

The First Sunday of Advent

December 3, 2023

The Power of Love and Wonder

by Regan Schutz

What I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.

—Mark 13:37

I wonder at the power of love. A seemingly pedestrian pondering, I know—a Christmas-time cliché. But I am just now beginning to grasp how truly love can transcend everything we think we understand. It has been a bittersweet lesson to learn. Yet when it gets especially difficult, it has helped me to remember that Easter only comes after Good Friday's sorrow.

Last year I noticed a proliferation of Blue Christmas gatherings. While the world gives us soft glowing lights, images of fireside family celebrations, and Hallmark-style romances in the snow, the reality is that this is a hard time of year for a lot of people. There is a palpable tension as the days grow shorter. And when we are struggling, we may feel the darkness more deeply.

My own tension comes from a journey with my dad and dementia. The gradual losses and prolonged grief of dementia are called “the long good-bye,” and nothing on this road is easy. However, I have encountered a beautiful surprise in the midst of my grief: despite not always knowing my name or even who I am, my dad's love for me is still present. We like to go for drives together, and I can feel our dad-and-daughter love as we sit side by side, cozy in the car.

I wonder at the power of love. It is possible that what I feel in his presence is simply my own memory of his affection and love. But I am pretty confident it is more than that. I am beginning to see that love that exists *simply exists*, whether we can express it or not. Through time and space, adversity and divide, love remains. Love is a constant.

If you need a break from the Hallmark channel (which we just might secretly love), I recommend checking out the film *Interstellar* with Matthew McConaughey, Anne Hathaway, and Jessica Chastain. It is



Monday, December 4, 2023

Wonder and Love

by Scott Stoner

*Love came down at Christmas, love all lovely, Love divine;
Love was born at Christmas; star and angels gave the sign.*

—Christina Georgina Rossetti

I remember a Christmas Eve when I was four or five years old. My parents had tucked me in bed, kissed me good night, but as I lay there wondering when Santa would arrive, it was just too hard to fall asleep. So I got up and looked out the window, hoping to glimpse the man from the North Pole and his reindeer.

While I didn't see any reindeer, miraculously I did see Santa! Just as I glanced out the window, he walked up to our neighbor's door and stood on the stoop. I tried to yell to my sister, who was in the bedroom next to mine, but as flabbergasted as I was, I could not make a sound come out of my mouth. Finally, catching my breath, I ran around the house until I gathered everyone at my bedroom window. By that time, Santa was gone (I later learned that the neighbors had hired "Santa" to surprise their party guests), and because I knew he would be at our house very soon, in a panic I insisted we all get to bed immediately.

That's when I discovered that wonder can leave us speechless. Like love, wonder opens the heart and touches our soul. As Regan Schutz wrote so poignantly yesterday, there is a deep vulnerability in both wonder and love.

Each Monday during Advent we will introduce a theme for the week that will focus on an aspect of our overall theme of *Practicing Wonder*. This week we will focus on the connection between wonder and love.

Making It Personal: Can you think of a time when you had an experience of wonder and/or love that you could not express in words? What initial thoughts do you have about the connection between love and wonder?

Tuesday, December 5, 2023

The Light of Love & Wonder Shines in the Darkness

by Scott Stoner

*What came into existence was Life,
and the Life was Light to live by.
The Life-Light blazed out of the darkness;
the darkness couldn't put it out.*

—John 1:4-5, The Message

Regan Schutz wrote about the proliferation of Blue Christmas services many churches now offer in December. The intention of these services is to honor and make room for the grief many people are feeling this time of year. It may be their first Christmas since a significant loss, or a time of year that brings back feelings of grief from a loss suffered long ago.

Our culture generally has a hard time acknowledging feelings of grief. That difficulty can be magnified this time of year with messages from songs, movies, and advertisers trying to convince us that surely this must be the “happiest or most wonderful time of the year.” This is why it is important to create space for our grief and sadness, both for ourselves, and within our community gatherings.

One of the profound gifts of Jesus' birth is captured beautifully in the opening words of the Gospel of John. One translation describes Jesus' birth this way: “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.” While *The Message* translation reads: “The Life-Light blazed out of the darkness; the darkness couldn't put it out.”

As people of faith, we need never be afraid of the darkness or sadness of our grief. The wonder of the incarnate Light of Christ allows us to embrace our grief, knowing that this Light, this love of Christ, can help us to not be overcome by our suffering.

Making It Personal: Are you experiencing grief right now? If so, do the holidays magnify that feeling? How does the Light of your faith help you hold that loss and sadness?



Wednesday, December 6, 2023

A Feast of Wonder and Love

by Robbin Brent

*O Saint of love,
be a guide for us
in our lives, we pray,
that we may
create joy for each other,
as you have done for so many.*

—a prayer from the town of St. Nikola an der Donau, Austria

There are many stories and traditions that encircle the life and ministry of St. Nicholas. He was revered during his life centuries ago, and still to this day, for being the patron saint of children, sailors and ships, travelers, a wonder-worker for those in need, and a generous gift giver, just to name a few.

