

## Wonder

Matthew 1:18-23

December 15, 2010

As I look at the scripture and at the world, I see two very different sets of expectations for Christmas. The church and the world really are celebrating two different holidays. I have often heard it said that a good way to identify what a community believes and thinks is important is to listen to their music. The music a church uses in worship is as important as what the pastor preaches in shaping the beliefs and understanding of the congregation.

Armed with this knowledge, I went to “Philly’s Christmas Station”, B101, in order to find out what the larger culture believes about Christmas and what our society thinks is important to celebrate about it (as if I didn’t know already). I am an analytical person by nature and so I found their playlist, took a two hour segment and looked at it.

As you might expect, there was a wide range of songs. The first impression is that it is a very confused holiday with no real central theme. There was “Linus and Lucy” which is an instrumental jazz trio number that is only connected to Christmas by virtue of its being the theme to two Charlie Brown Christmas specials. In the mix was also the Chipmunks’ song about how they long for Christmas to come so they can get all the things they want—especially a hula hoop. Then there is the adult version of the same theme, “Santa Baby,” with a very grown up woman, in a very grown up way, asking Santa for very grown up presents.

At the other end of the spectrum were several carols that we would find in the hymnals and on the screens of our churches. These songs mention a baby in a manger and refer to salvation coming into the world. The meaning of Christmas is in them, but even in carols like “Silent Night,” and “O Little Town of Bethlehem,” the real reason for Jesus’ coming is not always clear, especially when there are no words or verses are left off. Of the thirty three songs played, there were six songs dealing with the birth of Jesus in one way or another—about 18% (I warned you I’m analytical).

The vast majority of the songs, however, (about 70%) had to do with spending time with family and friends and enjoying the company of those we love. Some of these songs, like Feliz Navidad, simply call us to celebrate. Most of them call our attention to the season and the traditions and expectations that have been built up around it and call on us to carry these on in a spirit of celebration. We are to be happy and merry. We are encouraged to go back home and enjoy the winter weather. We are to want our significant other for Christmas to the exclusion of everything else. We’d better not pout or cry. Put up the decorations because we need a little Christmas—right this very minute!

For the people around us, while they are aware we celebrate Christmas as the day Jesus was born, it really is about exchanging presents with the people they love. It really is about parties, getting together with family and friends, getting out and setting up decorations, setting out milk and cookies for Santa (and don’t forget the carrots and celery for the reindeer). It is a holiday that has become about listening to our favorite songs, eating

our favorite cookies and pies, drinking hot drinks on cold nights, stealing kisses under the mistletoe, and snuggling up with someone we love.

These things are not all bad. They are traditions that have been built up around the celebration. But as the culture has sentimentalized it, they have become the celebration.

It is also easy to see why this season is so hard on those who have lost loved ones or are struggling with money or health or other problems in life. If the season is about us and our experience of joy in life, then those who have reason to be sad only find their sorrow amplified by the season and its expectation of gladness and joy. If it is about celebrating family, what are we to do when family is missing? If giving gifts is all important, how are those who are struggling to meet their basic needs to celebrate?

The church also runs the risk of the traditions replacing the heart of the celebration. Surely, the church will not give up the use of the word “Christmas,” and there is little danger of us focusing more on Santa Claus than on Jesus Christ, but there is a sense in which we slip into the same nostalgia and sentimentality that characterizes the world’s celebration. In addition to being nostalgic about family traditions, we are also nostalgic about church traditions. We are sentimental about getting together with family, and about singing our favorite carols in worship, or lighting candles on Christmas Eve.

What we too often miss is a holy wonder, a sense of awe at the whole thing. There is an old proverb that says, “Familiarity breeds contempt.” That is too strong

here. I don’t think that we hate Christmas because we know it too well (though even we get tired of it after immersing ourselves in it nonstop for six weeks). But it is true that our familiarity with the Christmas story often breeds a certain nonchalance. We can read about angels coming from God in dreams, announcing things that are impossible, and declaring that God is breaking into history to bring salvation and redemption to His people, and we can read it with a sense of, “Yup, this story again.”

There is something so much greater and that goes so far beyond all the trappings of Christmas to which Advent only points. I want to focus our attention on it this evening with the hope that we can keep that focus, at least for little while, and return to it time and again after we leave. The Bible is dripping with it, and we find it in this evening’s text as well.

Matthew announces that he is about to tell us how the birth of Jesus Christ came about. That is his focus. It is not about Joseph and Mary. It is not even about the angel that came to change Joseph’s mind. It is, first and foremost, about Jesus, the Christ. Within this theme of the coming of Jesus into the world, Matthew tells us Mary and Joseph’s story.

He begins by telling us that Jesus’ mother, Mary, was pledged to be married to Joseph. This pledge was somewhere between marriage and engagement. It was a legally binding contract that they would, in fact, get married when the appropriate time came. This being true, divorce was required to get out of it, and any unfaithfulness on the part of either of them carried the same weight as adultery.

