

2022.12.18 - Advent - Reenchanting Christmas

So What? Because our world is disenchanting, we must reclaim the wonder of Advent.

Feel What? Encouraged

Now What? How can I become more curious and cultivate wonder in my life?

INTRODUCTION

Today, we celebrate the third Sunday of Advent, and we're continuing our new message series called Foretold and Fulfilled. We're going to be looking at prophecies of the Old Testament and how they're fulfilled in Jesus and, specifically, how we see them play out in his birth narrative.

Paul Gould, *Cultural Apologetics*: "The ancients inhabited a world drastically different from ours. Populated with gods and goddesses, nymphs and dryads, monsters and spirits, heroes and lawgivers, their world was not tame or dull. Life was a colorful adventure, a battle between opposing forces. The world was supernaturally imbued with personalities and powers. At any moment, you might be in the presence of a god. Divine judgment for sins was a constant worry. The human experience of the world was one of mystery, enchantment, and sacredness. Not so today."

"As the world was emptied of the divine, space and time were drained of significance. Space is viewed today as nothing more than an empty container for particles in motion. The heavens are viewed by many as 'chiefly, a vast empty space with a humanoid God and a few angels rattling around in it, while several billion human beings crawl through the tiny cosmic interval of human history on an oversized clod of dirt circling an insignificant star.' God or the gods, if they exist at all, are silent and distant. Time is divested of meaning and viewed as a commodity greedily dispensed only if a perceived benefit, usually a personal pleasure or accomplishment, ensues. It is little wonder that modern man, in such a universe, has aptly been described as an 'empty self.'"

"Emptied of transcendence, the human experience of the world fades to grey. Moral distinctions between right and wrong, good and evil, are erased, and

aesthetic evaluations of what is beautiful and what is horrid begin to blur. Everything once held dear and valued as sacred is now up for grabs. This even extends to the very concepts of goodness, truth, and beauty themselves. Without an underlying vision of the world as magical or mysterious, life is utterly mundane. The divine fabric that holds together the warp and woof of reality is severed: ‘When mankind no longer lives spontaneously turned toward God or the supersensible world—when, to echo the words of Yeats, the ladder is gone by which we would climb to a higher reality—[we all] must stand face to face with a flat and inexplicable world.’”

The more that science explains, the more mystery is vanquished. Few of us realize that we live from an imminent frame: What’s real to us is what’s in front of us that we can experience with our five senses. But do we see what happens when we think we can explain everything? When we can conquer any uncertainty? Are we better for thinking this? We thought that utopia was on the other side of technological advancement. We’ve found it’s greater anxiety and higher rates of depression. And we’ve never as a country been wealthier or had more collective leisure time to spend doing whatever we want.

The modern lives comfortably in an empty world devoid of moral or aesthetic absolutes, a world without fixed meaning or clear purpose. Because of this, the goal of life is entirely subjective. It is found within the self. To be specific, the defining goal of an individual’s life in this disenchanting age is the total satisfaction of their personal desires. Instead of reaching for the divine, we our quest takes us inward. And what we find there is bland and meaningless, and we have to come up with our own meaning for why we exist and how we contribute to the world’s betterment.

When Nietzsche’s declared “God is dead” he was making a statement about the consequences of the divine’s absence in society. Everything dies when God dies, including our link to the wisdom of the ancient world and to the established conceptions of human meaning, purpose, and value.

But just adding God back into a dull life doesn’t do much for us. When God is a means to the ends of Project: Self, we still come up short to finding fulfillment. This is one reason many of our contemporary peers who grew up hearing, “Be a good person and don’t skip church, and God will bless you and your life will work out fine” have left that behind. It’s the evangelical prosperity gospel that believes do the right things and things will work out alright. Sometimes, life sucks. And when we don’t have an anchor, we’re

adrift at sea wondering who let whom down—and we usually point the blame towards God.

Transition: Contrast this with the Scriptural narrative.

SOLUTION

The Bible assumes God's presence and activity everywhere. And we see there are moments where God's powerfully breaks in to upset and disrupt the status quo in amazing ways.

