Reclaiming Wonder
Sermon by Pastor Sarah Rohde
Bethlehem Lutheran Church, St. Charles
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For unto us a child is given, and he shall be called “wonderful.”
Wonder-ful.

This God, this child, who comes to earth, is, indeed, full of wonder, and this God, this child, is filled with the power to turn each of us, again, toward wonder itself, and toward the wonders of life and love and hope that are given to us by God.

Let us pray,

*Emmanuel, God with us, once again you come to us in newness – in new life, and in new hope for us and for the world we all call home. We’ve heard this story hundreds of times; but tonight, may we simply pause in wonder at it all. Lead us to rest in your love, and lead us to share your endless love with a world that longs to hear it and know it.*
*In Jesus’ name, Amen.*

Many of you know that I am mom to two young boys, to 3.5-year-old, Benjamin, and to 1-year-old Owen. Both of them are in such fun and demanding stages – I’ve been at this parenting thing long enough to know I’ll probably say that about every stage, but one of the things we are so enjoying, and marveling at these days, especially as Benjamin learns more and more words, are the places his imagination takes him, and takes us right alongside him. You can’t believe the number of places we’ve visited, the number of things we’ve created and seen
right from the floor of our living room rug. This past weekend, for example, an Amazon box became a basketball hoop – and let’s just say I can actually play that kind of basketball. Then a few minutes later a bunch of bright-colored magnetic tiles in various configurations transported us to gigantic castles, and then to airplane landing strips. And then with the help of an empty oatmeal container and a solid wooden spoon, suddenly we had quite the drum corps marching through our home.

Witnessing the imagination of a child is a beautiful thing.
It makes you realize again how the world can be received when it doesn’t have to pass through the filters of logic and utility that we adults acquire over time. Sometimes I look at Benjamin’s innocence and imagination, and I think, “I wonder how long this will last? When will he figure out what these simple objects around our home are actually used for?” But then, in the same breath, I find myself wondering who has more to figure out here. Sure, Benjamin has knowledge and reason to acquire, and he will. But what about us who have grown up, and, with growing up, have seemingly grown out of this ability to wonder and imagine?

What do we lose when we give that up?
What do we lose when we let a world that is so plump with meaning become flat and one-dimensional?
There’s gotta be a way to recover a sense of wonder, even as we grow in knowledge and understanding.
What if the invitation from God this Christmas is just that - to loosen our grip a bit, to yield our sense of certainty, so that we can wonder again? Wonder at a
God who is born into this world in a manger, and ever since, has been making God’s love incarnate throughout the world, if only we have eyes to see. Instead of just talking about wonder, I’d rather do some wondering right now. Let’s allow ourselves to peak behind the curtain and imagine for a few minutes the emotions, the facial expressions, the textures of meaning that might just live behind the words that made it into Bible in Luke chapter 2.

Let’s wonder first about Mary. I wonder what was she doing when the angel Gabriel showed up. Was she cooking, or ironing? Maybe she was hauling water from the nearby well or maybe she was home jamming out to her favorite song. She was a singer, after all. What did Mary do when she realized an angel had shown up, unannounced? Yes, eventually she says yes, but, in the moment, did a bad word come flying out of her mouth? Did she feel faint? Did she ask for some time to think about it? And even after she agreed to carry the Christ child in her womb, those must have been a long nine months. I wonder how many times she wanted to change her mind? Or I wonder if Gabriel ever came back, you know, for a follow-up visit? I wonder how people treated her as they discovered the news; it’s not like she could keep it covered up forever.

I wonder about Mary and Joseph’s journey to Bethlehem; what we so often imagine to be a slow, lonely journey of two human beings and a donkey, but it was probably more like the Sunday after Thanksgiving, when everyone and their brother is on the road to somewhere; this time, everyone happens to be making their way home to be registered. I wonder if people along the way offered to carry Mary and Joseph’s stuff. I wonder if Mary got the kinds of questions every
woman gets in the last weeks of her pregnancy. I wonder how it was for Joseph, all – those – miles to think about the life ahead of him, and the task of raising a child he hadn’t exactly planned for.

I wonder if, by the time they got to Bethlehem, if Mary cared one lick that there was no room in the inn; maybe she was actually grateful for some respite from the crowds, grateful to have animals as her only spectators as she neared the delivery of her son.

I wonder about Jesus in his first moments of life – how much did he weigh? Did he have any hair? What were the first words that he heard from his mom and his dad when they saw his tender face?

I wonder about those angels – what does a heavenly chorus sound like anyway?

And I wonder about those shepherds, settling in for just another night in the fields – no one ever thought of them, much less talked to them, until the angels of God arrived. How did they get over their fear and decide to follow? I wonder – what’d they do with their sheep – pack ‘em up or leave them to graze? What happened to their hearts when they finally caught sight of that baby boy who’d come even for people like them?

You see what happens when we let ourselves wonder about this story, this story that most of us know by heart. When we let wonder be our guide, the story gets
to breathe, and new possibilities for its meaning and power open up, even within a storyline we know so well.

This is why God came, beloved. That we might have reason to wonder again. This is why God is born among us, born amidst real, human, messy, stressful, unpredictable human life – because it’s in the midst of this life – no other life – that the wonders of God are to be experienced. The same way a child’s eyes can open up possibilities for a tired, hardened parent, God comes to be born among us to sweep us up in the story of God’s incredible love.

The beautiful thing about wonder is that it’s not ours to create or produce. Wonder is merely the response that comes when we let ourselves begin to take in a God whose birth makes no sense at all, a God who creates a way when we’re fully convinced there is no way forward; a God who promises to shine a light even in the darkest night, a God that loves us, even when we’re not sure we can love God back.

Friends no matter where your heart is tonight; no matter if the story of the Christ child feels worn or irrelevant or the truest thing you know; no matter if your focus is here or on the presents you have yet to wrap; no matter if you live with an awareness of God’s presence in your life or are still waiting for some sign that God is real, hear tonight the good news that Christ is born for us all, for you and for me, just as we are.
You don’t have to get it.
You don’t have to make sense of it.
Just come to the manger, look at the baby, look around at the most unlikely
crowd of people surrounding Jesus, and just wonder about it all.

As you look at Mary, may she lead you to wonder at a God who is always calling
the not-quite-ready to tasks beyond their imagining.
As you look at Joseph, may his faithfulness lead you to wonder what it looks like
to embrace a future that’s different than the one you would plan for yourself.
Look at the angels; may they rouse in you wonder about who out there is waiting
to hear the good news, and to hear it from you.
Look at the shepherds; may they stir wonder toward the outsider.

And may the babe in the manger, God in human flesh, cultivate in you a sense of
wonder at a God who chooses to be born among us, to infuse human life with
beauty and possibility beyond anything we know.

Thanks be to God.
Amen.