

A Sermon  
Rev. W. Kevin Holder  
Grace Baptist Church  
Bryans Road, Maryland  
December 24, 2016

## **The Wonder of Christmas**

Luke 2:1-20

"And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be taxed" (v. 1). Sounds familiar, especially if you're a fan of the King James Version. It has a certain beauty and rhythm to it, though it may strike some as a little old and dusty. How about the Contemporary English Version's rendering: "About that time Emperor Augustus gave orders for the names of all the people to be listed in record books." Okay, that has a little more freshness and pop to it.

New translations of the Bible are one of the ways that we try to break through the barrier of familiarity. Most of us have heard Luke's story of the birth of Jesus before, many times. We know what happens. And sometimes, knowing what happened can get in the way of having something happen, here and now, on this Christmas Eve. That's one of the reasons why, year after year, publishers and producers crank out new books, new songs, and new dramas/skits that aim to take the ancient story and retell it, in creative ways, to a contemporary audience.

I came across one book titled *Touching Wonder: Recapturing the Awe of Christmas*, that tries to overcome the tendency toward Christmas as usual. According to the marketing summary, "This retold story of Word made flesh invites readers to react appropriately—with eyes opened wide in wonder, jaws dropped in amazement, and hearts rejoicing."<sup>1</sup> Eyes opened wide. Jaws dropping. Hearts rejoicing. Those aren't easy to come by on Christmas Eve, partly because we're so weary from the past few frenzied weeks of events, activities, and preparation. Ironically, all the effort we expend on getting ready for Christmas can actually undermine a deeper and richer experience of Christmas. For many of you, by the time you make it to the church on December 24, you're running on fumes. You need something a little more high octane than, "And it came to pass in those days. . . ."

The opening segment of tonight's text is very simple and down to earth. Many of the faces and features of ordinary life are there. Those who hold the reins of government. A frightened teenage girl and her loyal, carpenter husband. Taxes to be paid. A baby on the way. A place to stay for the night. Then comes Luke's restrained, bare-boned birth narrative: "It happened while they were there that her term was up and the days were completed for her to deliver. She delivered her son, the firstborn. And she wrapped him up and placed him in a feed trough because there was no place of lodging for them anywhere else" (vv. 6-7).<sup>2</sup> Nothing very jaw-dropping there. Nothing that would bring you to the edge of your pew and make you say, "Wow!" At least not at first glance.

But that's where Luke wants us to see beyond the familiar to the extraordinary. Beyond the earthly to the heavenly. Or better yet, to see the heavenly in the midst of the earthly, the extraordinary in the midst of the ordinary. Luke isn't just giving us dates, times, places, and people. He isn't just telling us what happened. As one commentator puts it, Luke's Gospel "tells what *really* happened, giving us the divine perspective on history that transcends the mere recitation of human occurrences and achievements."<sup>3</sup> What's really happening here, says Luke, isn't just a sequence of ordinary historical events, but the coming of God, in Jesus, to bring an end to the present evil age and to inaugurate his realm

of justice and peace. Old world of sin and death out, new world of righteousness and life in. Now that might make your jaw drop, at least a little bit, or cause your eyes to widen some.

As time passes, and we experience more of life, especially its sufferings and sorrows, a sense of awe and amazement can be harder to come by. Christian apologist Ravi Zacharias has written about our ever-increasing need for wonder. He says:

If I were telling my children the same fairy tale, notice the different reactions. If I took Sarah at age 8 and said to her, "Sarah, little Tommy got up and walked to the door and opened the door and a dragon jumped in front of Tommy," Sarah's eyes go wide. But now imagine me telling little Naomi, age four, the same story. "Naomi, little Tommy got up, walked to the door, and opened the door." Naomi's eyes go wide. Now let's imagine I tell a story to Nathan, aged two, whose entire worldview is exhausted in one word—cookie. All I have to say is, "Nathan, little Tommy got up and walked up to the door" and Nathan's eyes get wide with amazement.

Zacharias concludes, "You see the difference? Sarah needed the dragon. Naomi needed to open the door. For Nathan it was a pretty big deal to walk up to the door. The older you get the more it takes to fill your heart with wonder, and only God is big enough to fill it."<sup>4</sup>

It's easy to hear the first segment Luke's story about the birth of Jesus and think, "Hmm, there doesn't appear to be much heavenly glory here. Nothing really awe inspiring. Nothing to generate a sense of wonder. In fact, it all looks pretty ordinary and routine, at least on the surface." But that's when Luke starts to ramp up the excitement a bit. He transports us from the manger to the fields, where shepherds' business as usual is interrupted by a messenger from God. "The glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified" (v. 9). Or as Eugene Peterson renders it, "God's angel stood among them and God's glory blazed around them." We don't usually come to Christmas Eve worship expecting heavenly fire. We're normally content with the serene glow of Christmas candles. After the intensity of Christmas preparations, we're looking for an experience that will tone it down, not turn it up. We prefer calm, not chaos.