St. Nicholas not only gave generously from the heart, he also gave anonymously as a way of honoring his faith. Continuing the tradition of his gift-giving, in many homes, the Feast of St. Nicholas begins the evening before with the sharing of sweets, chocolates, small gifts, and simple fun poems and riddles. Then before bed, children put out their shoes, some putting carrots and hay for St. Nick's horse and wishing for a gift in exchange for the food. On the morning of December 6, children wake to find candy canes, small coins, and other modest delights in their shoes.

Out of these beginnings grew our traditions of Santa Claus, whose name originated from St. Nicholas. Honoring the Feast of St. Nicholas is the perfect way to bring to life our theme this year for the first week of Advent: wonder and love.

Making it Personal: Have you ever celebrated St. Nicholas Day by putting out shoes or exchanging small gifts with children or others? If not, might this be one way to infuse the season with wonder and joy? Or, perhaps you might consider giving a modest gift anonymously this Advent in honor of your faith.

Thursday, December 7, 2023

Whoa and Wonder

by Scott Stoner

Children see magic because they look for it.

—Christopher Moore

There is something special about being around children at Christmas because they remind us that we are all children at heart. The embodiment of wonder, our six-year-old grandson has a unique way of expressing wonder. Whenever he encounters something new and exciting, he stops and shrieks, “Whoa!” He could be reacting to a bird in a tree, frost on a window, seeing a tiger at the zoo, or looking at the stars at night. Throughout Advent we hear his exclamations about the lights on the tree, visiting Santa, the snow beginning to fall, and putting up the creche.

Recently, as a friend was telling me about some tutoring work she was doing with refugees, I found myself responding, “Whoa, that is so powerful.” I call encounters like these “whoa moments.” Times when we experience something that causes us to stop and wonder, or to be filled with awe at the wonder of the myriad ways God shows up in our lives.

In a few weeks, we will celebrate the ultimate *whoa moment*, the story of Jesus’ birth. To help us prepare for our celebration, we might want to practice paying closer attention to some of the “whoa moments” we encounter day to day, but may easily overlook. If you need some help recognizing them, you might find it helpful to spend some time with a child. Children naturally have a tendency to help reawaken our sense of wonder and awe.

Making It Personal: Can you think of a recent *whoa moment* that you experienced? What might help you be more open to noticing such moments during this season? How might you offer the wonder of love to someone in such a way that it might create a *whoa moment* for them?



Friday, December 8, 2023

Raindrops on Roses

by Robbin Brent

They [Chimpanzees] also have feelings of some kind of spirituality, which is really being amazed at things outside yourself.

—Jane Goodall

I recently watched a video (link below) of Jane Goodall describing the universal dance that chimpanzees do in the presence of waterfalls and storms. Her quote, taken from that video, reminds us that one way of understanding the spirituality of awe and wonder is to realize that it can be invoked by many things and events, both large and small, outside ourselves.

The title—inspired by the song, *My Favorite Things*, from my favorite movie from childhood, *The Sound of Music*—provides just one example of how we all can find awe and wonder in the small everyday things we love.

There is now conclusive research proving that even brief daily exposure to awe, as little as five minutes a day, can quiet the part of our brains that scientists associate with self-criticism, anxiety, rumination, and even depression. Exposure to awe can increase our ability to be open, curious, kind, and can increase our desire to help others in need and inspire us to share, donate, co-operate, and volunteer.

The season of Advent, a season of expectant wonder, provides plentiful opportunities to notice everyday wonders, both small and large. Perhaps adding this as a daily practice could be one powerful way to nourish ourselves heart, mind, body, and soul.

Making It Personal: If you want to commit to a brief daily-ish (more days than not) practice of noticing the things that fill you with awe and wonder, what are some of the everyday things that inspire those feelings in you? You might want to write them in a journal or even on a sticky note to keep close by to remind you of how readily available are those experiences.

Link to short waterfall video with Jane Goodall: <https://bit.ly/3Ix1D4t>

Saturday, December 9, 2023

Believing Is Seeing

by Scott Stoner

*I believe the world is incomprehensibly beautiful—
an endless prospect of magic and wonder.*

—Ansel Adams

When I was growing up, I often heard the idiom “Seeing is believing.” Sometime the same meaning was expressed in different ways, such as, “I’ll believe it when I see it.”

Recently, I discovered great wisdom when I played with reversing the order of the words. Now I like to say, “Believing is seeing,” and, “I’ll see it when I believe it.”

Focusing on “believing is seeing” has helped me to see more love and wonder in the world because when I believe that life is full of these things, I am inclined to see more of them. The quote by Ansel Adams, famous wilderness photographer, made me think that perhaps he was able to see and capture the wonder of the natural world in such magnificent ways because he believed so deeply it was there just waiting to be discovered.

Our beliefs and attitudes are like soil. If our perspective is “prove to us that love and wonder are all around us,” we are like hard, dry soil. It will be difficult, if not impossible, for the wonder of the world to take root in those inhospitable conditions.

Believing that the world is full of wonder, beauty, love, and hope does not mean that we minimize or ignore suffering. Jesus was born into a broken world full of suffering. Believing in the Light that he brought into the world helps us to see all the ways in which the wonder and love and that Light shine all around us, often in the smallest and most unexpected moments.

Making It Personal: What do you think of the difference between “I’ll believe it when I see it,” and, “I’ll see it when I believe it”? What helps strengthen your belief in love and wonder? How might this enhance an expectation that you will experience these things as you go through the rest of this season of Advent?