After God delivered the Israelites from Egypt, he gathered them at Mount Sinai in order to give them their national identity as his people. He worked wonders in order for them to be released, and God was again showing them his power to further drive home the point that he is God and he will continue to protect them. But this also caused concern. At Sinai, Moses delivers to the people the Ten Commandments, but they have a different reaction than he does.

Exodus 20:18-21, NIV: When the people saw the thunder and lightning and heard the trumpet and saw the mountain in smoke, they trembled with fear. They stayed at a distance and said to Moses, "Speak to us yourself and we will listen. But do not have God speak to us or we will die." Moses said to the people, "Do not be afraid. God has come to test you, so that the fear of God will be with you to keep you from sinning." The people remained at a distance, while Moses approached the thick darkness where God was.

The power and wonder of God's presence created distance between God and the people. On one hand this was good: They understood what he was capable of. But, on the other hand, a greater distance was established between them and God.

We understand the Israelites' concern and reaction. Something in us believes is better for someone else to do all this spiritual stuff while we get on with our lives. It's just too much trouble to pray and cultivate an awareness of God's voice and his presence. When there's babies to be feed, coding to be finished, lawns to be mowed, and cars to be maintained and maintained, isn't it nice to have some pastors who can distill down what God wants and just report back the highlights?

But this creates a big problem for us: This distance, whether intentional or not, works against our purpose and design. From the moment of our creation, we were meant to dwell with God in his presence. He made us for companionship. He made us to be with

him. God's presence has always been the answer to the mundane parts of life. His Spirit is with us and we have a privileged connection to God that breaks us the hardness and dullness of our hearts.

Even before sin broke our fellowship, God has been working to bring restoration to us so we can safely remain close to him. Even the design of worship in the Old Testament was created so we could safely remain close to him:

Carmen Joy Imes, Bearing God's Name: "The hot spot of Yahweh's presence was hidden in the innermost chamber of the tabernacle, guarded by the outer tent, which only the priests could enter. The entrance to the holy place was further protected by an outer boundary of curtains with an entrance near the altar. No toddler could accidentally wander into sacred space and tip over the menorah with its seven burning lamps. No sin-stained Israelite would suffer a violent death by getting too close to God's holy presence. The outer boundary of the tabernacle kept them from danger while enabling them to live in close proximity. The layout of the tabernacle allows them to gaze at Yahweh's glory from a safe distance and have the assurance of his attentive presence without constant fear of ritual violation. Just like the law, the tabernacle offers grace by putting up protective fences."

While we're tempted to see the rules and regulations of the Law as preventing access to God, it was meant to put God's presence in a concentrated place on earth so the nation of Israel could have distinct access to him that no other people enjoyed.

And, more than that, God throughout the writings of the Old Testament promised a greater intervention into space and time when he would come in a greater measure than even the tabernacle or the temple:

Isaiah 7:14, NIV: "The Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel."

"Immanuel" means "God is with us." The Prophet Isaiah was addressing the nation who had allowed their hearts to grow cold toward God, welcomed in compromise, and enemy nations were knocking on their door to come in and overrun them in battle. And the best thing that God could say to address these issues wasn't just that he was going to protect them and cast off their enemies—as good and as needed as that was—but that he was going to be with them. The distinguishing mark of his people was that his presence was there, and it wasn't just going to remain, but it would increase, bringing prosperity, peace, and protection.

So when the New Testament writers were considering their own predicaments, they found in these prophecies the promise of a Savior and the ultimate fulfillment in the person of Jesus. And we know them as the Advent stories we read every year:

Matthew 1:18-22, NIV: This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly. But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.” All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: “The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel” (which means “God with us”).

And God’s emergence as Immanuel helps us see other promises as prophecies that he would fulfill in himself:

Isaiah 41:9-10, NIV: “I took you from the ends of the earth, from its farthest corners I called you. I said, ‘You are my servant’; I have chosen you and have not rejected you. So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.”

What has seemed like helpful encouragements become realized promises in the person of Jesus Christ. He is the fulfillment of the long-hoped for promises of God. He is the Savior Lamb who has come to take away the sins of the world. He is the Messiah who has charged in to the darkness of this world and wrestled the keys to the kingdom away from death and darkness.

