

A Homiletics to Express Wonder

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Christmas Day, and the lectionary suggests Colossians 1:15-20. Colossians is tough at best, because the language keeps running off into mystery. I can't get my mind around expressions like "the image of the invisible God," "the first born of all creation," "by him all things hold together." To have to preach when you are not totally certain of the meaning is difficult.

So I'm tempted to leave Colossians. It was in the lectionary last year anyway. Why not retreat to the Gospel reading for Christmas, the story of the nativity in Luke 2:1-20? I would be on more familiar ground. "And in that region there were shepherds abiding in the field . . ." People like that passage. It is familiar and seems easy to understand. Yet there is a phrase in the story that suggests the first hearers had as much trouble with the nativity story as I have with Colossians. The story indicates that all who heard the news of the birth wondered at what was told them (vs.18), just as I wonder about those phrases in Colossians 1.

Wonder. How do you express that in a sermon? How do you recapture that when Christmas stands on such familiar ground, and with hardly an angel in most people's sky? Many sermons do not leave room for wonder because they try to explain everything. There is no room for further thought nor faithful doubt. If those sermons allowed a few questions to protrude, they might help the faithful stand at the doorway to the Savior's birth, adoring, but still astonished at what we're told. So let's try again with Colossians.

The passage is a hymn, says Eduard Schweizer. Poetry and imagination are at work—truth through hinting speech, not flat, rational, logical speech.

"In him all things were created, visible and invisible . . . whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers." Visible thrones? These I have seen. But what are invisible thrones? Are there foreign powers in the universe such as those of *Star Wars* or *The Return of the Jedi*? Is Yeats' line true, with its dark question, "And what rough beast, its hour come round at last, slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?" Should I demythologize that eerie, extraterrestrial stuff, call it nonsense? Yet to do so might lose some mystery the hymn points to, plus the sense of wonder, plus the sense of cosmic triumph, in that those thrones and dominions were created by him and for him.

"He is before all things." Well, certainly before me and my times. Was he before his own times? Before the days of Caesar Augustus, when all the world went to be enrolled? Before Abraham? Neanderthal man? Before the morning stars sang and the first trees of the field clapped their hands? Who is this really who so astonished the people at the manger, whom I so glibly feel I know when I set up my creche and sing carols?

"In him all things hold together." I am part of the "all things" and I have been held together. Those times when I was "beside myself," I did not walk off

from myself and disintegrate. I can give the text a personal reference. But does the text want a personal reference? Maybe Colossians suggests that the “all things” which Jesus holds together are atoms and molecules, stars and far off galaxies. Maybe he is the power that keeps the planet from exploding and the human race from destroying itself. Jesus, the hope of the universe, who made cosmic peace by the blood of his cross. Does the passage hint at this?

Colossians lends itself to questioning, which in turn heightens the wonder that is built into Christmas. Don’t try to work out all the questions in advance. The questions are part of the story. Fred Craddock has an apt image: that too many preachers wrestle with their text beforehand, solve all the questions, and only preach their conclusions. This, says Fred, is like boiling off all the juices and preaching the stain at the bottom of the cup. Let the ponderings show. After all, what we are dealing with, however familiar, will always be unexplainable, spoken with a drop of the jaw, a gasp, a shake of the head. Astounding, not fully clear, yet true.