Introduction - What is Wonder?

This is the second Sunday in Advent – and our third week in our Advent series– (I'm not even going to go there this week). “Jesus Moves into the Neighborhood.” Christmas is getting closer. You know how those side view mirrors say “Warning – objects in mirror are closer than they appear. “ I always thought that they should have the same on December calendars.

Warning: Dates in calendar are closer than they appear.

The season is heating up – not weather wise. It is getting a little harried out there. I was in Border’s the other day and asked where the self-help section was and the harried clerk wouldn’t tell me - she said it would defeat the purpose.
It’s our desire that through this Advent sermon series our reflections on the Incarnation – God becoming a Man will help us not be harried – but rather transform this holiday season and transform us. This week we are going to look together at Wonder and Mystery and how the Light of God will help us recover Wonder and Mystery in our own lives from John 1:5-9.

Let’s Pray

Let’s start by reflecting on wonder for a few minutes. Christmas is a time that can generate intense feelings of wonder. Wonder is the feeling aroused when you are in the presence of something mysterious or surprising. Wonder often gives us a glimpse of eternity – it takes us out of the ordinary. We see wonder often in children. Have you noticed how they seem to experience wonder easily?

When our daughter Abby was 11 months old, watching her experience her first snowfall was wonder-filled experience. The snow flake were so big. Well not that big.

She gazed up into the sky and starting laughing and reaching out trying to grab one of them.

Our granddaughter Hannah exhibited “wonder” the first time we took her to a play at about the age 4 and she watched her cousin Maia in a stage production of “Peter Pan.” She sat wide eyed on the edge of her seat the whole play and exclaimed at the end of the play – “I’m going to be a show girl when I grow up.”

Wonder does that – it often moves us to action – BTW – you can see that show girl and many of our other children this Saturday at 6:00 in our presentation of the “Greatest Christmas Pageant Ever.”

I want you to watch this clip for the PBS special “The Question of God” for another glimpse of Wonder.

Lewis: Once in those very early days my brother Warren brought into the nursery a box, which he had covered with moss and garnished with twigs and flowers. That was the first beauty I ever knew. It made me aware of nature — as something cool, dewy, fresh, exuberant. Everything seems like a dream, anything seems possible, and all sorts of ideas float through your mind.

Lewis: It was something quite different from ordinary life and even from ordinary pleasure, something, as they would now say, in another dimension. It was a sensation of desire. But before I knew what I desired, the desire was gone ... the world turned commonplace again.

I know growing up, I had some of those experiences and I’ll bet you did too – where mystery and wonder filled a moment – filled an afternoon. Where everything seemed like a dream – anything seemed possible – and all sorts of ideas floated through your head.
For most of us, like Lewis, as we grew older those experiences faded. Losing our ability to experience wonder and embrace mystery is a very serious thing: Listen to the words of Albert Einstein

The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true art and all science. He to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer pause to wonder and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead: his eyes are closed.

Let’s look at our scripture and see how the Incarnation can bring some light on this subject - why as adults wonder has faded and how to recover it.

**The Retreat from Wonder and Mystery (verse 5)**

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

The word translated here “comprehend” literally means to eagerly take possession or seize and can be translated – overtake / overcome /get a grip / over power / take hold /

This is one of the most mystifying truths in all of scripture – that God would come into the world – and we would not get it. Do you remember Ian’s argument from the first week – If God came to earth as a man – wouldn’t it be more obvious? “Is that the whole point? Duh! Is anybody home?” The nature of the incarnation is so mysterious that it shouldn’t surprise us that we don’t get it. Remember all those questions that Ian raised.

As adults, we are uncomfortable with unanswered questions. Parents – have you ever been uncomfortable when your kids ask those great questions about God – like

Why did God make mosquitoes?

And I believe that it is because of this discomfort, we avoid mystery and miss wonder.

Have you noticed that our adult world does not promote or encourage wonder or embrace mystery? As adults we are afraid of the unknown – of wonder – of things for which we don’t have answers. I am amazed at how often I find myself deeply reluctant to step into something I have never done – start a project that I have never undertaken – call someone hurting or in trouble for whom I have no answers. In our world as adults – what matters is competence, control, mastery
and information gain – or the appearance of these. We hate it when there are things we don’t know.

