

God with Us

The Wonder

Luke 2:1-18

Mark Vroegop

"In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. And all went to be registered, each to his own town. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!" When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us." And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them." (Luke 2:1–18)

"Wonder" is a great word. It was the theme of our Christmas Concert this weekend.

There are a few different ways that we use the word *wonder*. For example, we might use the word *wonder* to describe something we are thinking about in an inquisitive manner, as in "I wonder why the sky is so blue in the winter?" It can be used in a negative sense or for something that is doubtful, as in "I wonder what he meant by that text?"

But it also can be used to describe being filled with awe or amazement. That is what we mean when we say that something is *wonderful*. It has the qualities that makes something special, attractive, and appealing.

Imagine, for instance, the look on a child's face on Christmas morning when they see the presents under the tree. There is a child-like emotion over something incredibly exciting or mind-blowing.

I was doing some research on the concept of wonder when I came across this quotation:

If you want to witness a natural display of a sense of wonder, just observe a child. A child's whole world is viewed through the eyes of wonder and excitement. A child has no judgments of why things are so, but rather a child is in awe of life and views life through innocence, purity and curiosity.

You may have often heard the term "be childlike," referring to our adult self to let go . . . and be more open and curious. The truth is that we lose our sense of wonder as we become adults.¹

I think the author is right: it is easy to lose our wonder as adults. The reason, of course, is because things become familiar or explainable. The more experience we have with something or someone, the easier it is to lose the wonder. This is true with a concept, a person, or a place.

And it is also true with the Christmas story.

I feel it. I'm sure you do as well. You know the story of the baby in the manger. But when was the last time it made you stop and say, "Wow, that's amazing!" Today we are going to walk through the most familiar text in the Christmas narrative—Luke 2. Let's look at this so that we can try to reclaim the wonder of what it means that God is with us.

Wonder Revealed

Last week we examined a text in Matthew's gospel where he attempted to demonstrate that Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah. We learned that Matthew used three words—son, Immanuel and Jesus—to introduce the Messiah in his narrative.

Luke's aim is a bit different. He aims to put into writing an account of the life of Jesus so that believers can have confidence in what they have been taught (1:3-4). Luke writes with the precision and the skill of a physician evaluating all the relevant data. He starts from the beginning, explaining how Jesus was born into the world.

The text begins with a set of facts that help to not only locate the event in history—to prove that it really happened—but also to illustrate the way that God intervened in the midst of mundane and inconvenient events.

¹ In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. ² This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³ And all went to be registered, each to his own town. Luke 2:1–3 (ESV)

Luke refers to two political rulers in order to set the historical environment. It would be like saying "during the days of the Civil War . . ." A statement like that would not only indicate who was president, but also what the culture was like.

¹ https://www.huffingtonpost.com/mary-paleologos/a-sense-of-wonder_b_5686811.html

During the time of Jesus' birth, Rome ruled the Middle East. We don't know a lot about Quirinius. He was some kind of regional administrator in the Roman government for the region of Syria. Rome typically appointed a provincial ruler who would do their bidding, but who also had some connection to the people. Herod was this kind of ruler.

We do, however, know a lot about Caesar Augustus. He was born Gaius Octavius, and he was the nephew of Julius Caesar. Gaius was adopted by Julius Caesar and became heir to the throne through Caesar's will. For a while he shared power with two other Roman leaders. Eventually Octavius consolidated his power, and in 27 B.C. the Roman Senate conferred on him the title of "Augustus," which meant "the exalted one."

Caesar Augustus reigned in Rome for 44 years. His administration is considered by many to be the golden age of Roman culture. Part of his leadership involved reorganizing the diverse empire.² The census Luke wrote about may very well have been a part of his attempt to bring order and structure to the Empire.

In verse three we learn about a significant event in the life of the Empire. Everyone was required to return to their hometown for the purpose of being registered. Imagine what this must have been like, with massive numbers of people traveling back to their family homes.

Luke sets this narrative in the midst of the Roman Empire with its taxation, census, and particular rulers. The setting is very common human history. But it will be anything but typical as we will come to see. In fact, part of the wonder of this moment is how unexpected this is.

What's more, I love the fact that while the events of mankind are turning—kings are ruling, taxes are being paid, people are traveling—God is on the move. Mysteriously and sovereignly, God is working out His plan, but He is doing so in the midst of very ordinary lives.

