

The Wonder of Christmas: Sunday, 12/24/17

1 When was the last time that you were amazed or completely captivated by something? Not just interested or impressed, but amazed? Was it the roar of the ocean waves? The beauty of a star-filled night or a richly colored sunset? The cry of a newborn baby? God created each of us with the capacity and the need to get lost in a sense of wonder. Enjoying the wonder of God's creation and giving thanks to God is one of the deeply fulfilling ways for us to worship God, worship that we can enjoy every day, not just on Sunday mornings. So when was the last time you got lost in an overwhelming sense of wonder? I feel that way pretty much every time I look up at the star-filled sky on a clear winter night. I hope you're finding some wonder in your days and nights as you walk through life, because God is offering wonder to you if you have the eyes to see it and the heart to receive it.

Christmas can be a difficult time to get lost in wonder. I made the mistake of walking into a Lowes and a Best Buy store at the beginning of December and discovered that the aisles we're so full of pallets of boxes that I could barely walk through the stores. Calendars get full, family gatherings bring out old arguments, financial pressures mount, and our noses start to run. And to make matters even harder, some of us are reminded of losses during the Christmas season, loved ones we hold in our hearts but can no longer hold in our arms, or other significant losses. Christmas can be a difficult time to get lost in wonder. The original Christmas included plenty of hardships to go around for Mary and Joseph, but it was also a time full of signs and wonders. And although it can be difficult, this Christmas can be a time of wonder as well. So open your eyes, open your ears, and open your heart to let God restore to you the wonder of Christmas.

2 One of the most spectacular signs that God gave at the first Christmas was a star blazing above Bethlehem. Astronomers will tell you that stars are nothing more than enormous balls of burning gas. But what if one of those stars told a story, fulfilled a promise, and invited you to be a part of something that would turn the world on its head? That's exactly what happened to the Magi, who set out on a journey to follow the star. They could have ignored it, dismissed it, studied it from afar, or explained the star away as just another one of many in the sky. But they didn't. They opened their hearts to the wonder of the star

and then set out on a journey, trusting that star would lead them to Jesus.

I don't know about you, but there are times in my life that I allow myself to get derailed in the complications, anxieties, and fears of life. There are times when I've got my eyes turned so far inward toward my own problems that I fail to notice the stars that God has placed in the sky to lead me. That's not the way I want to live. Do you? Whenever I get sidetracked by the worries of living, I need to open my eyes to see the wonder of God's star. I need to follow the star until I find Jesus. And then I need to worship Jesus, whether it's here in the church sanctuary or sitting around a campfire.

The wonder of the star of Bethlehem is breathtaking, not just because it's beautiful, but because it leads us into the presence of our savior. Christmas is a time to notice the star of Bethlehem, to set out in search of Jesus, and to be overcome with joy that the sovereign Lord of all creation is still showing us signs and wonders in creation all around us. The wonder of Christmas is there for us to rediscover, but first we have to open our eyes, break out of our routines, and go on a journey to find Jesus.

3 Reclaiming the wonder of Christmas also means rediscovering the wonder of the name of Jesus. Names have always been important. The first gift given a newborn child is their name. We put on our names before we even put on our first set of clothes, and we carry those names throughout our lives. Our names are intimate gifts that distinguish us from others and become a central part of who we are and of how we're known by others.

The Bible refers to Jesus by many different names. At Christmas, we especially remember the names given to Jesus by the prophet Isaiah: Wonderful counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace. Those names are important, they reflect to us a part of who God is, but the name given by the angel Gabriel, "Jesus," cuts to the very center of our faith. Jesus means "God saves!" Think about that for a second. His very name is a resounding affirmation of God's goodness, love, and mercy. Christmas is a time of anticipating and celebrating that "God Saves" is making a personal appearance on earth to save us all. There's a breathtaking scope of mercy, compassion, kindness, and forgiveness wrapped up in that one simple name, Jesus. There's an endless and overwhelming flood of love in that name. There are rivers of living water springing forth to wash you clean in that name. Jesus, God Saves! If you want more wonder in your life, wonder that's real and long-

lasting, then look to the name of Jesus.

