

Christmas Eve, 2011

Pastor Wayne Peterson

Minnesota is known around the country for many things, such as the Mayo Clinic, our beautiful lakes and parks, our winters (though this one has been pretty wimpy so far) and, of course, the Mall of America. But Minnesota has a national reputation for something else, too, and that is its tradition of fine college choirs. Augsburg, Concordia, Gustavus, and St. Olaf have been recognized for many years as having some of the finest a cappella choirs in the country. (All of you alumni present here tonight, please note that I mentioned the colleges in alphabetical order so as not to indicate a preference.)

The choral tradition in Minnesota is directly attributable to the work of one man, F. Melius Christiansen. It was he who brought the St. Olaf Choir to national prominence, and his numerous compositions and arrangements are favorites of choirs throughout the country.

A few years ago, a St. Olaf friend of mine told me an interesting story about F. Melius. It seems that when his setting of the hymn “Praise to the Lord” was prepared for printing, the typesetter made a mistake in the third stanza. The text is supposed to read “Ponder anew what the Almighty can do.” What came out of the print shop was, “**Wonder** anew what the Almighty can do.” Nothing much was made of the error at the time, and it was corrected in the next edition, but F. Melius kept a copy of the original tucked away in his files.

The story picks up again long after F. Melius’ death. The music department at St. Olaf was getting ready for their annual Christmas program – which, by the way, this year marked its 100th year. I’m not sure which year this was, but it was the first time the program was going to be broadcast on national public television, so there was a little more pressure than usual. While struggling to find a theme for this significant occasion, one of the professors happened to come across the first edition of “Praise to the Lord” and noticed the typographical error. He immediately recognized that this small slip of the fingers that occurred many years earlier provided a very appropriate theme for a Christmas program. And so, for many years now, we have been able to watch the program “Wonder Anew” at Christmas time.

My objective for the next few minutes is to get us to “wonder anew” at the Christmas story. But just to get us going, 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 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 check book balances on the first try.

I enjoy sharing the wonder of the many new babies here at St. Barnabas. I wish there was some way for them to tell me what they are experiencing. Instead, I have to be content with being an observer, watching the wonder on their faces as they discover the world around them. First, there is the realization that those things that keep moving in front of their faces are hands. And not only hands, but their hands. Then they discover that when they see an object close by, that can move their arms and hands to grab it. Each day they become a little more adept with their newly discovered skills. They must be thinking that this is the greatest thing in the world! They have control over something. They can pick things up – which is followed in short order by the discovery that they can put whatever it is in their 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.

The Christmas story we have just read from Luke's gospel can easily become something similar to picking an object up with our hand – 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. As I was growing up, I listened to my dad, who is also a pastor, read these words not only on Christmas Eve, but also every year when the church council came to the parsonage for their Christmas party and when he would go to the local nursing home for the December communion service.

“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 does have a purpose, and I think that purpose is to cause us to wonder.

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 each of us. “A Savior is born to you.” In Bishop Mark Hanson’s Christmas greeting, which we used as our Call to Worship this evening, he emphasized the personal aspect of this word: “For you, weary from trying to meet the expectations of others. For you, worrying about an uncertain future. For you, wondering if you are worthy. Yes! For you, the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation.”

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 was willing 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 babies marvel at using their hands. Delight in it. Exult in it. But above all, wonder at it. “A Savior is born...to you.” That, my friends, is wonder-ful.