, ordinary wisdom of human experience and reason! Its sole office is to preserve the miracle as miracle, to comprehend, defend, and glorify God’s mystery precisely as mystery. This and nothing else, therefore, is what the early church meant when, with never flagging zeal, it dealt with the mystery of the Trinity and the person of Jesus Christ.... If Christmas time cannot ignite within us again something like a love for holy theology, so that we—captured and compelled by the wonder of the manger of the Son of God—must reverently reflect on the mysteries of God, then it must be that the glow of the divine mysteries has also been extinguished in our heart and has died out.”¹

May this night, this ancient story, this experience in worship, in music, candlelight in dark times, ignite or reignite within you a sense of mystery, wonder, awe before what we claim tonight. God with us. If you’re not feeling it tonight, that’s okay too, maybe over Christmas and Epiphany. Stay open to being surprised. The great Howard Thurman (1899-1981) reminds us, “There must be always remaining in every life, some place for the singing of angels, some place for that which in itself is breathless and beautiful.” Children of God, may you find that place of wonder in these challenging times. And don’t let anything—or anyone—steal your joy!

¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Theological Education Underground: 1937-1940, Collected Works*, Vol. 15 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011), 537ff.