

Experiencing Wonder
Series: How Does a Weary World Rejoice?
Luke 1:57–66
Sunday, December 15, 2024 (Advent 3)

Let us pray: Coming Christ, as this season gets busier and busier, slow us down and help us to listen for the word that you are speaking into this world and into our lives, in Christ. Amen.

We live in a world that is *filled* with wonder.

I remember the first time I saw the Milky Way. I had been visiting my grandparents in Kentucky. They lived in a small town out in the country. I got up early in the morning to drive back, and as I walked outside to load up my car, I just happened to look up, and there was this fuzzy thread of stars and color stretching across the sky. It wasn't like the pictures you see, where everything is vivid and bright and clear, but it was enough to stop me dead in my tracks, it was so beautiful. I just stood there, staring at the sky, looking at something that I had never seen before. It made me feel very *small*. And it made me wonder if around those millions (or *billions*) of other stars, other *suns*, there might be other *planets* that might have other *beings* on them, that might be looking back at me. It was one of those things where all I could do was stand there and just say, "Wow."

We live in a world that is filled with wonder. But I'm not just talking about the *big* things like the Milky Way or the Grand Canyon or Niagara Falls, although those *do* inspire a sense of awe and wonder in us. I'm also talking about the normal, every day things. On Monday night I left my house to drive here for a meeting, and there was this thick fog blanketing our neighborhood. It only got thicker as I drove, so that at one point, I had to stop because I could not see anything beyond the hood of my car. I remember saying, "What is going on?" But there was nothing

“going on.” It was just fog. It wasn’t anything supernatural or nefarious. But it *felt* different. It felt mysterious. And it evoked in me a sense of *wonder*.

When I got to the meeting, someone else was talking about driving through that fog. They said that at one point a fox ran across the road up ahead of them. It just kind of stopped in the middle of the road for a second and turned its head, and there was this perfect outline of a fox looking at them. And it gave them this feeling like, “Wow, what did I just see?”

How many of you still get excited when you see deer somewhere? In your yard, on the side of the road as you drive by, or in Valley Forge Park as you’re out for a walk. We must see them *all the time* around here, but it still makes us say, “Oh, deer!” And we watch them, almost secretly, like we’re intruding on them, and it gives us this thrill of excitement and wonder.

When you hear an incredible piece of music that just inspires a sense of awe in you. Or that feeling when you’re watching a movie or show or reading a book, and all the different pieces of the story come together to finally make sense, and you get this feeling that you’ve been let in on a secret. I remember reading a short story once, where the author took all these different characters and storylines from *other* stories and blended them into *his* story, and it *worked* in this way that was really incredible. It was so complicated, and yet so simple. And when I finished it, I just said, “How in the world did he *write* this?”

Do you remember the wonder you felt as a child? The wonder of snow. The wonder around Christmas. Around Santa and wrapped presents under the tree (what could be in them?). The wonder of a candlelight service and walking out of the church and looking up at the sky because maybe *you* will see a star tonight. We live in a world that is filled with wonder.

But somewhere along the way, we stop seeing it. We grow up and learn more or we get disillusioned or hurt, or we just get too busy, and wonder is something that is relegated to being *childlike*. We want to figure everything out and understand it all or even *control* it all, and the world loses its sense of *mystery*. “Oh, that fog you saw the other night? It was just a lot of tiny water droplets suspended in the air after water vapor condensed because it reached a certain temperature.” “The northern lights that we saw back in October? That’s just the earth’s magnetic field interacting with solar wind particles from the sun.” “All those deer that you see? That means that Valley Forge is getting overpopulated, so they’re going to have to cull them soon. Besides, they’re eating my flowers.”

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German pastor and author back in the 1930s, was in prison for opposing Hitler and the Nazi Party when he wrote this:

“The lack of mystery in our modern life is our downfall and our poverty. A human life is worth as much as the respect it holds for the mystery. We retain the child in us to the extent that we honor the mystery. Therefore, children have open, wide-awake eyes, because they know that they are surrounded by the mystery. They are not yet finished with this world; they still don’t know how to struggle along and avoid the mystery, as we do. We destroy the mystery because we sense that here we reach the boundary of our being, because we want to be lord over everything and have it at our disposal, and that’s just what we cannot do with the mystery.

“Living without mystery means knowing nothing of the mystery of our own life, nothing of the mystery of another person, nothing of the mystery of the world; it means passing over our own hidden qualities and those of others and the world. It means remaining on the surface, taking the world seriously only to the extent that it can be *calculated* and *exploited*, and not going beyond the world of calculation and exploitation. Living without mystery means not seeing the crucial processes of life at all and even denying them.”¹

We live in a world that is filled with wonder, and when we *lose* that wonder, we lose a piece of what it means to be *human*. We lose a piece of our souls. Bonhoeffer held on to that wonder,

¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *God Is in the Manger: Reflections on Advent and Christmas*, Week 2, Day 1 (pg. 18).

even as he was in a concentration camp, waiting to be executed. His last words were, “This is the end, for me, the beginning of life.”

