

# *The Second Sunday of Advent*

December 10, 2023

## **The Carpenter, the Storyteller, the Healer, and the Cook**

by David Dill

*We are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses.*

—from Hebrews 12:1

I was lucky to know all four of my grandparents.

One grandmother was a generous and prolific cook. There were always too many delicious things to eat at her house. Her kitchen was perpetually cooking, and the AM radio perched over the sink was always purring with country hits to keep the mood light.

“Y’all come on” was her sung invitation to the Sunday afternoon dinner table.

My other grandmother was too busy to cook.

She burned toast and swore by the economy of powdered milk. She drove all over town with a bag full of prosthetic breasts that filled the hatchback of her 1976 Toyota Corolla. A survivor of breast cancer in a time when surviving was rare, she spent most of her time after that life-altering event accompanying other women on the road to recovery.

One grandfather loved his Airstream travel trailer and kept meticulous records of the routes they took. In the evenings he monitored local emergencies on a police scanner from a huge swivel easy chair. He ate a bowl of cereal every night before bed. He was an amazing storyteller.

The other grandfather preferred buttermilk and cornbread. He built furniture and toys for me and my brother out of thin air in his basement woodshop. He stocked nails, washers, and screws in reclaimed pickle and peanut butter jars that hung from the rafters overhead. Hundreds of bits of hardware and hinges and oilcans and glues stood

at the ready for his next creation. He hummed and penciled out curlicues on unshaped scraps of plywood that miraculously took form as summer slingshots for each boy, right before our eyes.

The carpenter, the storyteller, the healer, and the cook.

They've all been dead for many years now.

It's funny. The farther away they get in time, the closer I feel their presence. They fed me and taught me and loved me into being. They go before me.

They live on through memory and story and in the gift that is my life. As different as they were, each showed me a way to live more fully.

The way of Jesus is about learning to live and move in the WAS, in the IS, and in the IS-TO-COME. If we can find the courage to respond to the invitation, the dance that happens between those three dimensions of time is a wonder. Every time we break the bread and share the wine of God's meal, we acclaim that all the saints surround us and even join in the singing as we praise God together. The living and the dead.

That's a real gift. A real wonder. We are never, ever alone.

Like that wild and woolly bug-eating baptizer John standing in the Jordan river who goes before Jesus, our saints do too.

The saints.

Who are yours?

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Monday, December 11, 2023

## Wonder and Stories

by Scott Stoner

*All Jesus did that day was tell stories—a long storytelling afternoon. His storytelling fulfilled the prophecy: I will open my mouth and tell stories; I will bring out into the open things hidden since the world's first day.*

—Matthew 13:34-35, The Message

In yesterday's reflection, I experienced the power of the stories David Dill wrote about his four grandparents in the small, intimate details he shared about each. Perhaps his memories inspired you to remember a parent, grandparent, aunt or uncle, teacher, pastor, coach, mentor, or neighbor. If you were to write a paragraph or two about them, what unique details would you share about them?

Love and wonder are passed on through the power of stories. How is it that we know about the birth of Jesus, that we are preparing to celebrate in just a few weeks? Through the stories of his birth found in the Bible, and the stories that people of faith have handed down. And how do we continue to experience and transmit the love of Christ as a light in our day and age? Again, it is done through the medium of stories.

The Christmas season is filled with stories, movies, and songs—from the secular to the sacred. What are some of your favorites? Is this in part because a particular story, movie, or song is connected to someone you have loved? Do you connect them with a cherished memory of shared stories of love and wonder?

This week we will focus on the relationship between wonder and stories. Stories so often help us remember the One whose love we are preparing to celebrate, and those who have taught us so much about wonder and love through the years.

**Making It Personal:** Who is a special person, a saint, someone who has gone before you, who taught you about love and wonder? Do you have a favorite Christmas story, movie, or song? If so, how or why does it speak to you about love and wonder?

Tuesday, December 12, 2023

## Stories of Holy Communion

by Scott Stoner

*The Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body that is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me."*

—1 Corinthians 11:23

Christian denominations and churches vary in numerous ways, but one practice that most share is the celebration of Holy Communion. How they celebrate these two rites may differ, but its centrality to the community's life is the same.

The power of remembering and giving thanks is not only at the center of the services of Holy Communion. We also remember and give thanks in our celebrations with friends and families as we break bread together around the tables in our homes. Love is made present in the stories and memories we share.

Every year I tell the story to friends and family of how my father, who passed away many years ago, made Christmas extra special for my sister and me. Every year when we were kids, he created new and elaborate HO model train boards. In the remembering and retelling of these stories, my father's spirit and love are once again alive and present in our holiday gatherings.

Sacred stories and sacred acts of remembering connect us and offer us an experience of holy communion—with God, and with the people who have meant so much to us.

**Making It Personal:** What memorable stories do you remember and share this time of year? What special rituals or practices do you have that connect you with God and with others during the holidays? Do you have any special traditions of food and meals that are important to you? In what ways are they a "holy communion" to you?

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Wednesday, December 13, 2023

## Storytelling and Wonder

by Robbin Brent

*This is our goal as writers, I think; to help others have this sense of—please forgive me—wonder, of seeing things anew, things that can catch us off guard, that break in on our small, bordered worlds. When this happens, everything feels more spacious.*

—Anne Lamott

For millennia, storytelling has been a tool we've used to make we sense of our lives and the world around us. In addition to writing, we tell stories through music, art forms like drawing, painting, sculpture, movies, and dance. We also tell stories in the silence, the pauses.