As a culture – we don’t know how to “encourage wonder.” I did a Google search on the phrase “encourage wonder” and only got 278 hits out of almost 5 billion web pages. To give you an idea how small that is, the phrase to “encourage spending” gets over 24,000 hits. Even the phrase “encourage garbage” which doesn’t mean anything gets 3 times as many hits as “encourage wonder.” And over 90% of those were about how to encourage wonder in children. In other words, in the whole world wide web less than 20 people have anything to tell us about how to “encourage wonder.”

How can we, the church encourage wonder – invite ourselves and others to embrace mystery in this information age – in this age of mastery and control – in this age where the Light has come – but the darkness just doesn’t get it? Let’s look at the next three verses.

**The Mystery We Inhabit (verse 6-8)**

> 6 There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. 7 He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. 8 He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light.

Although this section of our scripture is focusing on John the Baptist – we aren’t going there today as that would be a study in and of itself – I want to look at John’s imagery for the incarnate Word as the Light. The Light that was

- The Light of Men v4 – In him was Life and the Life was the Light of men.
- The Light that shines in the darkness v5
- The Light that can be testified about v7,8
- And looking ahead
- The Light that was the True Light v9

What a wonderful image to use for the incarnate God – the Light. Of course it harkens back to Isaiah’s Messianic prophecy from Isaiah 9:2

John uses the image of Light to describe the Incarnation. So let’s think for a minute or so about the nature of light and in each of these thoughts – think about how this applies to Jesus

In the natural, light reveals the world to us. Our bodies and our souls crave it. Light feeds us, through photosynthesis supplying the energy for plants to grow.

Light gives us life changing tools, from incandescent bulbs to lasers and fiber optics. Light in all its forms – visible and invisible – saturates the universe. Think about how Jesus reveals the world to us, how we hunger for Him, how he feeds us and equips us.

Yet there is so much about light that we don’t understand. Modern physics has sliced and diced the stuff of nature into ever smaller and more exotic constituents as we discussed last week – into quarks and gluons, but you cannot do this with light. Not only have we not broken it down, its essence is a mystery to us. Is it a wave? Is it a particle? Both? Natural light teaches us that two
mutually exclusive ideas – a wave and a particle – can be used to describe a single entity. How is that possible? One of the most basic building blocks of our world – light – is caught up in mystery.

Let me tangent just a minute – because light is just one of the myriads of mysteries that exist in the natural world. One of things that came out of 20th century science – is that certain things – even in the natural world are not just unknown but unknowable. They will always remain a mystery.

At the beginning of the 20th century, the unknowable was unthinkable. Everything was soon going to be understood and proven. But early in the 20th century all that changed. We had Werner Heisenberg’s Uncertainty Principle – telling us the there are certain things that we will never know that are unknowable. Kurt Gõdel’s Incompleteness theorem taught us that any system of thought with even modest complexity cannot be proven – these were findings that set science on its ear. Then – the discovery that the universe had a beginning was repugnant ¹ to scientists. Dr Robert Jastrow – founder of NASA’s Goddard Institute who is not a Christian describes it this way.

“For the scientist who has lived by his faith in the power of reason, the story ends like a bad dream. He has scaled the mountains of ignorance; he is about to conquer the highest peak; as he pulls himself over the final rock, he is greeted by a band of theologians who have been sitting there for centuries.”²

These three discoveries and others were like ‘bad dreams’ for those who thought that all unanswered questions – even the question of God – were just waiting to be discovered. As adults we don’t things that are unknowable.

**The Mystery of the Incarnation (v9a)**

So our understanding of the natural world should shatter our illusions of control and mastery. And it can encourage wonder – if we let it. John, in our passage today, tells us how the Incarnation also calls us to embrace mystery and wonder.

9 There was the true Light which, coming into the world,

John goes on to tell us that the true Light was coming into the world. John uses that image of Light to tell us that just as natural light is a mystery, there is another mystery coming into our world

- The mystery of God emptying himself in order to become a man – becoming a single cell
- The mystery of the trinity - the diversity within the unity of the one God – God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit. When was the last time you heard a sermon to adults that attempted to explain the Trinity? I have never heard one. We avoid it. It is hard to preach on mystery – on something we cannot wrap our rational minds on. But John uses the image of Light – light which holds mutually exclusive properties – it can be a wave or particle – yet it is a distinct single entity. John uses Light to describe the Son. God in the form of the Trinity is three mutually exclusive persons – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – but still one entity.

