

## The Wonder of Advent

sermon digest

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Isaiah 64: 1-5, 8-9; Romans 1:1-7

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Today is the first Sunday of Advent, which means “the coming.” Again we are reminded that Christian Advent celebrates the coming of God in Christ. Advent necessarily precedes and leads to Christmas, the birth of Jesus. Under Constantine the Great, the pagan holiday *Dies Natalis Solis Invicti*, The Birth of the Unconquered Sun, celebrated on December 25, became the official birthday of Jesus. Because of the pagan origin and association with Constantine, some Christian groups today boycott Christmas. In coordination with the Eastern Christian celebration on January 5, Christmas eventually continued twelve days through January 5. Older than Christmas, the celebration of Epiphany on January 6 was associated with the visitation of the Magi from the East.

Although Advent stands at the beginning of the Christian year and the birth of Jesus at the front end of Matthew and Luke, the birth narratives appear to have been the last thought in the development of the Christian Faith. Like the creation stories in Genesis that grew out of faith in the God above all gods, Christmas grew out of the faith of early Christians that “God was in Christ, reconciling the world.”

Anglican scholar N.T. Wright (*Christian Century*, Dec. 16, 1998) states that Christmas looms large in our culture, more popular than Easter, but the gospel in John and Mark was told without Christmas. Except for Jesus’ Davidic descent, Paul’s gospel in Romans was proclaimed without mention of his birth. Wright snorts at the lyrics of the popular Harry Belafonte Christmas song “Mary’s Boy Child” that declares, “Man shall live for evermore because of Christmas Day.” Wright offers a profound “No, replies the New Testament. Because of Calvary, Easter and Pentecost.”

What, then, shall we do with the fantasy that surrounds Christmas in the birth stories in Matthew and Luke and the extension of legend in modern culture? Children are particularly vulnerable. My own childhood preceded the television culture of our world. Christmas centered in family, the exchange of gifts, and Santa Claus rather than the Advent of the Christ; but I was not introduced to the extended fantasy of Frosty the Snowman, Rudolf the Red-nosed Reindeer, or the Drummer Boy until late adolescence and the entrance of television. Children today as yesterday lack the critical apparatus to distinguish the wonder of Advent in the Gospels from the fantasy world of TV and the twinkling lights of commerce, but I suspect that the Christmas blend of biblical miracles and secular fantasy is also a problem for the adult mind. Why should we be surprised to find that the confusion of Jesus with Santa and the embellishments of television Christmas fantasy eventually leads to adulthood and growing away from the childish fantasies of December? Our culture has created a world in which baby Jesus is easily thrown out with the secular bath water. In the process of growing up in the age of science in which everything is rightfully subject to question, have we lost our sense of wonder?

**Wonder is a biblical synonym for miracle.** The wonderful work of Jesus in the Gospels creates a sense of awe and amazement; Jesus revealed the very being of God to the world. Miracles were also called signs because they illustrated and pointed to teachings of Jesus about the ways of God. Each wonder performed by Jesus appears in the Gospels in context with a particular lesson, a meaning that leads to a higher understanding of God; and, as a whole, the miracles proclaim Emmanuel, God with us. But we need to distinguish the wonders performed by Jesus and the wonder of the person of Jesus in the Gospels. Unlike the myriad of Gospel miracles, Easter and Christmas, the resurrection and the incarnation, the end and the beginning, proclaim the miracle of Jesus himself. Between the two biographical wonders of Jesus, Easter and Christmas, the resurrection takes priority. The Gospels present an evolving, growing, expanding comprehension of the meaning of the Christ that literally explodes in the new Christian faith in the Acts and Epistles of the church. So we might well speak not only of the wonder of Jesus the Christ, but the wonder of his church and the wonder of the faith in Jesus in the community of people called Christian.

When we moved here in 1988, I spoke one Sunday evening on “The Birth Came Last” that captured the interest of Granvil Kyker. My message was neither original nor particularly profound. I was sharing with new friends in faith what I had gleaned from theological education. Granvil was a scientist, prone to raise questions. Placement of the question of Advent after the experience of Easter

rang came like a revelation to his reasoned faith.

If you read the New Testament carefully, you cannot escape the fact that the dominant event was the resurrection of Christ. Every book of the New Testament revolves around this central moment in the life and death of Jesus and becomes the reason for hope in a world of despair. Even the story of Jesus that seems to unfold in something of a chronological order is told with the experience of the end, the resurrection, in hand. That Jesus was born is mentioned in passing in Galatians 4:4, "born of a woman," and implied in Roman 1:3 in the Davidic descent of Jesus; but the gospel is proclaimed, with the exception of Matthew and Luke, without any reference to his birth. Theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg suggests the high probability that the last question asked by the New Testament church was the question of Advent, the coming of the Christ. "What was his destiny?" led to the question, "What was his origin?" But we also must accept that Mark and John could proclaim Jesus as the Christ without reference to his birth.

N.T. Wright refers to miracles in the Bible as "God's Way of Acting." As a historian, he questions the conflicting genealogies in Matthew and Luke, references to Joseph as Jesus' father, the Bethlehem location for his birth, and the historical reference to the census in Luke. The big question seems to revolve around the virginal conception in Mary through the Holy Spirit, which the science oriented person wants to dismiss completely on biological grounds but which the biblical student questions as an exceptional event in biblical history. Wright comes around to the conclusion that the wonder-filled stories surrounding the birth of Jesus have meaning for someone who has come to faith in Jesus as the Christ and has already accepted the resurrection and ultimate hope revealed in Easter.

***We need to recover our sense of wonder.*** A common protest among contemporary people of faith is that our cynical, skeptical notion of truth which we have associated with science is the child of the Enlightenment that gave birth to the scientific method of ascertaining fact. Coming of age has come to mean outgrowing fantasy and myth as the explanation of things. Unfortunately, it often means abandonment of mystery in the structure of the real world. The "God of the gaps" became the answer of faith to the mysteries of the universe. When the human mind and scientific effort reaches the boundary of knowable fact, people of faith want to fill the gap of mystery with the notion of God and the supernatural. Through the ages the God of the gaps has often been the only recourse to continued existence in the face of suffering, sickness, and death.

This morning I stand on vulnerable ground. At the risk of filling the gaps of my knowledge with the supernatural, I believe that God transcends our knowledge. I would rather field the questions raised by my faith in the God of Wonder than to surrender to the notion that nothing real can exceed our accumulation of facts. I applaud the scientific view of the world and the continued human struggle to understand the concrete reality of things; but while I strive to grow with Paul beyond childish ways of thinking, I believe that the real God is always beyond our facts occupying the mysterious limits of human knowledge.

Perhaps the same fantasy in the childish mythology of the modern Christmas in the secular culture produced the wonder Advent in the stories of the Gospels. If so, we need to toss out Jesus with Santa, and we can easily abandon the myth of virginal conception with the myth of talking snowmen and reindeer. But the world of mystery has consistently been the dwelling place of God in the Bible. If we have the idea that God is the occasional visitor who drops out of the sky to invade our world of scientific fact with events totally beyond all comprehension, a world of magic where tricks that violate all of the rules of nature can be performed, then it is time to outgrow the world of wonder, of miracle, and the idea of God.

Wright notes that the birth stories have become a test of faith and fact raised to "prove" one way or the other the reality of God. "If you believe in miracles, you believe in Jesus miraculous birth; if you don't, you don't. Both sides turn the question into a shibboleth, a true-false issue. But God does not drop in on our world to dazzle our eyes with the candy of miracles. The biblical God is not an occasional visitor. God is always present, always involved in this world, and often in ways that totally mystify and startle our sense of reality.