One of my favorite movies is *Joe Versus the Volcano*, in which Tom Hanks plays a man named Joe, whose life is just drudgery. Every day he goes to the same awful job with the same awful people. His world is gray and bland. He gets diagnosed with a rare disease, and since he’s going to die anyway, he accepts an offer to travel to a remote island in the Pacific, where he will throw himself into a volcano in order to appease the gods on behalf of the island’s inhabitants. On the way there, he meets a woman named Patricia, played by Meg Ryan, and they start to fall in love.

One night, they’re lying on the deck of the sailboat that is taking them to the island, and they are looking up at the stars over the Pacific, when Patricia says, “My father says that almost the whole world is asleep. Everybody you know. Everybody you see. Everybody you talk to. He says that only a few people are awake, and they live in a state of constant, total amazement.”

A little later, their sailboat is destroyed in a storm, and they are floating across the Pacific on a raft Joe made out of luggage. Days and days of drifting across the open sea, scorched by the sun, with no land or hope in sight. One night Joe sees the moon begin to rise over the horizon of the water. And it is *enormous*. He stands there with his arms spread out wide, taking it all in, basking in the absolute glory of it. And he prays, “Dear God, whose name I do not know. Thank you for my life. I forgot how *big*...Thank you.” He opens his eyes to the wonder, and that marks the beginning of a new life for Joe.

Throughout Advent, we are following the story of Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth, who were too old to have children. But one day an angel visits Zechariah and tells him that God has heard

their prayer, and they will have a son named John. Zechariah asks how this can be, since they are so old. And because he questioned God's promise, the angel takes away his voice until the baby is born.

Well, today the baby is born. All their friends and relatives come over for the circumcision and naming ceremony, and they just assume that they'll name the baby Zechariah, after his father. But Elizabeth says, "No, his name is John." "John?! Where'd you come up with *that* name? No one else in your family is named John!" So they go to ask Zechariah, who still can't talk, but he has a tablet he can write on now. And he writes, "His name is John." It says that all of them were amazed, and immediately Zechariah's mouth was opened and he could speak again.

But I want you to notice something. It *doesn't* say that his mouth was opened, and he began to speak, and *then* they were all amazed. It says that Zechariah wrote, "His name is John," and they were amazed at *that*, and *then* he could speak again. All he did was *name* him. Why were they amazed at *that*? It wasn't the big, impressive spectacle of Zechariah being able to speak again after nine months that amazed them. It was the simple, everyday act of naming a baby that amazed them.

We don't have to wait for the miracles in order to be filled with wonder. We can experience wonder every single day, for no reason at all, *if we let ourselves*. If we let go of the need to pick everything apart and understand everything and explain everything and control everything; the need to have everything make rational, logical sense. "Oh, Zechariah didn't really see an angel. It was probably just a dream he had or a story he made up. He could just *pretend* to stop speaking for nine months and then suddenly start again when the baby was born. And I've seen stories in the news of women in their 70s getting pregnant."

I can't *prove* to you that this story is *true*. But it *amazes* me and makes me *wonder*, "What if...?" What if it *did* happen? What if Zechariah *was* visited by an angel, and his wife, who was barren, *did* miraculously become pregnant, and he *was* struck mute for nine months only to speak again when the baby was born and God's promise was fulfilled? What if we live in *that* kind of world?

If all that we look at is the *news*, then we live in a world devoid of wonder. And it makes us *weary*. How does a weary world *rejoice*? By allowing ourselves to be *amazed*, to make room for *mystery*, to be filled with *wonder*. Not everything needs to be *explained*; it can just make you say, "Wow." Not everything needs to be *understood*; it can just be beautiful. Not everything needs to be controlled; sometimes we just need to trust that we live in a world that is *saturated* with the presence and love of God.

Abraham Joshua Heschel writes, "Our goal should be to live life in radical amazement...get up in the morning and look at the world in a way that takes nothing for granted. Everything is phenomenal; everything is incredible; never treat life casually. To be spiritual is to be amazed."

We live in a world that is filled with wonder. And this is the greatest wonder of all: the Word became flesh and dwelled among us. The creator of existence, whose vastness is beyond our ability to understand and explain and control, was born as a tiny, helpless baby. *God* became *human* and lived here on earth *with us*, as *one of us*. In Jesus, God experienced the things that *we* experience – love, joy, sadness, pain, hiccups, hunger, grief, exhaustion, disappointment, betrayal, amazement, wonder, death. Jesus healed people and fed people and gave people hope and peace. And he calls us to do the same.

The word became flesh and dwelled among us. *He* became like *us*, so that *we* could become like *him*. We can either say, with skepticism, “How can these things be?” or we can say, with awe and amazement and wonder, “How can these things be?” *What if?* What if *that* is the kind of world that we live in; a world that is *filled* with wonder?