

## “SUCH A DEAL OF WONDER”

Luke 2:13-20 (KJV)

*A homily given by Larry R. Hayward on Christmas Eve, December 24, 2018, at the 8:00 p.m. and 11:00 p.m. services at Westminster Presbyterian Church in Alexandria, Virginia.*

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*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, good will toward men. And it came to pass, as the angels were gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said one to another, Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us. And they came with haste, and found Mary, and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger.*

*And when they had seen it, they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child. And all they that heard it wondered at those things which were told them by the shepherds. But Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart. And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told unto them.*

It goes without saying that Christmas Eve is one of the three or four occasions in the Christian year with the highest worship attendance. Most of us who preach approach such services with some degree of *anticipation* and perhaps a greater degree of *intimidation*. It never ceases to be *both* for me; and whether you are here out of *deep faith*, out of *loyalty to someone you love*, or out of a sense of *hoping against hope* for a word of hope, I am glad you are here; *we* are glad you are here.

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In Christian churches that follow the church calendar, nearly every service in which the church gathers at night is a service in which the mood is somber, reflecting the commemoration of suffering and death for which the church has gathered.

- The Longest Night service, when we gather to acknowledge the difficulty of suffering in a season of joy
- Ash Wednesday, when we gather to be reminded that “we are dust and to dust we shall return”
- Maundy Thursday, when we gather “on the night Jesus was betrayed”
- Good Friday, when we gather to sing “Were You There When They Crucified My Lord?”
- And Easter Vigil, when we gather awaiting, but not yet experiencing, the resurrection of Christ.

But on this night, Christmas Eve, we gather with a sense of rapt, beautiful wonder.

Shakespeare once wrote: “*Such a deal of wonder is broken out within this hour, that ballad-maker’s cannot be able to express it*”.<sup>1</sup> In contrast to all other services in which the church gathers at night, on Christmas Eve, the sense of wonder is so pervasive that not even our most beautiful hymns and anthems, our gentlest harp, our most inviting voices can “express it.” Christmas Eve almost begs to be silent.

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<sup>1</sup> William Shakespeare, *The Winter’s Tale* (5.2.21-23).

But the impossibility of expressing wonder has not stopped any of us – musicians, artists, Biblical writers, preachers, teachers and ordinary worshippers from across the centuries – from seeking its expression. Hear again just a sampling of the *words* we have heard read tonight with which Biblical writers have expressed and the church adopted to its hopeful use “such a deal of wonder”:

- From Genesis: “I will multiply thy seed as the stars of the heaven, and as the sand which is upon the sea shore...”<sup>2</sup>
- From Isaiah: “The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light...”<sup>3</sup>
- “The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them.”<sup>4</sup>
- From Luke: “Then said Mary unto the angel, How shall this be, seeing I know not a man?”<sup>5</sup>
- “The angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid.”<sup>6</sup>
- “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, good will toward men.”<sup>7</sup>

*“Such a deal of wonder is broken out within this hour...”*

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One of Maggie fondest memories growing up was following the space program from her home in El Paso. One of her mother’s brothers worked at NASA, and she and her family were invited to see two separate launches from Cape Canaveral. Ever since I have known her I realized she has known much more about the space program than I have; so a few weeks ago when I saw an announcement of a commemoration of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Apollo 8, sponsored by the Smithsonian’s National Air and Space Museum and held December 11<sup>th</sup> at the National Cathedral, in a rare act of spousal good sense I ordered tickets and we attended.

Watching this commemoration, I learned more about the space program than I had ever known.

- We saw photos of the lunar landing, the space walk, the surface of the moon.
- We heard Apollo astronaut Jim Lovell recall the flight.
- We followed a transcript and listened to audio as the three astronauts read from Genesis 1 on Christmas Eve 1968, fifty years ago this evening, and concluded with “God bless all of you, all of you on the good Earth.”

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<sup>2</sup> Genesis 22:17.

<sup>3</sup> Isaiah 9:2.

<sup>4</sup> Isaiah 11:6-7.

<sup>5</sup> Luke 1:34.

<sup>6</sup> Luke 2:9.

<sup>7</sup> Luke 2:13.

