

Christmas Eve/Day, Yr. A  
2019

Christmas and Easter are the principle feasts of the Christian year. You might call them the two anchors, or the two pillars of the tradition. And I think they each have a word and a phrase that encapsulate their message. For Easter, that word is JOY and the phrase is "The Lord is Risen." It's a message of triumph - of final victory over death. At Christmas, I think the word must surely be WONDER and now we say Emmanuel, God with us.

Those two feasts together give us a lens to help us understand God, the world and ourselves, and they also give us a template upon which to pattern our lives in accordance with their vision.

So, WONDER and its close kin AWE. Wonder has to do with surprise, and delight, and amazement at something that's inexplicable. When we experience wonder it leaves us speechless and it opens our hearts. Wonder belongs to children but also to the child in all of us. One writer said that his earliest conception of what that word meant was a feeling that would come over him when he thought about the shepherds on the night hills over Bethlehem. "Even when those shepherds were made of illuminated plastic, standing around on my neighbor's lawn, their slack-jawed expressions of wonder appealed to me." He goes on to dispute the line that the shepherds were terrified. "I believe...the star in the East smote them with sheer wonder, and my experience of wonder is that, once it smites you, you are smitten by wonder alone. Fear can't penetrate till wonder subsides.... Wonder is anything taken for granted...suddenly filling with mystery. Wonder is anything closed, suddenly opening.... (God Laughs and Plays by David Duncan)

Einstein weighs in on the subject as well saying that the one who cannot wonder and stand rapt in awe is as good as dead.

In Hamlet, Shakespeare connects Christmas and wonder. Marcellus tells his companions that the time of Jesus' birth is a HALLOWED time, a holy time, a time in which life grows still like the surface of river so that we can

look down into it and see glimmering there in its depth something timeless, precious. (Buechner, *The Faces of Jesus*.)

Wonder seems to come easily and naturally to children. I am sure we can all remember all those moments of wonder we felt at Christmas when we were children. There was always something different about Christmas, wasn't there? The expectation and preparations, the festive gatherings, the anticipation of (may I say it?) presents, the special meals, the decorating. All of it. In thinking about this sermon, and what I remembered, I recalled a Christmas play when I must have been seven, in which we girls wore, if you can believe it, dresses made of crepe paper and carried flashlights with some kind of red covering while we sang O Holy Night. It was a time of wonder. But while it may come naturally to children, as adults we may need to be more careful to be open to wonder, to wait for it, to hope for it. We can lose it in our more adult assessment of the world; it can be covered over with doubt, cynicism, fear, despair. But Christmas, among all the gifts it brings, brings yet another opportunity to make us catch our breath, to pierce and open our hearts.

But wonder also has an intellectual aspect. I wonder.... That phrase leads us to reflection. So wonder is two-fold. The heart and the head. And while Luke's story touches our hearts, the story told in John's gospel stretches our minds as well as our hearts. You'll remember John's gospel, which takes a cosmic view of what's happening in Christ – the Word who was with God from the beginning of creation, who was the light of all people, who was the light that no darkness could overcome. The one who so loved the world that he became flesh and dwelt among us. Here's the theologian speaking; telling us that this God, the one who created everything, stepped into time and space as a part of that on-going and well-loved creation. Someone put it this way: When we celebrate Christmas, we are celebrating that amazing time when the Word that shouted all the galaxies into being, limited all power and for love of us came to us in the powerless body of a human baby. So first, God's Word, speaking to us through all creation, and then God's Word, in the person of Christ, speaking to us as one of us, and, as John reminds us, giving each of us, from his fullness, grace upon grace.

John and Luke are telling the same story. It's the story that we live in a spirit-filled world, a God-soaked universe. And here's where the second kind of wonder comes into play with another question: what are the implications of the Incarnation for us? What does it really mean that God took flesh, in Christ, but also in all creation? John tells us in theological terms, but it's there in Luke as well. The short version is that God is God, God is in charge, not whatever Caesar is in power at the moment, and God's will is for peace and justice, for good will to all people.

I've talked often about LOVE and as I know I've said, I've come to think that the best definition of love is that it is the recognition that we are all connected, and then a life that manifests that recognition. We see that in Luke – there's the connection first of heaven and earth, a gap bridged by Jesus Christ. When I was a chaplain at an Episcopal school, the head of the lower school decided that it would be a great idea to have the little kids each draw a picture or write a prayer and we'd put all of it together in a book. I must admit I wondered how that would work out, but it was great and one of the first prayers offered was from a seven-year old named Daniel who wrote a prayer with the appropriate picture: GOD, PLEASE SHOW ME THE SIDEWALK TO YOUR HOUSE. Yes, there it is, the perfect description of what happened in the Incarnation, God showing us, through Jesus, the sidewalk to God's house.

And because of this birth, other gaps are bridged as well: look at Luke's story. Look at who is gathered around the manger: shepherds and kings, rich and poor, old and young. Angels and animals. Everyone is there.

So the deeper message is one of love, connection and inclusion.

I've often thought it would be wonderful if Christmas was an everyday occasion. But, thinking about that, and about all the intensity around the feast, which is all good, but a bit exhausting, I was amused by a story I ran across about two guys, who must have been in a warmer climate than ours, who decided to go sailing while their wives went Christmas shopping. While they were out, a storm came up. They were having a lot of trouble keeping the boat under control. As they tried to maneuver toward land,

they hit a sand bar and the boat grounded. They jumped overboard and began to push and shove with all their strength, trying to get the boat in deeper water. With his feet almost knee-deep in mud and the waves bouncing him against the side of the boat and his hair blowing wildly in the wind, one of the men said with a grin, "If sure beats Christmas shopping, doesn't it?"

So while Christmas probably wouldn't be the same if it was celebrated every day, the spirit that animates Christmas and the vision it presents to us, IS something that can be lived every day. That recognition of connection that we call love, the recognition that we're all in this together; that we're here show God's loving and generous face to the world, to care for creation – all of that is meant to be lived every day.

As a perfect example of what I'm talking about, I'm sure most of you saw the article in The Pulse about a young man, Ben Anderson, who donated part of his liver to a dying 3-year old. In the article Anderson said that there was pain and what he called a "temporary setback" but he did it because it would give a little boy a chance at a life. One of his high school classmates was quoted in the article said that Anderson is Jesus Christ reborn, "with just a little bit of Elvis in him."

I think that very few of us will be called to live out our Christian vocations in that way, but because each of us, like Jesus, is God's word spoken into creation in this time and space, we'll have countless opportunities in ways large and small, to show God's face to the world.

I'd like to close with the famous poem by Howard Thurman:

When the Song of the angels is stilled,

When the star in the sky is gone,

When the kings and the princes are home,

When the shepherds are back with their flocks,

The work of Christmas begins

To find the lost,

To heal the broken,

To feed the hungry,

To release the prisoners,

To rebuild the nations,

To bring peace among people,

To make music in the heart.

And I would add, to live open to and out of a sense of wonder.

Amen.