

St Paul Lutheran Church
Christmas Eve – 2022
“Is It Still a Wonder?”

Dear Fellow Recipients of the greatest gift ever given – Jesus Christ, our Savior:

Our text on this eve of the celebration of our Savior's birth is a part of that familiar Christmas account that we just heard from our children, found in the Second Chapter of Luke's Gospel, verses 16-19:

And (the shepherds) went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. ¹⁷ And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. ¹⁸ And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹ But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart.

This is the Word of God. Thank him ceaselessly for the gift of his words, by which we are brought to faith and preserved in the same. We thank him especially this evening for the words that reveal to us that our Savior has been born. To prepare our hearts for the study of God's Word, we pray, ***“Sanctify us by your truth, O Lord. Your Word is truth.”*** Amen.

It's a word that we find often in our Christmas hymns – “wonder.” We sing of the *“Child of wonder,”* of a *“Great and Mighty Wonder,”* of the *“wonders of his love”* and how *“we are rich for he was poor, is not this a wonder.”* There are many such references in our hymns, for good reason. The original source is probably our text for this evening and the “wonder” that filled the people of Bethlehem at the news the shepherds brought them.

There is, in fact, no greater *wonder* in the history of the human race than the eternal God entering our world and taking into his divine essence the humanity that he himself once created. We look on the event again this evening with profound wonder.

Or do we? Do we still look with wonder?

Wonder is that unique human characteristic that causes us to investigate the unknown. The wonder begins in childhood. Give a

little boy a toy and you will likely soon find it disassembled – because he wonders how it works, wonders what it looks like inside. And probably not only disassembled but abandoned. Wonder causes us to look, to investigate, to explore, to question, and yet answers are often the death-sentence of wonder. Explanation terminates exploration. Answers tend to render the mysterious ordinary and therefore forgettable.

The problem or challenge then in connection with the birth of the Son of God ought to be readily apparent. We cannot, *dare not*, allow the wonder of the birth of our Savior to be lost to us. It is too sublime, too important, too monumental to be disassembled, studied, partially understood, and then discarded, neglected, or forgotten. This incredible, miraculous event quite literally forever changed the course of human existence. More personally, it was the miraculous beginning of God's rescue plan for humanity – including obviously therefore every single one of us here this evening.

For Christians, traditional Christmas celebrations are intended to magnify the wonder of the birth of the Christ Child. I'm not sure what exactly a “traditional” Christmas looks like to each of you. Several of this congregation's traditions are obviously evident – decorated Christmas trees, banners, lights, poinsettias, and a manger scene. Others have been abandoned. You will not see, for example, an Advent wreath, which was abandoned some time ago because it no longer held meaning for us. In fact you may recall that a couple years ago we dedicated our Christmas Eve service to the exploration of the meaning behind the Advent Wreath. By the following Christmas, no one remembered. We are, in fact, continually faced with decisions regarding the manmade customs and traditions of the past. We must not only understand them, they must direct us to our Savior – or we must discard them. To preserve customs in ignorance, even if they are intended to create wonder and exploration, more often than not results in formalism – the focus on outward forms of worship to the exclusion of internal meaning and understanding. Nothing good ever comes of formalism.

Obviously there is nothing inherently wrong with Advent wreaths. Yet when they, or any other human custom or tradition, draw our

attention and curiosity, rather than pointing us unerringly to our Savior, they have outlived their usefulness. Even with continual explanation, such traditions can work against us. Like a disassembled Christmas toy, the "disassembled" Advent wreath lies abandoned and forgotten. Our curiosity satisfied (for we have our explanation) the explanation can actually work against our sense of wonder at the event itself.

Clearly, we never want to lose the *wonder* of the birth of our Savior, but just how do we preserve that wonder, that ongoing amazement and awe at the human birth of God himself? The challenge is compounded by age. The older we grow, the more it takes to fill the heart with wonder.

One of my favorite Christian writers/philosophers, G.K. Chesterton, frequently addressed this very challenge. *"The world will never starve for lack of wonders,"* he once wrote, *"but only for lack of wonder."* Though none so great as the birth of Jesus, there are wonders all around us, we just stop noticing them. We stop appreciating them. We stop being thankful for them. Wonder, gratitude, even happiness are all interconnected. Wonder increases gratitude exponentially. Misdirected gratitude spoils everything every bit as quickly as does lack of wonder. *"When we were children we were grateful to those who filled our stockings at Christmas time. Why are we not grateful to God for filling our stockings with legs?"*

There's wonder all around us, but just how then do we preserve our sense of gratitude, joy, and wonder at this event. God in our text identified two very different paths that our natural human wonder can take, one path taken by those who heard the announcement of the birth from the shepherds, and the other the path that Mary took. Even something as simple as history tells us that the two are very different. Which is better? From our text this evening we learn that the people were intensely interested in the events described to them by the shepherds, but history tells us that for the vast majority their wonder was short-lived. Not long after his birth, the family of Jesus had to flee with him to Egypt, and from there to Nazareth. At some point the initial wonder of those who first heard the message of the shepherds waned. Many undoubtedly later saw with their own eyes the "newborn King," but probably perceived nothing all that special or unusual. Nothing all that wonderful. Even the effect of the star, which

led the Magi or Wisemen, seems to have been a passing phenomenon that was eventually discarded as no longer a wonder, and therefore no longer all that wonderful. Given Bethlehem's proximity to Jerusalem, it's even possible that some who were present at Jesus' birth were also present at his death. Apparently having come to the conclusion that they had "disassembled" Jesus and had arrived at an understanding of what he was all about, the Jewish people consented to his crucifixion.