But sometimes, in order to reawaken us to the wonder of Christmas, God has to break into our holiday business as usual with the disruptive, but always good, news that the liberator has arrived and God's dominion is underway. No wonder the lone angel is quickly joined by a choir from above, singing a song that raises the rafters: "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests" (v. 14).

That kind of announcement calls for some kind of response. That's why the shepherds move into action, go see the child for themselves, and begin spreading the word. And those who hear the news aren't just intrigued. They're amazed. The shepherds have suddenly become a praise team, taking their show on the road to anyone who will listen. They go around praising God and saying wonderful things about him. What began as a modest description of a humble birth ends with a burst of evangelism and worship. Eyes widen. Jaws drop. Hearts rejoice. Awe. Amazement. Wonder.

Pastor Craig Barnes says he was a boy at his grandparents' farm when he saw his first shooting star. He rushed to his grandmother to tell her what he saw. She said it meant that if he made a wish it would come true. "Really?" he said. Then Barnes told his grandfather about the star. He said it meant that someone had just died. With big eyes, he said, "Really?" Then Barnes told his older brother. His brother said that they had just been studying that stuff in school, and went on to explain passing meteors, light years, and trajectories of light. Barnes said, "Oh." "The wonder was gone," writes Barnes, "and in its place I now had the right answer. . . . I have no interest in living without scientific insights

to life, but I do believe that in our hearts we yearn for the child-like ability to wonder. We would love to believe God is at work behind the meteors and the hopes that pass us by.”<sup>5</sup>

But as Barnes reminds us, we aren’t still children. As time passes and we experience more of life’s sufferings and sorrows, and hear the relentless daily news about the world’s brokenness and pain, our capacity for wonder, for dreaming, can weaken and break down. Our ability to imagine can grow weary. But in spite of all the things that can erode our sense of awe, we still come here on Christmas Eve. We come because we need to have our imaginations stirred. We come because we need to have our tired hopes revived. We come because we know that our salvation doesn’t depend on our plans, our explanations, or our relentless effort and striving to set things right in our lives and in the world. No, our salvation depends on God’s capacity and desire to do more than we often realize or imagine.

Who would have imagined that’s God’s plan to redeem us would include taking the form of a baby? As Philip Yancey puts it, “The God who came to earth came not in a raging whirlwind nor in a devouring fire. Unimaginably, the Maker of all things shrank down, down, down, so small as to become an ovum, a single fertilized egg barely visible to the naked eye, an egg that would divide and redivide until a fetus took shape, enlarging cell by cell inside a nervous teenager.”<sup>6</sup> Wow. To think that out of his love for us, and his desire to forgive us and make us new, God descended and identified himself with us in our humanity. To think that he got personally involved in our lives and the life of this world, going all the way to the cross to take upon himself the power and penalty of our sins. To think that he has taken up our cause and bound himself to us so tightly through the gift of the Son. To think that the glory of God is revealed in such a humble, weak way, a way that runs so contrary to our definitions of power, achievement, and success. The wonder of it all.

I have a friend who has beautiful white dog. He once told about a time when the dog went out of the house and got up under the front porch. By the time it emerged, the dog was filthy from rolling and squirming around in the dirt. In fact, the dog was so dirty, my friend was unable to get it thoroughly clean without resorting to an unusual measure. He concluded that the best thing he could do to solve the situation was to put on his bathing suit, get in the tub with the dog, and scrub it clean. So that’s what he did. And it worked. That story has always reminded me of the lengths to which God has gone to step into our situation so that our condition could be fixed and we can be the people God intends us to be. That’s really the wonder of Christmas.

Are you ready for Christmas? That’s the question that’s been circulating. The problem is, it assumes that Christmas is primarily a project to finish, a checklist to complete, a deadline to meet, or a task to be accomplished. And in the process, we lose a sense of what God has accomplished for the world in Christ. The most appropriate reaction to that news isn’t, “Whew! I’m glad Christmas is done.” But rather, “Wow! Christmas. See what God has done!” That’s why a story that begins with, “In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus” ends with “the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen.”

<sup>1</sup> [https://www.amazon.com/Touching-Wonder-Recapturing-Awe-Christmas/dp/1434764656/ref=sr\\_1\\_10?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1481739746&sr=1-10&keywords=the+wonder+of+Christmas](https://www.amazon.com/Touching-Wonder-Recapturing-Awe-Christmas/dp/1434764656/ref=sr_1_10?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1481739746&sr=1-10&keywords=the+wonder+of+Christmas).

<sup>2</sup> Ginger Barfield, Commentary on Luke 2:1-14 [15-20]. Working Preacher website. Accessed December 14, 2016 <[https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=3099](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3099)>.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Lischer, summarizing the description given by Fred Craddock. In *Speaking of Jesus: Finding the Words for Witness* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982) 78.

<sup>4</sup> Ravi Zacharias, “Created for Significance,” Part 1 (March 7, 2015). Preaching Today website. Accessed December 15, 2016 <<http://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2015/july/3072715.html>>.

<sup>5</sup> Craig Barnes, “The Interruption of Christmas Plans.” *The Living Pulpit* (October-December 1995) 20-21.

<sup>6</sup> Philip Yancey, *The Jesus I Never Knew* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995) 36.