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## **Holy Bewilderment: Making Space for Angel-Song**

Luke 1:57-66, Psalm 126

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We have been making our way, this Advent, through the first chapter of the Gospel of Luke—the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth, and the birth of John the Baptist. In this, we have been discovering the movements of joy for a couple who had grown weary by the circumstances of life.

To give a brief recap: Zechariah was a priest serving in the Jerusalem temple; Elizabeth is his wife. Luke emphasizes that they both are “righteous before God,” yet they carry a long, unresolved sorrow: they are childless, and Elizabeth is beyond the age when childbirth is usually expected. One day, while Zechariah is offering incense in the sanctuary, the angel Gabriel appears and announces that Elizabeth will bear a son. The child is to be named John, who will prepare the people for the Lord’s coming by turning hearts and restoring hope. Zechariah responds not with praise but with skepticism, asking how this can be, given their age. Something about the way he had become close-off to the possible in the face of the impossible causes him to go mute until the promise is fulfilled.

For Elizabeth, shame from the community causes her to retreat in despair, and she hides in isolation for months. But Mary later visits her and helps to restores her joy. Elizabeth recognizes the divine work at hand and speaks a blessing over Mary, rejoicing that God is acting in unexpected ways. In today’s passage, Elizabeth’s child is born. She insists on the name John, breaking with the tradition of naming him after his father. Zechariah confirms this name by writing it on a tablet, and immediately his speech is restored. He blesses God, and the surrounding community is seized by awe and wonder, asking, “What then will this child become?”

There is one thread that I'd like to trace throughout this story and pull on a bit, if I can, and it's this: Amazement is a prologue to joy, and amazement only comes by paying attention. Amazement, or awe, is a prologue to joy—it is the very ground from which joy springs, but to be seized by amazement and awe, one must remain open to it through paying attention.

Howard Thurman was one of the greatest and most important Black theologians, philosophers, authors, and Civil Rights Leaders of the past 150 years. Thurman was in fact a profound influence on Martin Luther King, Jr. and through his writings, particularly *Jesus and the Disinherited*, gave an oppressed people a theological framework for finding hope and strength in the most unbelievable of circumstances.

The brilliant, first black dean at Boston University, wrote this about awe: "There must be always remaining in every [person's] life some place for the singing of angels—some place for that which in itself is breathlessly beautiful and by an inherent prerogative throwing all the rest of life into a new and created relatedness." He goes on: "Despite all of the crassness of life, despite all of the hardness of life, despite all of the harsh discords of life, life is saved by the singing of angels."

I don't believe Thurman was making the case for the believability of angelic beings as much as underscoring the significance of wonder and awe in any person's life. It calls to mind when Jesus said, unless you turn and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven? (Matt. 18:3 "[Everyone must maintain] some place for the singing of angels." In what Jesus said, and what Thurman challenges here, we have to ask: What is truly lost when we lose our wonder? And to you, and me: When was the last time you or I were amazed at something, to the point that it left an indelible mark on our lives?

We have to understand that we were built for wonder. In 2023, New York Times put out an article titled, "How a Bit of Awe Can Improve Your Health" with the subtitle: "Experts say wonder is an essential human emotion—and a salve for a turbulent mind." In it, psychologist Dacher Keltner, says "Awe is the feeling of being in the presence of something vast that transcends your understanding of the world." And once you experience this vastness, the mind, and the heart, must expand to allow room for it.

Often we think about the vastness, the unbelievable, the dramatic when we think about awe. But awe can also be a response to simpler things: noticing an act of kindness, engaging in an unexpected conversation with a stranger, a small word of affirmation you didn't know you needed, a moment of music-making with a friend. In these moments, something opens or expands that was previously closed-off. In this Times article, Dr. Keltner explains that there are health benefits to this, including calming down our nervous system, triggering the release of oxytocin, the "love" hormone that opens us up to trust and connection.

Wonder—for all its benefits—is risky. There is a cost. Wonder requires openness for us to be changed. The heart is left exposed. It is inherently risky. The heart might succumb to the "harsh discords" of life, but wonder leaves it open to change anyways. Yet, what about its counterpart, cynicism? Cynicism is easy. Cynicism is a short-cut to protect us from disappointment. It is a self-preservation based in fear. It is how we shield ourselves—if you don't allow yourself to care about something, then you can't be hurt by it. Do you find yourself falling into cynicism these days?