¹ Sir Arthur Eddington “Philosphically, the notion of a beginning of the present order of Nature is repugnant to me.”
² Robert Jastrow God and the Astronomer
Recovering the Wonder (v9b)

We know that as adults we have lost wonder – Einstein has told us that it is something wonder. Nature and the Incarnation tell us that wonder and mystery are everywhere. But we don’t get it. So what practical steps can we take to recover wonder?

9 There was the true Light which, coming into the world, enlightens every man.

a. Immerse yourself in beauty – the Light has come into the world. Take time to just be in nature. Beauty has a way of helping us experience the transcendent and encourage wonder.

b. Recognize that there is a difference between “enlightening every man” and “enlightening everything.” God has not told us everything. But He has brought Light into our darkness. We are on to something. Not everything is a mystery – but sometimes we have to step into it in order for Him to enlighten us. [Example: close friend – was not a Christian – had cancer three years ago – no health insurance – drained all he had – was healed – has become a Christian in the last year – a week ago shared that there is a new lump. My old response was to flee – I don’t want to embrace that kind of mystery. – But Jesus has moved into our messy neighborhood – He is calling us to walk into situations where we know that we have no answers. Where we are powerless. He hasn’t enlightened every thing – but he has brought light that we can walk in. There was deep fear in calling him this week – But thank God I did – But I want you to know that it was hard. Thank God the biopsy this week showed it to be non-cancerous – But this is one way we can regain wonder – taking the risk to step into the unknown – ours or someone else’s – Going where God is calling.

Our life is a faint tracing on the surface of mystery. Annie Dillard

c. Accept the fact that the deeper we go in knowing God the more numerous will be the questions that we cannot answer. I am more certain of God’s love for me as expressed through the Incarnation than at anytime in my life – but I have more questions than ever. That is what has happened in knowing the natural world. J.B.S Haldanes was a British geneticist who said

"The universe is not only stranger than we suppose, it is stranger than we CAN suppose."3 .

Why should it surprise us that knowing the infinite God is less filled with mystery? I would say that the Incarnation is not only more mysterious than we suppose – it’s more mysterious than we CAN suppose. [Example – time recently with the Copples – couple whom we have known and ministered with for over 30 years – currently serving as missionaries in North Vietnam – God has been using them for many years to bring entire people groups to faith in Jesus – We were sitting together – reflecting on the past – Pat said – “We sure know a lot less than we did when we started.” My first reaction was – no – I have learned a lot. Then I realized she was right. [It’s no small thing for me to admit that someone else is right]. We must not pretend to know too much. We must learn to have humility before the data – to accept and embrace how little we really know.

d. Lewis encourages us to “Begin where we are” not where we aren’t and to see God’s presence everywhere – the Light that has come into the world. As we do that Lewis says that “The God of Mystery, Wonder and Awe becomes brighter and less blurry. We may ignore but we can

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3 Haldane’s Law from the famous British genetic biologist J.B.S Haldane
nowhere evade the presence of God. The world is crowded with Him. He walks incognito.”

We spoke about that the first week – If we embark on the journey of the shepherds and the magi – the real me looking for the real Jesus – the one who hides in a manger – in an insignificant setting – this will be a giant step towards recovering wonder and embracing mystery.

**Conclusion [worship team come up]**

God is inviting us back to a place of having childlike eyes

> Unless you become as a child- you cannot enter and see the kingdom of God

- Where we reach for beauty like Abby reached for those snowflakes
- Where we are not afraid of mystery – and we embrace it.
- Where we step out of our comfort zones and enter into another’s mystery.
- Where we are not so pre-occupied with control, mastery and competence but we choose to go after wonder – we reject the darkness and pursue the Light that has come into the world.

God has given us a world full of mystery and full of many things that are unknowable. It is also full of many things that we can know. The Incarnation is full of mystery and many things about it are unknowable – but we have been enlightened on some things – every one of us. We are truly on to something wonder-full – something full of wonder – because the Light shines into our darkness.

This advent season –

- choose to walk into one situation that you would normally shun
  - because you don’t have the answers –
- choose to walk into one situation where you don’t see God
  - but you go looking for him because you know that he’s there

He’s moved into that neighborhood. Let’s pray.

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4 C.S. Lewis Letters to Malcolm – Chiefly on Prayer.
5 Luke 18:17, Mark 10:15, Matthew 18:3