

At one of our long-range planning meetings, we were brainstorming our Advent 2012 theme. I mentioned that Christian Saj would be the featured artist in our Art Gallery in the interval beginning in November and running through mid-January, which would encompass the Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany seasons. Once we agreed on the Advent theme of *Wait, Watch, Wonder*, we commissioned Christina to create an original piece of art.

Having settled on the theme, the worship staff began to think creatively about how to shape the liturgy in conversation with this theme. As we moved closer to the Advent Season of 2012, we invited Christina Saj to join us for an Open House Artist's Reception in November. We invited the Introduction to Worship Class at Columbia Theological Seminary to attend the open house and asked Christina to teach a portion of the class. She helped us and the seminary students understand the history of iconography and shared an excellent slide show illustrating the role icons have played in religious faith and formation across the last millennium.

It was this process that informed all of our Advent worship and was the motivation for Gary to preach three sermons, each of which centered on one part of the Advent theme. The sermon on "Wonder" was the closing sermon and follows below.

Notes

1 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, I. xi.12.

2 Ibid., I. xiv.20.

3 William A. Dyrness, *Visual Faith: Art, Theology, and Worship in Dialogue* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 62.

Wonder *Luke 1:26-38*

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Wonder. I find it a word hard to define even though it is often on my tongue. "I-pads and Kindles are each a technological *wonder*." "The child's eyes were filled with *wonder* as she looked at the Christmas tree." "We watched the fireworks on the Fourth with *wonder*." "The disciples stood outside and looked upon the Jerusalem temple in *wonder*."

So what is the best way to define "wonder?" Is it as the dictionary says: "a cause of astonishment" or "the quality of excited amazed admiration" or "rapt attention" or "astonishment at something awesomely mysterious" or is it all of the above?

Sometimes I find it easier to say what a word does not mean. A staple of my elementary school lunches was peanut butter and jelly on "Wonder Bread." I promise you that when I removed that sandwich from its wax paper, there was no "cause of astonishment" or "amazed admiration" or anything "awesomely mysterious" about the plain, boring, white bread smothered with peanut butter and jelly. It may have been good marketing, but "Wonder Bread" derailed a really fine word for me for a long time.

In my experience, when it comes to defining "wonder," a dictionary is of limited use. When I have stumbled upon wonder, or wonder has stumbled upon me, it has

been at the same time unmistakable and yet almost always indescribable. To experience “wonder” is probably the most maddening of all experiences for verbal folks like me, because wonder cannot be downsized into a word or any combination of words. “Wonder” is something that we know in our guts, in our hearts, even when we cannot put it into words.

On this final Sunday of Advent, I give Luke credit, for he defines “wonder” better than any dictionary entry as he tells the story of the angel Gabriel paying a “visit” to the peasant Mary. This past week, I searched our sanctuary windows, each of which are filled with crèches from around the world, and I did not find the Mary who Gabriel visits. I suspect I would more likely find *that* Mary sleeping on the ledge outside our front or back door or stuck at the bus station without money for a ticket or camped out underneath an overpass rather than situated safely at the base of any of our lovely stained-glass windows.

“Mary found herself pregnant and not yet married in an ancient culture in which coercive control of female sexuality was a primary measure of masculine honor,” writes Old Testament scholar Carolyn Sharp. “Mary faced an uncertain future at best and a devastating retribution from her community at worst. . . . So I don’t envision Mary as the radiant woman peacefully composing the Magnificat in Marie Ellenrieder’s 1833 painting, but as a girl who sings defiantly to her God through her tears, fists clenched against an unknown future” (12/14/11 blog *On Scripture*).

Maybe the porcelain Marys and wooden Marys, the dark skin Marys and the plump Marys and the lithe Marys all look so serene in each crèche because the Magnificat was sung nine months earlier, and over nine months, Mary moved on to ponder all these things in her heart. Or maybe Mary knows better than anyone that she is living in the calm before the storm. Over those nine months, Rome did not start looking for a new lord; Caesar had that role nailed down already. Culture did not start valuing the contributions of women and softening its harsh expectations of female sexuality. The world did not start seeing poverty as something to be overturned, but a condition to be avoided at all costs. If I were an artist, my crèche might also have a serene Mary, but her fists would be clenched beneath her tattered birthing robes.

It is a “wonder” to me that the church – Protestant and Catholic – has tried so hard to take the sting out of this story, and by so doing, much of the “wonder.” Part of the “wonder” not to be missed in the Annunciation is that Mary did not enlist. She was no fool; she was not waving her hand wildly to play the role of “theotokos” – mother of God. She was not anxious to call the wrath of Rome or Judaism or family upon herself.

Mary listens to Gabriel and then asks a perfectly reasonable question, “How can this be?” But it is the only question she asks. “There are several other questions I believe I would have asked,” writes Barbara Brown Taylor, “such as: Will Joseph stick around? Will my parents still love me? Will my friends stand by me, or will I get dragged into town and stoned for sleeping around? Will the pregnancy go all right? Will the labor be hard? Will there be someone there to help me when my time comes? Will I know what to do?” (Taylor, *Gospel Medicine*, pp. 151-152).

The greatest “wonder” of the Annunciation story for me, then, is not biological – was Mary really a virgin, and if so, how is such a pregnancy possible. The greatest “wonder” is that when chosen by God to bear the love of God, the child of God, into the world, despite all the good reasons to rant and rail and raise a clenched fist

at God, Mary says, “Yes.” Wonder of wonders, Mary embraces this holy disruption. “Here I am; let it be with me according to your word.” That response from Mary is as good a definition of “wonder” as any I have ever heard or read.

I don’t want to miss, though, the role that Gabriel plays in the story. His role is easy to overlook. Just peruse all the crèches again, and you will not find one angel Gabriel on display. Sure, he came nine months earlier and was long off the scene by the time of the Bethlehem birth, or was he?

Look again at each crèche, and you will often find a single angel. I would like to think of that angel as Gabriel making the same announcement to the shepherds that earlier he had made to Mary: “Fear not.” It just seems the angel thing to do in the Bible. Angels know that fear can choke the life out of wonder; they know that it is frightening, sometimes terribly so, to pay full attention to God, to try to live into God’s vision for the world, to embrace God’s choice for our lives when we had other plans, but the wonder of Gabriel’s song is that God would not let Mary, will not let us, drown in that fear alone.

I wonder what it would mean to live that way, unafraid to hold on to the good news of God for dear life, unafraid to tell the world that God has no patience with hunger and human desperation, with children being preyed upon by adults, with healing afforded only to those who can afford it, with bending over backwards policies to protect the rich while crafting pious lip service policies for the poor, with public power purchased by those who can write the biggest checks, with religion remote from the streets, content inside sweetly adorned sanctuaries,

I wonder what it would mean for us to believe that “in this world of sin, where meek souls will receive Him, still the dear Christ enters in.” I wonder how we would be changed if we believed that these were more than lame lyrics to a popular carol, but were the very confidence that carried Mary for nine months and for thirty-some years after that, the very confidence that can carry us in this season of what we want into a season of what God wants, carry us on wings like eagles from this beloved sanctuary into God’s beloved world.

I wonder.