But something that caught my attention early in the commemoration were words printed on the first page of the booklet we received, written by the poet Archibald MacLeish, They were published in *The New York Times* on Christmas Day 1968, one day after the reading of the Creation story and the words of blessing from the astronauts.

MacLeish had written:

To see the earth as it truly is,  
Small and blue and beautiful  
In that eternal silence where it floats,  
Is to see ourselves as *riders* on the earth *together*,  
*Brothers* on that bright *loveliness* in the eternal cold—  
*Brothers* who know now *they* are truly brothers.<sup>8</sup>

Acknowledging that MacLeish’s language is less inclusive than the spirit of his words, what MacLeish reveals is that the wonder of the space shot – “*The see the earth as it truly is/Small and blue and beautiful*” – leads to a humility – “...*to see ourselves as riders on the earth...*” – which in turn leads to a deepened awareness of human community – “*riders on the earth together*”

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My friends, I need not remind you that we are in need of such dream and such community across our world today. Nearly every community we know is being pulled toward dissolution.

- Corporate
- Ethnic
- National
- Political
- Religious
- Familial

Even the most intimate relationships we know are not immune from the strain. We need “such a deal of wonder” today. We need the reconciliation it can create. Such wonder asks:

- Is it not possible for us to derive – from the *wonder* of the event we remember this evening – a humility that leads to *community*?
- Is it not possible for us to be so moved by the birth of Christ that we realize – *again*, or perhaps for the *first* time – that we are “riders on the earth *together*”?
- Is it not possible to come to know “now” that we are truly brothers, truly sisters, truly family on this earth that is “small and blue and beautiful.”
- If a space shot instill such a dream in the poet, can the birth of Christ do the same for *us*?

I am told that the “deal of wonder” of which Shakespeare speaks comes from *The Winter’s Tale*, a rare Romance in which the bard depicts something that does not happen often in human history, namely the repentance of a King followed by the “reunion, reconciliation, and forgiveness” among the citizens of the

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<sup>8 8</sup> *The Spirit of Apollo: Commemorating the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Apollo 8*, Washington National Cathedral, December 11, 2018, program booklet, page 1.

land. It is truly a story of “the dream of a second chance”;<sup>9</sup> but its rarity does not lead Shakespeare to shrink back from expressing his hope for it.

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Perhaps the most important word in MacLeish’s poem is the word “now”: “Brothers who know *now* they are truly brothers.”<sup>10</sup>

Another person whose words appear in the Apollo Commemoration Booklet was a lesser known figure than the astronauts or famous poet. Margaret Hamilton, identified as the “Lead Flight Software Designer” for the Apollo Program, described what it was like to work on the mission.

Looking back [she said], we were the luckiest people in the world.  
There was no choice but to be *pioneers*;  
*No time to be beginners.*<sup>11</sup>

In many ways ironic, we in our day are likewise among “the luckiest people in the world.” For within our world today, the divisions across nations, peoples, races, religions, communities, and families seem so intense and intractable that they leave us with “no choice” but to be “pioneers” rebuilding relationships and communities that are fraying before our eyes and on our watch. Ours may be “no time [for] beginners,” but ours is a time for “pioneers,” for people who will let “such a deal of wonder” that has broken out in our world in the birth of Christ lead us all to seek “the dream of a second chance.”

We have heard this dream before.

The wolf...shall dwell with the lamb,  
And the leopard shall lie down with the kid;  
And the calf and the young lion and the fatling together;  
And a little child shall lead them.<sup>12</sup>

It’s a rare dream. It’s a romantic dream. It barely breaks out in the halls of realism and cynicism in which we move. It invariably sounds like “child’s play” the places where Pharaoh or Herod reside.

But the dream comes from the “such a deal of wonder that comes to us” the birth of “a little child” – born even in Bethlehem – who invites *us* to allow *him* to lead *us*.

Will we accept his invitation to be pioneers in his name, in “the small and blue and beautiful earth...on which we are riders ... together? Amen.

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<sup>9</sup> Stephen Greenblatt, *Tyrant: Shakespeare on Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2018), 136.

<sup>10</sup> *The Spirit of Apollo: Commemorating the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Apollo 8*, Washington National Cathedral, December 11, 2018, program booklet, page 1.

<sup>11</sup> *The Spirit of Apollo*, page 9,

<sup>12</sup> Isaiah 11:6-7.