This reminds me of an older friend, a vocal prodigy in her youth, who went decades without singing a single note. Late in life she began singing for small groups of friends, letting each song tell the story of her journey with her voice, the challenges and heartbreak of not feeling worthy of sharing her gift with the world. The first time I heard her, I was in awe of the power and beauty of her voice, but I was more taken with the pauses she allowed into each song. She was not afraid to allow space to resonate between words and notes. These pauses left me breathless, leaning in for more.

Anne Lamott describes a similar spaciousness created when we allow ourselves to wonder, to be willing to lean in and notice once again, as if for the first time. In this season of birth and new life, Advent offers us a contemplative space in which we can listen to old stories in a fresh way, allowing room for new insight and wonder to enter in.

**Making it Personal:** What do you think of the idea that storytelling is a way we make sense of our lives, inner and outer? What is one small practice you could try to see your world from a fresh perspective, to allow wonder to reveal what may have been “hidden in plain sight”?

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Thursday, December 14, 2023

## Our Personal Christmas Pageants

by Scott Stoner

*To be surprised, to wonder, is to begin to understand.*

—José Ortega y Gasset

**M**y wife and I co-directed the children’s ministry at our church when our children were young, and one of our great joys every year was staging the Christmas Pageant. Our urban church had members coming and going on a regular basis, and so every year we had a different cast of children. Each year was its own delightful experience of holy chaos.

One year, two sisters had dressed up for Halloween in dog costumes their mom had made to match their family’s Border Collie. We had scripted the sisters as angels, but at the last minute, they pleaded to be dogs at the manger scene so that they could wear their Halloween costumes. Moved by their excited faces we responded, “Of course!” That year we may have been the only church to stage a pageant with two dogs, loudly and happily barking on several occasions, as part of the Christmas story.

My wife and I often have reflected that as our family changes and grows every year, our family gatherings grow more and more like those Christmas pageants we used to coordinate. We never know who is going to show up and how they will add their unique voices.

The Christmas story reminds us that there was plenty of holy chaos when Jesus was born. I take comfort in knowing that and also in knowing that however the Christmas pageants of our lives unfold this year, Christ’s love will be present and celebrated—even if someone shows up in their Halloween costume!

**Making It Personal:** How comfortable are you in dealing with the holy chaos that often accompanies the holidays? How might you be more flexible in dealing with last-minute changes to plans if that is what ends up happening for you?

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Friday, December 15, 2023

## Once Upon a Time

by Robbin Brent

*If you want your children to be intelligent, read them fairy tales. If you want your children to be more intelligent, read them more fairy tales.*

—Albert Einstein

As we all know from experiences with parents, grandparents, teachers, or other family members, stories have the power to evoke the full range of emotions and imagination. They have the power to connect us by creating a common narrative that entertains, educates, and guides, while filling us with the awe and wonder and magic contained in a time-tested story.

When my oldest grandson was still a toddler, I began to make up simple stories, which seemed to delight him. As he got older, we began taking turns telling stories, which has been a great source of joy for me. Over time, while the stories have remained a bedtime ritual when he spends the night, now we go through a menu of options he's come up with: "Do you want a silly, scary, mystery, adventure, or sad story?" His choices never fail to keep Grandma on her storytelling toes.

At some point, I realized that many of my stories were inspired by the stories I'd internalized from the Bible. The Baptist Sunday School teacher from my childhood never shied away from any story in the Bible. Yet all these years later, I am filled with wonder at how deeply these stories continue to influence my faith and beliefs, and inspire the stories I am passing on to my grandchildren.

**Making it Personal:** Advent and Christmas are filled with stories we retell every year. What are some of your favorite Advent or Christmas stories? Can you remember other Bible stories or fairytales from your younger years that continue to fill you with strong emotions or memories? Are there any you'd like to spend time revisiting this Advent?

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Saturday, December 16, 2023

## Stop and Wonder

by Scott Stoner

*Practice the pause. Pause before judging. Pause before assuming. Pause before accusing. Pause whenever you're about to react harshly and you'll avoid doing and saying things you'll later regret.*

—Lori Deschene

We are a little more than halfway through the season of Advent, and it seems like a natural time to pause, to stop and reflect on our journey so far.

As I pause, what comes to mind is that I don't think I have ever heard someone say, "I want to hurry up and wonder." The much more common phrase that comes to mind is, "I want to stop and wonder." To wonder requires not just a slowing down of our activities, but also the slowing down of our interior lives. Paraphrasing the words of Psalm 46, may we take some time to "be still and wonder."

Pausing or stopping to wonder can also include slowing down the kind of thoughts that interfere with our capacity to wonder. As the quote from Lori Deschene reminds us, sometimes our judgments and assumptions can shut down our ability to wonder.

Our capacity to wonder can be diminished when we hurry up our activities, or when we rush to judgment. Yet when we remember to pause and stop, our practice of wondering is enhanced.

**Making It Personal:** How could you pause or stop today to practice wonder? Has there ever been a time when you have rushed to judgment and missed the opportunity to be more curious about another person's behavior or motives? What did you learn from that experience and how might that guide you now?

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