I've often pondered the fact that our lives turn dramatically in the midst of ordinary moments. If you are married, think of the first time you met your spouse. Think of the path that led you to your present job. Or even how you landed here at College Park. My journey here began with a conversation on a beach in Gull Lake Michigan when I was a junior in high school. It led to an internship, which led to a lunch, where I met Dr. Jim Grier. That led to the seminary where he taught. And he is my connection to this church. My journey here started in 1992, sitting on beach. That's the way God works. And it's just amazing.

God works in ways that we rarely see in the moment. Now that's really important if you are in one of those seasons of waiting or confusion. One of the ways you can fight anxiety or fear is by being amazed at how God was working everything out to fulfill His word. And if He's done it in the past—which He has—you can trust Him for your future. Put off worry with wonder.

Verse 4 provides the specifics regarding the location of the birth of the Christ-child. There are many important details that are given here. Let me highlight a number of them:

² Elwell, Walter A., and Barry J. Beitzel. "The Caesars," *Baker encyclopedia of the Bible* 1988 : 392–393. Print.

- Joseph leaves Nazareth and travels to the Bethlehem, the city of David, because he was a descendent of the royal family.
- Nazareth was a small, insignificant town. Bethlehem was about 95 miles away (the distance from Indianapolis to Rochester, Indiana).
- It had been prophesied in Micah 5:2 that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem:

²But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days. (Micah 5:2)

- Bethlehem will also be the location of the tragic genocide of children as Herod tries to exterminate any threat to his throne (see Matthew 2:16-18)

As we continue in the text, we find other important details. All of them create a particular picture here.

Verse 5 is too familiar to us. It loses the shock value. Joseph travels to Bethlehem with Mary *“his betrothed who was with child.”* To be betrothed and with child would have been scandalous for those who knew them. Imagine what it may have been like for them as Joseph returned home with everyone he grew up with. Just ponder the fact that this is the backdrop for the birth of Jesus. It is filled with such irony—wonder-filled irony.

In verses 6-7 we find the actual birth narrative:

“And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.” (Luke 2:6–7, ESV)

The child is identified as “her firstborn.” This statement is connected to the virgin birth, sets up the presentation in the Temple in Luke 2:22ff, and unlike another word which means “only son,” this allows for the future children that will be born through Mary and Joseph’s marriage, after the birth of Jesus (see Matt. 1:25 and Luke 8:19-21).

The Christ-child is wrapped in swaddling clothes, which was a long piece of linen or strips of cloth that were wrapped tightly around babies to limit their movement.³ And Jesus was famously laid in a manger, a feed trough or stall for animal food, because “there was no place for them in the inn.” New Testament scholars suggest that since Bethlehem was such a small village, the “inn” was a crude overnight lodging place for travelers and that there was no suitable place for Mary to give birth.

The point, more than anything else, is that the Christ-child was born in humble circumstances. In the historical context of mighty empires, imperial rulers, ruthless kings, and powerful armies, the Messiah is born in a tiny village and in a manger. The ironic entrance of the Christ-child becomes a harbinger for the life of Jesus and the message of the gospel. The God who saves comes as a baby—in a manger.

³Chad Brand et al., eds., “Swaddling Clothes,” *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2003), 1542.

One commentator said it well:

The irony of the most important event in history taking place in a manger should not be lost sight of; it reveals how God elevates the lowly and humble and rejects the proud and mighty of this world.⁴

Just ponder this. Consider and wonder that the Messiah's entrance into the world would be very different than what anyone would have thought or predicted.

Is it any wonder why Paul would say the following in Philippians 2, while at the same time encouraging us to live the same way?

"Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." (Philippians 2:3–11, ESV)

Does that passage make you wonder? It should! And all of it started in what we read in Luke 2.

Wonder Experienced

The scene turns from the manger to the shepherds in the fields. We see an account of the kind of wonder that happens as other people encounter the news about the Christ-child being born.

The announcement of the birth of Jesus was a spectacular moment, but only for a few people in Bethlehem, and they were as unlikely as where He was born. The divine announcement was made to a group of shepherds. They are yet another example of the irony of this moment, because shepherds were not a well-respected lot. Shepherds were considered an unclean group by the standards of the law, and they had a reputation for being dishonest.⁵ Given the fact that they are "keeping watch over their flock by night," we can assume that they are living outdoors, as their sheep are feeding in the pastures in the countryside of Bethlehem. Don't miss the fact that the first people to learn about the birth of the Messiah were literally outsiders, at the margins of society.

