Sermon for Christmas Eve

December 24, 2021

Luke 2:1-20

When was the last time you experienced wonder?

I mean the good kind of wonder. Not the kind of wonder that involves questions like, “I wonder why the car in front of me is just sitting there and not moving, even though there’s nothing in their way. I wonder how they don’t realize they’re holding up traffic in the parking lot? I wonder where they learned to drive!”

It’s probably been a while since you experienced the good kind of wonder.

Which is a shame, because just as plants wither without sunlight and water, we wither without wonder.

The good kind of wonder is nourishing for our souls. It can’t be forced. It can’t be manufactured. It can’t be scheduled.

It’s ours to just recognize it, experience it, to revel in it. To let it wash over us and live fully in the moment, soaking up the joy and awe it brings us.

Wonder is woven through the entire nativity story.

When the angel visited her, Mary experienced wonder as she listened to the angel declare that she was favored by God, that she was to have a child who would be called the Son of God, who would be given the throne of the house of Jacob.

Filled with wonder, Mary pondered the angel’s perplexing words.

The wonder continued when Mary visited her cousin Elizabeth. Elizabeth marveled that the mother of her Lord would visit her. And Mary responded with a song filled with wonder about the things God was doing, a song rooted in the history of God providing for the Israelites.

And then the time came for her baby to be born. As Mary rested, as her baby slept, shepherds suddenly arrived.

The shepherds were filled with wonder over the angel appearing to *them*, instead of the priests at the temple or any of the important political people Luke mentions. And they were filled with wonder over the good news that the Messiah had been born.

Again, as the shepherds returned to their fields, Mary was filled with wonder, pondering all the things that had happened, all the things she had heard, treasuring them in her heart.

What makes this a story filled with wonder is the methods God chose to employ. God intruded in the world, disrupting the way the world works, to do what God had promised…but in utterly unexpected ways. A teenage girl and shepherds were chosen to receive the good news that God was acting so that all humanity would see God’s salvation.

Not the high priest at the temple. Not the governor. Not the emperor.

A teenage girl and a band of shepherds.

And the shepherds found the Messiah not in a palace, but sleeping in the box that the held food for cattle and sheep.

The wonder of Christmas is that God chose to carry out God’s purposes in such unexpected ways.

God chose to have the Messiah — the one who would fulfill God’s purposes for humanity’s salvation, the one who would be a living example of God’s mercy and grace and love — born as a human baby. A baby who would have to grow up, have to learn to walk, and talk, and eat solid food.

And then God announced the arrival of the Messiah…to a band of shepherds?

Which seems unexpected, since shepherds weren’t exactly the most highly respected people in a community.

But when you remember that the shepherd is the model for biblical kingship. When you remember the words of Psalm 23: the Lord is my shepherd. When you remember that King David was a shepherd as a young man. Then it’s not so unexpected.

And yet? Still cause for wonder over the possibility of a better way of doing things in the world. Because the shepherd model of kingship was completely at odds with how the Roman Empire functioned.

Perhaps, to borrow from Mary, we might do well to ponder in our hearts the notion that God doesn’t seem to care all that much about our expectations for how God should act. About our understanding of how the world works.

Instead, God seems to delight in confounding our expectations, offering us new ways to experience God’s love, new ways to experience the meeting of heaven and earth in unexpected places.

Wonder, the good kind of wonder, insists that we suspend our disbelief, at least for a little while. We don’t create wonder. What matters is that we are open to experiencing it and how we respond to it.

In the nativity story, we are invited to experience wonder over the ways that heaven and earth meet in unexpected ways. Over God’s insistence that something different and better is possible.

But Mary and the shepherds don’t stop with experiencing wonder. Because wonder invites a response of faith.

Recognizing the birth of the Messiah as good news for all of creation, they *respond* to their wonder with obedience and reflection, proclamation and joy.

This Christmas, may God’s unending delight in shattering our expectations and offering us a glimpse of a better reality, fill your hearts with the wonder of Mary and the shepherds. And may that wonder lead you to new paths of obedience and reflection, proclamation and joy.