

Christmas Eve, 2016  
Grace Lutheran Church, Lancaster, Pa

How much do you wonder?

What do you wonder about?

We have no excuse really, for not practicing the holy habit of wondering.  
There are so many wonder-able things in the world.

Upon waking up, sometimes Kath and I will ask each other how we slept.

On a good night, one of us might say to the other: I slept like a baby.

But then you might wonder:

Why do I say I "slept like a baby?"

We had five of them: babies normally wake up screaming every two hours!

As you wonder about that, maybe you come down to the kitchen;

you open the freezer to put some ice in your cup

and then open the refrigerator to get some juice and wonder...

Why DO they put a light in the fridge and not in the freezer?

You could make your way to the toaster and put in your bread,

and make sure that the knob is set properly and then wonder...

why does my toaster even have a setting that will burn the toast to  
an inedible black cinder that no one will ever eat?

There's plenty to wonder about after breakfast too...

You can read the paper every day, and never find a newspaper headline  
that reads: "Psychic wins \$300 Million Powerball Lottery"

Would the speed of lightning change if it didn't zig-zag?

Why don't they make mouse-flavored cat food?

How do they get deer to cross the road just where they put those yellow signs?

Why don't sheep shrink when it rains?

Maybe the shepherds were wondering about that one night,  
when they got something to REALLY wonder about!

A terrifying angel, bringing wonder-able news, 'Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: <sup>11</sup>to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah,\* the Lord. <sup>12</sup>This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.'

After they get over their fear, they decide to go and "see this thing that has happened,  
that the Lord has made known to us."

And the shepherds make their way over to Bethlehem, and they find the Holy Family  
as the angel has told them.

And there, the wondering begins, theirs and ours, and anyone's who has heard the story  
that they made known, telling the angel's word concerning this child  
and the story of this lowly birth.

"...and all who heard it wondered at what the Shepherds told them."

What did they wonder...I wonder?

What do they wonder; we wonder, you wonder, I wonder?

Maybe the Christmas hymn says it most succinctly:

“The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.”

Such is the claim of Christmas, anyway – that everything that we wonder about:  
from the trivial idiosyncrasies of lighted refrigerators and darkened freezers  
and toasters that can cremate the heartiest slice of pumpernickel  
to the questions we have about life and death and heaven and hell  
and faith and grace and law and judgment  
and the questions we have about liberals and conservatives and democracy  
and the electoral college and crime and punishment  
and racism and repentance

and the questions we have about the beliefs and religions different than our own  
and the questions we have about love, and forgiveness, and sharing,  
and the questions we have about ourselves, and our unique combinations  
of talents and flaws, gifts and shortcomings,  
optimism and pessimism  
and the questions we have about the things that happen to us, or don't happen  
and answers to prayer and unforeseen consequences and decisions made  
in courage or fear, risks taken, selfishly or unselfishly

everything that we wonder about, everything we long for  
and everything we long to escape from  
is somehow related to THIS wonder, and this longing  
that the story of Jesus' birth begins to identify for us.

The longing for God, the Holy longing for union with God is diluted in our lives,  
thinned out and spread out over many things, many concerns, many experiences,  
many relationships.

Let's go back, for a moment to the refrigerator.

Surely you have had the experience of being vaguely hungry, not sure just what for,  
but hungry enough to make your way to the refrigerator and peer in:  
Cheese? Cold pizza? leftover salad? no, none of those will do it.  
Maybe you open a container of something and take a bite and put it back,  
because it's not exactly right.

And the cold air pouring out on your bare feet makes you  
feel guilty for grazing like this, wasting energy, and you close the door,  
and think about the options, hoping that something will finally occur  
to you that will satisfy.

It's possible to spend our whole lives like this, with vague longings that we don't know just how to satisfy.<sup>1</sup> We try different things, sometimes in our actual arrangements sometimes in our imaginations, but so often we can't rhyme our actual lives with our longings.

We say, we are not at peace with ourselves.

And people who are not at peace within will find it difficult to be at peace with others.

The peaceful scene of Jesus' birth,  
becomes the occasion for the angels' message to those shepherds  
Glory to God and on earth peace, and goodwill among people.

And Jesus grows to speak that peace again and again  
in his deeds of peace and his words of peace  
and his offer of peace...

"My peace, I give to you..." says the risen Jesus to his disciples.

"My peace...the peace that rhymes his own heart and mind  
that rhymes his life with God, and the promises of God,  
the peace that rules his body, despite the violence done to it,  
is offered to the world, beginning with his incarnation, his becoming flesh:  
his birth of the Holy Spirit and of his blessed mother Mary,  
and into the love and care of Joseph.

At Christmas we must all God to renew our trust that incarnation and all that it means.

It means that God has given us reason to wonder what and who we are truly looking for, as Jesus asked at both the beginning and end of his ministry:

"Who are you looking for? What are you looking for?"

At Christmas, we receive no simply an answer to our longing,  
an answer that we can begin to share.

As the shepherds made known what they had heard and seen,  
the possibility of Holy wonder, of questioning the way things are, or seem to be,  
with new possibilities of the way they should be and could be  
if we could be at peace - this possibility is also born at Christmas.

As the body of Christ in flesh and blood extends through time and space  
in the flesh and blood of those who wonder at the news of Christmas  
and begin to trust in its possibilities  
the power of the incarnation takes shape,  
in ways that can satisfy our hunger and longing.

Your touch is Christ's touch.

When you love someone, unless they actively reject your love and forgiveness,  
that person is sustained in salvation.

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<sup>1</sup> Thanks to Martin Copenhaver, Jesus is the Question, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2014), p. 6, for this helpful image of hungering for God.

Go back to the kitchen one more time.

For that is where, perhaps you were sitting, with your family  
feeling tired, irritated, un-appreciated. Suddenly someone does something  
or says something that pushes you beyond patience  
You lose your temper, you yell, you bang your hand on the table  
and get up and leave.

For awhile the anger simmers, but gradually, you start to feel sorry.

Still your wounded pride and raw feelings prevent you from coming back  
right away and apologizing. Eventually everyone sleeps.

The next morning, still wounded, you come downstairs again,

pour yourself a mug of coffee, and sit down at the table  
your sadness and contrition showing in the way you move  
the expression on your face.

Everyone knows what this means...without words.

You are touching the body, like the woman who reached out  
to touch Jesus garment when she was in need of healing.  
You are making the movement toward peace, your body and actions  
saying louder than any words...I need to be a part of the body again.  
Your family is there, waiting for you, holding open the door to peace,  
saying louder than any words...we are incomplete without you.

This is not just a metaphor. In the incarnation of Jesus, we are given the possibility  
of extending such peace, of healing it when it is broken,  
and expanding the rule of it where it does not yet exist.  
simply by being humble enough to sit down with one another.

Will Donald Trump make a good President?

Will people ever return to Syria and build homes and open shops?  
Will native Americans ever get a good deal from the rest of us?  
Will we ever recover from the legacy of slavery?  
Will terrorists stop killing innocent people?  
Are any of us, actually, innocent people?

We may wonder about these things, and many other things,

as we partake of the peace of Christmas. Indeed, doesn't it seem that those  
who are filled with Christ's peace, would spend a great deal of time wondering  
how best to bring peace in a world that is hungry, often starving, for it?

I wonder? Do you wonder too? As we gaze at the manger of his birth again this year,  
let us hear his grown up question: Who, what ARE you looking for?

A blessed and peace-filled Christmas to you all.

Amen