That was one of the two paths to wonder – to be amazed for a time, but then to allow the wonder to fade. Mary clearly took the other path, in reality a much different path. Although she was arguably in a better position than anyone else to understand the birth of the Savior, she didn't disassemble and lose interest. She, according to our text, ***"treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart."*** That's the sort of ongoing wonder that you and I want – not the sort that loses interest the moment a bit of understanding is gained (or what we imagine to be understanding). We want the sort of wonder that continues to fill us with that childlike amazement at the miraculous birth of the Son of God who, wonder of wonders, ascribed worth to the worthless, showed love to the unlovable, and gave hope to the hopeless. We want the ongoing wonder of our Creator-God taking into his holy, divine essence our human nature. We want the ongoing wonder of our all-powerful, eternal God leaving his throne in heaven and setting aside the full use of his divine power and majesty – all so that he could pay the sin-debt that sinful mankind owed.

Thought and contemplation of just what happened at Christmas should never decrease our wonder; it should only increase it – exponentially. Do you need to be reminded of power of your God and your own smallness? Walk out into the night, look up into the sky and find the faint spot of light in one of the rear legs of the constellation Pegasus. That's the Spiral Galaxy of Andromeda. As large as our Milky Way, it is, so we are told, 2.5 million light years from earth and 152,000 light years in diameter. It consists of one hundred billion suns, each larger than our own sun. It is, again, so we are told, one of a hundred million galaxies. Then consider that the baby you see in the manger at Bethlehem is

himself the very God that created all of that in an instant, from nothing, by the power of his Word. The godless, of course, ridicule this divine truth. You tell me which is more reasonable, that all of this was created by God out of nothing, or that nothing created all of this.

It is simply not possible to picture our God as bigger or more powerful than he truly is. Yet that is the very entity that we see wrapped in crude strips of cloth and lying in a cattle trough.

Think about such things if you ever start to lose the proper sense of wonder at the birth of the Son of God. Ponder them in your heart, as did Mary. Look upon that humble scene and see just who it is that occupies that manger – the very One who, by the power of his word alone, created the universe that is infinitely vast beyond our comprehension. *That's* the Savior who came to rescue those as small and insignificant as you and me. *That* is the wonder of Christmas.

Filled with that wonder we wholeheartedly agree with the hymnwriter:

*Let us all with gladsome voice, praise the God of heaven,
Who, to bid our hearts rejoice, His own Son hath given.*

*To this vale of tears He comes, here to serve in sadness,
That with Him in heav'ns fair homes we may reign in gladness.*

*We are rich, for He was poor; Is not this a wonder?
Therefore, praise God evermore, here on earth and yonder. Amen.*

Welcome – A warm welcome to all, especially to any guests with us this evening. We consider it a great privilege to share God's Word with you—especially the gospel message of the birth of Jesus Christ, our Savior – as retold also this evening by our children. Please record your visit in our guest book and join us again, beginning with our Christmas Day Service tomorrow morning at 10 am.

Christmas Gift Bags – As is our custom, gift bags have again been prepared for the children in attendance this evening. Please feel free to take a bag with you for each of your children as you leave the church this evening.



St Paul Lutheran Church
Bismarck, ND

Christmas Eve 2022

ST. PAUL EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH

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Mick Johnson, President Angela Pfennig, Organist
Michael Roehl, Pastor

Christmas Eve – December 24, 2022

The Opening Prayer by the Pastor

Hymn 712 - "What Child Is This?" (Brown Hymnal)

Service of the Word (Brown Hymnal page 22)

The Scripture Reading: John 1:1-14 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was in the beginning with God. ³ All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. ⁴ In him was life, and the life was the light of men. ⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. ⁶ There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷ He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. ⁸ He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light. ⁹ The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. ¹⁰ He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. ¹¹ He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. ¹² But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God. ¹³ who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God. ¹⁴ And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.

The Confession of Faith - (The Christmas Creed)

***I believe in God the Father Almighty, Who created me
And Who sent His Son to be my Savior;***

***I believe in Jesus Christ, His only Son, my Lord, the long-
promised Messiah, Who came as foretold, being conceived
by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary, announced by the
angels, worshipped by the shepherds, adored by the Wise
Men, Who lived to suffer, die, and rise again, To free me from
all sin, from death, and from the power of the devil;***

***And I believe in the Holy Spirit, Who has brought me to faith in my
Savior, and by whose continuous work in my heart, I rejoice***

***in my salvation, walk in Christ, show forth His praises,
and will one day live and reign with Him in all eternity.
Amen.***

Hymn 85 (Stanzas 1-5) (Red Hymnal)
"From Heaven Above to Earth I Come"

The Christmas Account – Told by the Children

Children's song – 715
"Where Shepherds Lately Knelt"

Hymn 85 (Stanzas 13-15) (Red Hymnal)
"From Heaven Above to Earth I Come"

Sermon by the Pastor

"Is It Still a Wonder?"



Text: Luke 2:16-19

¹⁶ And (the shepherds) went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger.

¹⁷ And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child.

¹⁸ And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them.

¹⁹ But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart.

Hymn 710 (Brown Hymnal)
"Once In Royal David's City"

The Prayers

The Benediction

Hymn – 646 (Red Hymnal)
"Silent Night"

- Announcements -