4 Have you ever seen the lyrics for a song for the first time and discovered you'd been singing the wrong words all your life? Or maybe you've been singing the right word and never realized what it means? When I was a kid I had the lyrics to Jingle Bells wrong. For example, instead of "one-horse open sleigh," I sang, "one-horse soap and sleigh." In a similar way, sometimes we get confused about the word "manger." The manger isn't a barn or a structure with a roof, it's actually the little box Jesus was laid in, what the dictionary describes as "a trough or open box in a stable designed to hold feed or fodder for livestock."¹ A manger isn't a cute scene to sing about and adore, it's a dirty animal feed box. That's right, Mary set the son of God down in a wooden box that cows had been licking and drooling in. Can you imagine that? We should be shocked by the manger!

The real manger scene looked nothing at all like the crèche we set up in my family's living room year after year, with each clean porcelain Hummel figure carefully painted and placed and Jesus neatly laid in a pile of pristine straw. Reclaiming the wonder of the Christmas manger means facing what really happened. The Son of God was born to an unwed teenager in a barn.

The wonder of the manger is not only that God came, that the holy appeared to us in the flesh, but that God came as a helpless child, crying and squirming as all children do, born under difficult circumstances, and revealed first to the most ordinary and downtrodden people possible- shepherds from the fields. The wonder of the manger is that in one bold stroke, God meets all of us exactly where we need God to be, the perfect intersection of the divine and the human, the holy and the ordinary. Christmas is upon us, a time filled with wonder, a time when heaven and earth come together in the most unexpected of places, a manger.

5 And then there are all those angels. We sing about them and we hang them on our Christmas trees, but why? It's not really the angels that should inspire wonder in us, but the promise they delivered. "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel."² Setting aside that first astonishing proposition, "The virgin will conceive," there

¹ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/manger>

² Isaiah 7:14(b), NIV

is even greater wonder in the promise of Immanuel (or Emanuel), meaning, “God with us.” Is God really “with us?” The Old Testament experience of God was often a strict one, an encounter with God’s rules and the punishment that ensued when one failed to measure up to God’s holiness. I once met a man who was convinced that God’s revelation to him was that Jesus was a giant man robed in white who hurled lightning bolts wherever he went.

How do you see God? Is God so high above you and so holy that God can’t be bothered to give you the time of day? Is God so angry with you for your failings that God has nothing but judgement and punishment for you? The miracle of the Christmas promise that the angels heralded is that while God was high *above* us, Jesus bridged that great divide. God is now *with* us, Emanuel. The wonder of Christmas is that God kept the greatest promise of them all, and God is *with* us, for now and forever!

When you get up in the morning, do you expect God to show up, to really be with you, to be a part of your day? Do you expect that God will be there when you don’t feel like getting out of bed? When the grief you’re carrying around in your heart feels bigger than you are? When the loneliness or fear you’re facing are too much for you to handle on your own? The Christmas promise is that God is *with* us, Emanuel.

6 Christmas is a time to remember the wonder of God’s relentless and miraculous love, to embrace the real and powerful presence of God in our lives, and to show the same relentless love to others. The wonder of the star leads us to the wonder of the manger and the wonder of the name of Jesus. And Jesus is the perfect fulfilment of God’s promise to be with us, the wonder of Emmanuel. This Christmas, don’t be satisfied with just going through the motions. Enjoy singing the Christmas carols, but allow the wonder of Christmas into your heart as you sing. Enjoy sharing gifts, but don’t forget to share the Good News of the most important Christmas gift of all, Jesus. The original Christmas was a time marked with signs and wonders. May this Christmas be for you as well!



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...serving people for Jesus Christ so that we all may know joy!



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