

The Wow and the Whoa!
Reading of the Gospel: Luke 2:1-20

Just over a week ago the heavens opened, and the Spirit of God descended upon this sacred sanctuary. It was our *Festival of Carols*, combining the gifts of Zach, our music director, choirs of children, youth, and adults, bell ringers, orchestra, liturgists, readers, Mary, Joseph, and the most adorable convention of angels, and sheep. If we had included a live donkey and sprung Aunt Becky from the courthouse, you would have thought we were filming a Hallmark movie.

A cast of thousands, it could have been chaos, but the Spirit and our Special Forces worthy A team of staff and volunteers have a way of smoothing our rough edges, corralling our energies, and eliciting a symphony from a swarm of individual notes. It was a glorious, beatific affirmation of the good news we celebrate this night, for unto us a child is born, a son is given ... And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

It was that worship service that members and visitors exit annually with seraphic smiles, rushing to tell me it's their favorite service of the year. That it's the one service of the year without a

sermon, I try not to take too personally. After all, the Word is proclaimed in such a glorious way that I too am lost in wondrous Wow, and indeed, it was in the midst of the lessons and carols that the Christmas spirit chased away any of the fleeting Scrooged grouching that would threaten my 34th journey into the bedlam of Bethlehem, suburban style.

It was a child, a preschool angel with silver shoes, a tinseled halo, and wings turned askew in a manner that might furrow the brow of the FAA inspector, but was undeniably flawless. She was the perfect angel, standing sentry for the ToysRus baby Jesus in the manger, just in case some member from the crowded pews breached the perimeter. She had this priceless expression of wonder, giving her face this luminous glow as she marveled at the thronged congregation surrounding her. She wasn't afraid, but rather captivated and at the same time captivating. Her fascination was such that when the other angels made for Bethlehem's exits, she lingered for a moment unaware, beguiled by the body of believers beaming back at her.

In the middle of her shift, the Secret Service angel faithfully guarding the Christ child and scanning the periphery, her eyes met

mine, and I smiled. Surprised, she shyly turned away. Yet, a moment later, her jaw set straight ahead of her, I could spy her pupils slowly, carefully shifting, straining as far to the side as her lateral oblique eye muscle would allow, in an attempt to glimpse whether I was still watching her. It was a marvelous mixture of amazed wonder that someone actually noticed her and that pensive, wary inquiry that asked, *Who's the geezer in the black robe?* It was a priceless combination of **Wondrous Wow!** and **Whoa!** that is at the heart of the Nativity. And in that briefest game of *I spy a preacher*, I spied Christmas.

The Message translation of Luke's nativity expresses it well. At the conclusion of the shepherds' visit, it says, "The shepherders returned and let loose, glorifying and praising God for everything they had heard and seen." **Wow!** Yet, of Mary it says, "Mary kept all these things to herself, holding them dear, deep within herself." **Whoa!** as in *Wait a minute, what's going on here!* Wow! and Whoa! It's the juxtaposition of *Hark, the Herald Angels!* and *In the Bleak Midwinter*. Or, you could say it is very much *O Little Town of Bethlehem – the hopes and fears of all the years are met in Thee tonight.*

The NRSV expresses Mary's reaction to the shepherd's tales this way, "Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart."

There is great joy to treasure in the Incarnation of our Lord, and what parent would not exult in swaddling their newborn? Yet, at the same time there is a lot to ponder, mull, meditate, consider, cogitate, and contemplate. There is much meaning to mine, both hopes and fears, a whole lot of wow and a whole lot of whoa. What is the significance of this event? What will become of this child wrapped in bands of cloth?

There is a weight, a heft that far exceeds this blessed infant's physical mass. Nine months earlier the angel Gabriel spoke in glorious terms of a royal reign built upon the baby she would bear, but the codicil of such promise was the erasure of the common from Mary's life plan. What path will this life take? You see, Israel already had a king, Herod, and not only that, the Israelites also had an emperor, Caesar Augustus. And I don't know how much history you've read, but Caesars and kings have never been too keen about sharing titles. A new kingdom, her child its king? But at what cost? Whoa!

From the beginning Mary sensed that this child's life would not be the kind that typically is reported in the standard mom's Christmas newsletter. You know, *Jesus was the conference champion in chariot racing and has applied to colleges in Corinth and Capernaum.*

The incomparable blessing of a newborn. The mysterious promise and its consequent path, a path marked with peril. *The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.* Wonder! but Whoa!

We, too, on this night find ourselves at the intersection of wonder and whoa. It's *Joy to the World* and *Silent Night*. We rejoice in the gloriously good news of the Christ child's advent, but the exultant melodies lose their force if we do not with Mary ponder what it means to live in the light of this Jesus, this Christ, this Messiah, this Lord. What does this incomparable gift call forth from you?

The gift is yours. Though it seems impossible, it will fit. And no one and no thing on this earth will ever tear it away from you. But I have to tell you, its owner's manual comes with those three words that put fear in the hearts of all parents this time of year – some assembly required. Sing the carols, ring the bells, light the candles, celebrate the

communion, rerun the rituals, and sip the nog, but do not forget the pondering. What does it mean to live in the light of the Christ child?

Wonder! Whoa! O Come let us adore him; but let us ponder and live into what it means and what it calls forth wherever that may take us. The world today is crying for us ask ourselves these questions; the world is crying for us to live in the light of the One who faced hate with love and injustice with restorative generosity, prejudice with compassion, suspicion with understanding, and brokenness with healing.

Wonder and whoa. It's a delicate balance. Vocationally, this is my 34th journey to Bethlehem, and a number of years ago within a three-year period, amidst all the Christmas cards and mint M&Ms, I received a couple of handwritten notes from this member. What was the name? ...Oh, I remember ... anonymous.

Well, anonymous was certainly not a fan, and anonymous was not happy, nor was she all that subtle, because it didn't even take a smart pill to figure out who anonymous was. The first note, as I remember, expressed the fervent hope that in the coming year I would endeavor to

inject some semblance of joy into the Christmas Eve service. It seems I must have made some allusion to the challenge of life and faith when the angels stop singing. *I come to church on Christmas Eve expecting to have my spirit lifted. More joy, please!*

Well, a couple of years later I received a second note at Christmas. Anonymous was once again distressed. You see, in the Christmas Eve service that year there was much laughter, a measure of mirth with a side of celebration. Anonymous was not down with that. *I come to church on Christmas Eve expecting to feel that spirit of quiet reflection as with a mother swaddling her newborn. Can't we take worship seriously?* Same anonymous.

What's a preacher to do? Hopefully, she found sermon satisfaction somewhere. Yet, apart from the contempt, she was onto something. On this night, Word becomes flesh, forcing this mysterious collision of joy and trepidation, alleluias and angst, mirth and meaning. And the key to capturing either is to somehow capture both.

Our preschool angel poignantly revealed that to me in her wonder at being in the center of such a spectacle and in her straining, sideways

glance at the geezer in the robe. Amazed by the spectacle and at the same time, *Who's that strange robed man and what's going on here?* Simultaneously, our angel singularly evoked both the shepherds and Mary in the Nativity, the wonder and the whoa of it all. Celebration and contemplation. Mirth and meaning. Alleluia and angst. A gracious gift and a sacred calling. For unto us a child is born! Amen.