This is why it was such a shameful thing when Mary got pregnant, and why, from the start, Matthew points out that her pregnancy was from the Holy Spirit. It was an act of God, not an act of sin, but we know more than the people around Mary would believe. Her shame was undeserved, but real.

By telling us that Mary's pregnancy was by the Holy Spirit, Matthew also reminds us that we are not talking about just any birth here. The baby that is coming is going to be different from any other baby that has ever been born. His very existence is of a different order. Something very special is going on, and Matthew is already pointing us to it.

After introducing the pregnancy, Matthew pointed out that Joseph was a righteous man. Joseph's righteousness led him to two conclusions. Because he was righteous, he would not marry a pregnant woman. From the only perspective Joseph had available to him, Mary had shamed herself terribly in getting pregnant. To marry her would mean Joseph either had no self-respect or no self-control. Since he knew he wasn't the father, he was not going to dis-respect and shame himself by marrying her.

Joseph's righteousness did not end there, however. The expected thing to do would be to drag her into the public court and have her shamed in front of the entire city. Instead, Joseph was kind and gentle. Perhaps he recognized that she would have to live with the shame of this pregnancy the rest of her life. His righteousness led him to do the proper thing in as kind a way as possible. He would not share in her shame, but he would spare her

as much of it as he could. His righteousness made him merciful.

Once the decision had been made, but no action yet taken, God sent an angel to Joseph in a dream. (First, a pregnancy by the Holy Spirit, now an angel in a dream. God is active all over this account, and Jesus isn't even born yet.) The angel filled Joseph in on what God was doing. "*Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.*" (vv.20,21) The baby was God's. The child would be a boy, and Joseph was to name him "Jesus" because He would save the people from their sins.

It was from sin—not the Romans, not financial trouble, not pain—but from the guilt and power of sin that Jesus came to save us. This is the purpose of Christmas, and rather than being local, it is cosmic in significance. Jesus came to begin the reversal of the effects of Adam's sin. This baby's purpose was to set right a world that had been turned upside down.

Matthew then pointed to the prophet Isaiah to show this was God's plan all along, and to point to the most wondrous truth of all. The prophet had foretold that a virgin would give birth to a son, and the son would be called, "Immanuel." Matthew then translated for us. Immanuel means, "God with us."

Let that sink in for a moment. We celebrate the birth of "God with us." When it comes right down to it that's what all this fuss is about. It's not about family, snow, sleigh rides, or gifts under the tree. It's all about

the gift in the manger—God’s gift to us of Himself, His presence in our world and in our lives.

A few months ago my congregation was introduced to a video called, “How Great is Our God” by Louie Giglio. It is about the grandeur, power, and sheer immensity of the stars in our galaxy, to say nothing of the galaxy itself, and the universe that contains it. These things exist on a scale we cannot imagine. Astronomers had to invent a new way of speaking just to describe it.

Yet all these things are the product of God. He made them with His breath. He fashioned them according to His will and He decorated the universe with them as we decorate the trees we’ve been setting up in our living rooms. God hangs galaxies in the same way we hang lights!

It is this same God, the Creator and no other, that came to us. He didn’t come in all His power, glory, and splendor and demand our worship and adoration, though it is certainly His right to do so. He didn’t come as a King and demand our obedience as His subjects, though He certainly has the authority to do that. He came as one of His creations. He doesn’t just care enough to talk to us and write us letters. He loves us enough to become one of us!

He came as a baby. Instead of being born in a temple or in a palace, which would still be beneath His dignity, He was born in a barn, wrapped in common cloth, and laid in a feeding trough as His first makeshift bed. There is wonder in this which the world cannot see and we too often forget.

Focusing on this view of Christmas sets everything right. Even if we have no money and there is

nothing under the tree, we still have the gift of salvation from God, so we still have Christmas. Even if we are sick and our health has gone, we celebrate the coming of the Great Physician and healer of Galilee who still has power over every infirmity and disease, so we still have Christmas. Even if we are alone and missing the presence of the people we love, we have the presence of One who loves us much more—that *is* Christmas.

Once we realize the focus is not on us, but on Him, we learn that in Him we have everything we need. The gladness and joy are found only in Him, and so they come to us regardless of what is going on in our lives when we have Him and focus on Him.

Last week we were reminded to slow down and take time to love and help those in need, to lift up those who are down, to visit those who are lonely, and to remember the spirit of the season.

Tonight I want to remind you to keep in mind the wonder of it all: from the grandeur of creation to the fact that the Creator stepped into it. Focus on the coming of God into His world, and the fact that He came so that we might know Him. As Jesus said, “*Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.*” (John 17:3) Revel in the wonder that you can be forgiven and know the only true God through and because of the baby born to a shamed, unmarried girl and laid in a feeding trough.