What happens next must have been a sight to behold. According to verse 9, a single angel appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them. In other words, they were suddenly in the presence of an angel, and a bright light surrounded all of them. The text tells us that they were filled with fear at this encounter with the angel. The glory and power of what they were seeing caused them to fear for their lives.

⁴ Robert H. Stein, *Luke*, vol. 24, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 107.

⁵ *Ibid.*

Verses 10-12 contain the divine message:

¹⁰ And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. ¹¹ For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. ¹² And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." Luke 2:10–12 (ESV)

A few things to note:

- The phrase "good news" is the Greek word *euangelizo*. The noun form of this word is translated as "gospel," and the verb form is the source of the English word "evangelism."
- "All people" is announcing something that will become even more evident in the rest of the New Testament, namely, that the Good News is now going to spread to people beyond the nation of Israel.
- "This day" is announcing that the long-awaited time of deliverance has finally come.
- "A Savior . . . Christ the Lord" is connecting the fact that Jesus is both the Messiah and the authoritative ruler over all.⁶
- The sign they are given is familiar to those who are reading Luke, but it must have been startling to the shepherds: the Messiah was to be found as a baby and in a manger. It must have struck them as odd.

What happens next must have been unbelievable! Just let your imagination take you there. After the single angel finishes the announcement, the entire night sky is filled with "the heavenly host." This term is used for the army of angels, and there is a multitude of them, or there are too many to be numbered. These angels join together in saying "*Glory to God in the highest, and on earthy peace among those with whom he is pleased*" (Luke 2:14). The NIV renders this "*Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.*"

That message is really the hope of what Jesus, as the Messiah and Savior, will bring. He will give glory to God, and He will bring the peace of God to those who are made favorable to God. The book of Romans put it this way: ". . . *since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ*" (Rom. 5:8). Within the announcement of the angels is the essence of what the gospel is all about.

The announcement text ends with the response of the shepherds. They are the first to hear the Good News, and their response is instructive. After the message was received and understood, they "made haste" and found Mary, Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. The sign verified the message of the angels.

"When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us." And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. And

⁶ Ibid.

when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them.” (Luke 2:15–18, ESV)

The baby, the manger, the angels, and the shepherds make for a moment of great wonder for those who heard about it. But it also created renewed wonder and excitement in the shepherds. Look at verse 20:

“And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.” (Luke 2:20, ESV)

Their experience of hearing the Good News and seeing the Christ-child created joyful wonder in them. They went back to where they were, but they were filled with great joy.

That’s the story of Christmas. It is amazing.

Wonder Check

Do you know what the danger is with this text for most of us? It is that we would lose our wonder—that we would treat this passage with a spirit of “I know, I know, I know.” We could lose the awe and wonder of what is here. And that can also happen in your entire spiritual life.

I found a blog that took up this question. It listed seven signs that you’ve lost your wonder over Jesus:⁷

1. **Your highest passion for Jesus is past tense rather than present tense.** For most of us, the height of our passion is closer to when we first become believers. From there, our faith too often settles into the routine.
2. **You have to make yourself do evangelism.** People filled with wonder over Jesus naturally and regularly tell others about Him. Those who no longer marvel at Him must force themselves to do it.
3. **Reading the Gospels no longer makes your heart leap.** Remember when you devoured every word about Jesus? You ate it up because you wanted to know Him fully. If that desire for His Word is no longer there, you’ve left something behind—probably your wonder.
4. **You don’t grieve your sin like you once did.** We most ache over our sin when we see it against a holy God who sent His Son to die for us because we’re sinners. When we take His Son for granted, our disobedience doesn’t grip us as strongly.
5. **You can’t say with integrity, “I long to know Jesus more.”** Paul counted everything as loss compared to knowing Jesus (Phil. 3:8-10). That’s the kind of heart that never settles into a mediocre relationship with Him.

⁷ <http://chucklawless.com/2017/10/7-signs-that-youve-lost-your-wonder-over-jesus/>

6. **You've begun to see your Christianity as a restriction rather than a joy.** When you get there, your faith has become a set of actions rather than a relationship with Jesus. That's usually a sign that you've turned your eyes off the glory of Christ.
7. **Something (or someone) excites you more than Jesus does.** Based on what you think about and talk about, Jesus is no longer higher than second place in your life.

Let's be sure that we don't lose the wonder of the gospel this Christmas. Let's allow that wonder to set into our hearts even now. Let's repent of cold-heartedness and any other sins that take up space meant for love for Jesus.

Let's ask the Lord to make us a people who never lose the wonder of Jesus.

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