As we wind down this year 2025, it's easy to get cynical. The headlines abound. The reasons to have a cynical position could be endless. Just think of how Market Capitalism, after all, thrives off of our fear and despair. There is incentive to keep us overwhelmed and cynical. The system knows that we'll need to cope and it'll be there waiting. Biblical joy calls us back to an economy of holy bewilderment, where the currencies of wonder and awe, as with joy, leave us open so that we might be changed.

In Luke, when John's name was confirmed by Zechariah, the text says that everyone was amazed. That's something else beautiful about wonder and awe—there can be a communal amazement, a shared response. The Greek word used is *ethambēthēsan* (eth-am-beh-THEH-san), which means "were astonished/amazed". This denotes something more like a "holy bewilderment" or a "reverent shock" which captures a profound effect more intense than mere surprise. This is their collective bewilderment, as everyone is sort of forced into wonder by a disruption of the expected order. We can find a truth for us in this: Amazement emerges precisely when convention breaks and God slips in through the crack. And Advent Amazement shows us that "holy bewilderment" comes in small, mundane packages, if we have eyes to see it. This way of wonder is not

childish naïveté; it is a theological stance toward the unexpected reversals of God. So, are we leaving ourselves open for God to show up in the small, unexpected places?

Another Elizabeth, poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning, in one of my favorite poems, writes this:

Earth's crammed with heaven,  
And every common bush afire with God,  
But only he who sees, takes off his shoes,  
The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries,  
And daub their natural faces unaware.

The Advent motif is this: Divine presence isn't the *exceptional*—the exception to the rule—it is the rule. "Earth is crammed with heaven..." What is rare is our attentiveness to notice it. Awe requires interior space. A cluttered, cynical interior world has no room for angels.

So, how do we make room for angel-song? One way is to slow down. The other day, I was walking through the park near our house, as I often do. And I noticed a young woman on the walking path taking a noticeably slow pace. She didn't seem to be nursing an injury or pausing to notice anything in particular, she was just purposefully walking slower. This was noticeable and notable because no one takes that pace usually. Even in the park, everyone is usually trying to get from point A to point B rather quickly. And I thought to myself: What is it about her interior life that allows her to slow down when the rest of us feel the need to be on the move?

I read recently how in mid 19th-Century Paris, a peculiar practice was going on where many strollers going on walks would sometimes take turtles with them. This obviously forced them to slow down and take in their experience. Now, you or I will unlikely be tying a leash to a turtle, but I do think we have to re-learn the value of the slower pace.

Another way to cultivate wonder, is to practice not taking things for granted. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel argues for what he called "Radical Amazement"—which is the refusal to take *anything* for granted. He said: "Our goal should be to live life in radical amazement . . . to get up in the morning and look at the world in a way that takes nothing for granted."

He wasn't using awe, here, as an escape from life, but as a discipline that prevents against spiritual numbness and cynicism. And so, beginning from a place of rediscovery or unknowing. There are two ways to view mystery. One is to assume that we can't know many things so we don't even try. Another way, is to see mystery as a limitless opportunity for learning. In fact, practicing unknowing those things we take for granted. Like our loved ones: We can assume we know everything about them, as if they were some static being. Or we can always be unknowing them, and learning them anew. This position, keeps us checking in on them, approaching them with curiosity. We can do this with people as we can do this about our world. Practice not taking things or people for granted.

Cultivating wonder is a protest in itself. To close, I return to the poetic words of Howard Thurman. In his *Moods of Christmas* book, he draws upon the idea of lighting candles during the holidays as a way to remain open. Perhaps our own practice of candle-lighting can remind us of this. Thurman writes,

"I will light candles this Christmas,  
Candles of joy, despite all sadness,  
Candles of hope where despair keeps watch.  
Candles of courage for fears ever present,  
Candles of peace for tempest-tossed days,  
Candles of grace to ease heavy burdens,  
Candles of love to inspire all my living,  
Candles that will burn all the year long."

My friends, may this be a candle-lighting kind of community. Amen.