And he welcomes all to come to him to receive the promise of life in the now and the when to come. There is no other hope that we can outside of Jesus, because he has designed us to be most fully alive when we find all of our hopes, dreams, and expectations in him.

C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*: “God made us: invented us as a man invents an engine. A car is made to run on petrol, and it would not run properly on anything else. Now God designed the human machine to run on himself. He himself is the

fuel our spirits were designed to burn, or the food our spirits were designed to feed on. There is no other. That is why it is just no good asking God to make us happy in our own way without bothering about religion. God cannot give us a happiness and peace apart from himself, because it is not there.”

Transition: Let’s talk now about how this affects us today.

APPLICATION

1. The Good News

This story was written for us, but not to us nor about us. This puts us into a place of wondering out loud, Is it really good news? Is it good news for me?

Brian Zahnd, “My Problem With The Bible”: “I have a problem with the Bible. Here’s my problem... I’m an ancient Egyptian. I’m a comfortable Babylonian. I’m a Roman in his villa. That’s my problem. See, I’m trying to read the Bible for all it’s worth, but I’m not a Hebrew slave suffering in Egypt. I’m not a conquered Judean deported to Babylon. I’m not a first century Jew living under Roman occupation. I’m a citizen of a superpower. I was born among the conquerors. I live in the empire. But I want to read the Bible and think it’s talking to me. This is a problem. One of the most remarkable things about the Bible is that in it we find the narrative told from the perspective of the poor, the oppressed, the enslaved, the conquered, the occupied, the defeated. This is what makes it prophetic. We know that history is written by the winners. This is true—except in the case of the Bible it’s the opposite! This is the subversive genius of the Hebrew prophets. They wrote from a bottom-up perspective.”

If you’re having trouble seeing the importance of this God story, it might be that you’re reading it from the wrong perspective. Those of us who enjoy comfortable positions in life can often forget that this really is good news to those who are on the bottom. Those living through hard times. It’s hard to convince us that this is good news when we benefit from the systems that disadvantage everyone but us.

2. Mystery & Wonder

Contrary to what the Enlightenment project has taught us, our hearts actually function best when there’s mystery involved. Ted Lasso was onto something when he said, “Be curious, not judgmental.” We know we’re curious when we’re asking questions of the world around.

St. Alphonse De Liguori: “My Jesus, supreme and true God! What has drawn Thee from heaven to be born in a cold stable, if not the love which Thou bearest us men? What has allured thee from the bosom of Thy Father, to place Thee in a hard manger? What has brought Thee from Thy throne above the stars to lay Thee down on a little straw? What has led Thee from the midst of the nine choirs of angels, to set Thee between two animals? Thou, who inflamest the seraphim with holy fire, are now shivering with cold in this stable! Thou, who settest the stars in the sky in motion, canst not now move unless others carry Thee in their arms! Thou, who givest men and beasts their food, has need now of a little milk to sustain Thy life! Thou, who art the joy of heaven, dost now whimper and cry in suffering! Tell me, who has reduced Thee to such misery? ‘Love has done it,’ says Saint Bernard. The love which Thou bearest us men has brought all this on Thee.”

As we look on the wonder of Jesus, he awakens more wonder in us. This is actually a Biblical principle that some have called beholding and becoming:

2 Corinthians 3:18, NIV: We all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.

3. Present To Others

Being attentive to God’s presence equips and motivates us to be attentive to and present with others. When we’re attuned to the mystery of God, we can access wonder and see possibility in the lives of others around us.

Now, I know that as soon as I say be curious about the people around you, the introverts among us bristle and say, “I’m not good with small talk.” I get it, I really do. But, you’ve been set up. Every week, we give you tools to become excellent at making conversation with others. We feed you two questions each week and then give you space to practice. Our church should be the best when it comes to the ministry of presence in the lives of other people.

When you’re together with your families over the next couple weeks, it could be as easy as pausing to ask the Holy Spirit, “What are you doing right now? Where are you active in this place?” And then saying, “Hey, Uncle Bill, what advice would you give your 10-year old self?”

INSPIRATION

John Wesley: "The best of all is, God is with us."

CONCLUSION

Next Step:

- How can I become more curious and cultivate wonder in my life?

Prayer