

It was just a few hours ago that five and six year olds were dressed up as sheep and shepherds, angels filled the chancel,  
and 10 year olds played the part of Mary and Joseph,  
and we sang Hark the Herald Angels Sing with grandparents  
and grand children.

We've been waiting for weeks and weeks for this night, this celebration to be here,  
and finally it has arrived.

We've waited and waited, for families to come to town,  
to see old friends,  
and celebrate Christmas.

We've lit a candle for hope, peace, joy, and love,  
and tonight we light the Christ candle.

Tonight we sing the carols,  
we tell the story and hear and see the drama unfold.

And I know that all over America there will be hundreds,  
no thousands upon thousands of preachers who have done their homework,  
prayed in earnest,  
looked for the perfect illustrations,  
written and rewritten their sermons,  
reviewed their manuscripts,  
practiced in front of their imaginary congregations,  
and all of them are hoping that their words might ring in such a way  
that somehow they might be able to convey the magic of Christmas.

In the end, most preachers will not be satisfied.

How do you translate a miracle into words?

How do you logically present the mystery and magic of Christmas?

Can anyone ever relay the miracle of a child being born?

Whenever I have spoken to a new dad about the birth of their child

I sense happiness and joy,  
perhaps a little exhaustion  
but when a dad really tries to tell me about their child's birth,  
when they try to put the miracle they experienced into words,  
time and time it happens again, it can't be done.  
The ones who really give it a try.  
The ones who really try to tell about their child's birth,  
sound more or less,  
crazy  
or just stupid.

Been there.

Some things just don't translate very well into words,  
new births are one of them.

And the miracle of God becoming flesh, is one too.

That's why so many churches, and so many preachers turn to music, art and  
drama tonight.

Somehow "Silent night, Holy Night,"

Or "Handel's Messiah,"

Or a live Nativity come closer to communicating the magic of  
Christmas.

Because tonight we celebrate miracle and mystery  
and mystery and miracle are almost always impossible to put into  
words.

Further, after this morning's worship service,

this evening's Christmas pageant

there is little left to say,

but let me offer a few words about the mystery of God on this Holy,  
Mysterious Night.

Poet, Wendell Berry, in his book "Life Is a Miracle" argues that we should  
not say too much when we are talking about miracles.

He recognizes that there is value in analysis and scientific methodology.

He states: "You analyze, discuss and reduce a thing to its smallest  
component parts and study the parts, you will understand better the thing  
itself—the plant, the person, or experience.

But there is a problem with this approach, “Reductionists have trouble with the idea of mystery. To the pure scientific reductionist, for instance, love is only hormones calling to hormones ...our genetic code acting to save the species.

Humans however are really “alive within mystery.”<sup>1</sup> There is a lot about us—about life, about the world—that cannot be explained.

Tonight, we come close to something that cannot be explained.  
We consider the miracle of God’s love being born  
and I’m hesitant to say too much.

I don’t want to give you the impression that any of us will ever fully understand the mind and mystery of God.

But there are a few things that we can say.

Author Annie Dillard provides some sound advice when it comes to miracles and the mystery of god.

Dillard says mainline churches say far too much about God.

She says: “liturgical churches in particular “are all too professional and reasonable (when it comes to God), they gather for worship and act as if they know what they are doing.”

Religious speaker, Leonard Sweet, adds, “Where as Peter cried out: “Depart from me Oh Lord,” many churches today, proclaim, “O God, you make me feel so good.”<sup>2</sup>

One of my favorite writer’s Annie Lamott, author of “Traveling Mercy” and “Plan B,” speaks about God and prayer in a way that makes a great deal of sense tonight.

When asked about her prayer life, she said the best two prayers she knows are simple. She begins the day with

“Help me.

Help me.

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<sup>1</sup> Berry, p. 45.

<sup>2</sup> Buchanan, John, Fourth Presbyterian, 02.08.04, p. 2

Help me.”  
And she ends the day with,  
“Thank you,

Thank you,

Thank you.”

She now has a third prayer. It is even shorter than the first two,  
But it too is a prayer that she says at least every day.

She said it is simply this: “WOW.”

That’s it, she advises everyone to say:  
“WOW”  
to God at least once a day.”

Perhaps that’s all we should say tonight.

“Wow!”

God loved the world so much that God would become one of us.  
The creator of all that is - loves us so much that God would come right to the  
place where we live  
and dwell with us.

WOW.

It’s amazing isn’t it?

Peter says “Depart from me Oh Lord” and God responds by saying  
“I am not through with you.”

And largely that is what God says this night.  
To all of those who say they are ready to give up.

To all of those who say “Depart from me.”

To all of those who are too tired-

Too human

Too busy

Or afraid their life has too many messes

God says:

“I am not through with you.”

And perhaps that is why God comes as a child,  
because anyone who has had a child knows,  
there is never a perfect time to have a child.

A child has a way of arriving, whether you are ready or not.

And barging into life  
with God’s unexpected grace and truth.

No words can explain it.

All we can do

is say: “Wow!”

Wow to the mystery.

Wow to God’s miracle of Christ.

WOW

Amen