

I would guess that there is someone present this evening that has seen the new *Star Wars* movie more than once already, even though it only opened a week ago. I would guess there are some here who have seen the original *Star Wars* movie five or more times. There are others of us who have seen *The Sound of Music* over ten times – maybe even twenty. There is something about great movies like these that prompts us to watch them over and over. We have the dialog memorized. We can sing the songs. If someone were to edit the movies by changing the script or cutting a song, we would be upset. We want the story to be exactly the same each time, no matter how many times we hear it.

This tells us something important about the power of story. A great story never gets old. We are drawn back to it time and again without it every feeling repetitious. The same thing is true for the story we have just read again. I've never had someone say to me, "Can't we get out of the rut and read a different story on Christmas Eve?"

As a pastor's kid, and then as a pastor myself, I have averaged attending between two or three Christmas Eve services every year of my life. That means I have read or listened to this same story over 150 times. Yet it not only doesn't get old for me, I keep getting new insights into the story as one line or phrase pops up in a way I hadn't heard it before. I realize that though the story stays the same, I don't – and that makes a difference in how I understand the story. I'm not the same person I was when I was 12 or 25 or 47. I no longer have the off-the-wall excitement about opening presents that I had when I was six. I have discovered that experiences like 9/11 or the death of my parents cause me to hear the story differently. This year I'm hearing the same story differently because in August I became a grandpa for the first time. I have since learned that all the people who over the years have told me how wonderful it is to be a grandparent were telling the truth. Beckett is now 4½ months old and he is re-teaching me a key element of this Christmas story – the element of wonder.

I wish there was some way for Beckett to tell me what he is experiencing each new day. Instead, I have to be content with being an observer, watching the wonder on his face as he discovers the world around him. First, there is the realization that those things that keep moving in front of his face are hands. And not only hands, but his hands. Now he has discovered that when he sees an object close by, he can move his arms and hands to grab it. Each day he becomes a little more adept with his newly discovered skills. He must be thinking that this is the greatest thing in the world! He has control over something. He can pick things up – which is followed in short order by the discovery that he can put whatever it is he picks up into his mouth.

I sometimes forget the wonder of something as simple as moving my arm and using my fingers and thumb to pick up an object. We do it all the time, so it becomes routine and unnoticed. We hold our hand one way to pick up a pencil, another way to pick up a cup of coffee, still another to carry a pail. We do it all without even thinking. Neuroscientists are making great advances in understanding how the brain, nerve impulses, muscles, and bones all work together for me to pick up this book, but even if I understood it all completely, it would still be a wonder.

Think for a moment of some of the things that cause you to wonder – not wonder in the sense of doubting, but wonder in the sense of awe, admiration, and marveling at something.

If you have been up to Lake Superior, do you wonder at the power and size of the glacier that dug that hole in the ground? Do you wonder at the stars on a clear night, realizing that the light you are seeing is just now reaching you after having traveled for millions of years through empty space? Do you wonder at the phases of the moon and contemplate the ongoing cosmic dance of the sun, earth, and moon that causes us to have a full moon tonight? Do you wonder at how, with all the germs and viruses surrounding us, we don't get sick more often than we do? Or maybe you are more apt to stand in wonder when your checkbook balances on the first try.

The Christmas story we have read again from Luke's gospel can easily become something similar to picking an object up with our hand or catching a glimpse of the full moon this evening – something so familiar and routine that the wonder has disappeared. How many times have I read or heard those words **"In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered."** I have recited those words in Sunday School Christmas programs. I've listened to Linus read them on Charlie Brown Christmas. I have heard them in small churches and large cathedrals.

**“Joseph also went...with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son...and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.”**

I know the story so well that I sometimes find myself hardly paying attention to it as someone else reads it. After all, I know what comes next...

**“In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night.”**

Maybe the story would seem a little fresher if we knew more details. How many shepherds were there, and how many sheep did they have? Were these shepherds religious people, or rough and tumble guys you'd likely find getting into fights at the local tavern?

Then the angels come on the scene and...well, you know the rest of the story. They tell the shepherds what has happened, the shepherds go “with haste” and find the baby in the manger, and then they return to their flock, praising God for all they had heard and seen.

We have now heard the story again for the umpteenth time. How did it affect you tonight? Or did it affect you? With all the excitement or concerns you might be carrying this evening – whether it's the excitement about opening gifts or concerns about how to pay for the gifts; whether it's excitement about getting together with extended family or dread about having to get together with extended family or sadness that someone is missing this year – with whatever is occupying our minds this evening it is so easy to let the story just slip by us, because, after all, we know it so well. But the story of Christmas doesn't get old, and the reason I think it keeps its freshness it because it invites us to wonder. The wonder of this brief, simple story is what gives it its ability to hold our attention time after time, year after year.

If the wonder of the story escaped you tonight, let me try to give you a little taste of it. I want to go back to the message of the angel. Listen to it one more time: **“Do not be afraid: for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.”**

There is the wonder. A Savior is born **TO YOU**. To each of you. Isn't that amazing! I mean, when you stop and think about how big the universe is, or even how many people are in the world, and how insignificant each one of us really is (after all, when our obituary gets printed, only a couple hundred people out of the world's 7 billion people will even notice) – and then we hear this word, a personal word addressed to all of us and to each of us. “A Savior is born *to you*.” Put your own name there. “A Savior is born to \_\_\_\_\_.” We can put every one of our names in that statement.

Think of it! God loves each of us so much that he comes uninvited to enter this human experience as a baby born in an obscure village to poor parents, ultimately to die on a cross, put there by us, the very people God loves. Why did God do that? I don't know. I can't explain it. Maybe God is a little crazy. Maybe it's nothing more than this – that when you love someone as deeply as God loves us, you're willing to do foolish things for them. And when you are loved by someone, you don't question their love – you just accept it.

I hope you will accept God's love given to you in that first Christmas present. Tonight, as you think about this Christmas story, wonder at it anew. Don't try to analyze it or explain all the details. The truth here is so simple. Marvel at it in the same way that Beckett marvels at using his hands. Delight in it. Exult in it. But above all, wonder at it. “A Savior is born...to you.” That, my friends, is wonder-filled and wonder-ful.