

THE VASTNESS OF THE WONDER

(The Blunders and The Wonders)

Despite whatever you may have heard or said to the contrary, I do not care very much about the blunders. They are in the way. They throw people off track. They do a lot of damage. So in that regard, I care about them. But what I really care about are the Wonders: The Wonder of the Incarnation. The Wonder of Christ Jesus with us and guiding us personally in the here and now. The Wonder of beginning to discover our true identity and the eternal destiny that is ours, and that lights our lives. The Wonder of it is always more than we can comprehend, more than we can fathom, more than we can believe or know or respond to at any one time in this partial realm. It always draws us to far more than we have seen or realized, and to far more than we presently are. So I resent the blunders that minimize the Wonders: contradicting our Savior's love; hiding the glory and the mercy; putting distance between us and the personal relationship the Holy Spirit of Jesus wants to have with every one of us. I have no desire to cooperate with constructs that try to trade back guilt and shame and fear for the joy, trust, forgiveness, and New Life our Savior has won for us. I still wrestle with guilt and shame and fear – as all of *you* do, if you are being honest – but I know that Jesus and His Holy Spirit have come to heal and free us, not to load more of it onto us. Our world always believes that if we become guilty and frightened enough, it will turn into righteousness and we will act better and better. But that is a lie. Jesus came to be and reveal a far greater truth, and I think it's a shame that we keep turning His truth back into the world's lie. We are not saved by getting frightened enough and shamed enough to try to stay out of Hell. We are saved by being filled with His presence and His love. He is "Joy to the World" – not more guilt and shame and fear. We already had and still have plenty of that. So I have told you to be careful what kind of Christmas you go for. And I have told you of well-meaning but terrible blunders that put distance between us and the Christ who comes for us – blunders that reverse the Message, turning it all back from the Light of Christ into what has always been the way our world tries to think and believe about God.

Have you ever pondered the contrast between Hitler and Jesus? We could use others, but Hitler is both close enough to be glaring and far enough in the past that we have sorted out the records to some degree.

Hitler said his Reich would last a thousand years. Jesus said His would last forever. Think of Hitler and his top disciples at the Heaven-on-earth they had created at Berchtesgaden: incredible wealth, luxury, art, music, wine, women. They were within a blink of dominating all of Europe, and they had it all – everything most humans think they really want. And all it had cost so far were about twenty-one million lives, with of course more to come. Hitler's Reich, no doubt about it, was built on fear, suspicion, guilt, hatred, cruelty, lies. Twenty-one million lives for five years of frightened bravado and lavish but counterfeit pleasure. And the world, understanding such things, went along with it – even in Lutheran Germany – still singing Christmas carols and decorating trees.

Jesus got three years instead of five, but He insisted His Kingdom was not over – that it is, for us, only just barely begun. He had no wealth or luxury of the kind our world covets, and He used no human against his or her will. Yet we strongly suspect that Jesus took delight in life and people and friendship – and in all that was happening around Him – in ways far beyond anything anyone in the Third Reich ever experienced. His earthly reign cost one life: His own. After that, of course, it cost many other lives, as the world increasingly reacted to His followers and His Message, but none of that was coming from Jesus' will or cruelty. It was not His way. It is not His WAY still. He invites, frees, forgives, inspires, heals. And He is forever telling us that we are more than we think, more precious and important than we can imagine – that in fact the Almighty and Omnipotent God loves us and is determined to claim us for his own. Words which typify His presence in our world are reconciliation, invitation, awakening, transformation. On another level, these are supported by words like trust, truth, love, acceptance, mercy, gratitude, salvation. What words would we use to typify Hitler's reign?

It seems to me the contrast between Hitler and Jesus is stark, incredible, and compelling. I am still annoyed with myself, to put it mildly, when I find myself wanting or wishing for rewards, methods, traits, desires, or goals that fit more with a Third Reich mentality and approach to life than with those traits, desires, and goals that match Jesus and His Kingdom. I also don't appreciate it that our world keeps wanting to rework Jesus into a type of Hitler. Jesus came as a lamb, but many say it was only a disguise – that in the end, it will all revert back to what we understand, expect, and think are truly powerful and effective: Hitler, Hell, fear, coercion, and killing off any opposition. This is not just my imagination. We have Inquisitions, Crusades, excommunications, banishments, torture, exile, hatred – even our own careless moments – built deep into the history of the Christian church.

After the second sermon in Advent – the blunder of the Virgin Birth – someone said to me that despite all the evidence I had mentioned, they did not see how I could doubt the Virgin Birth when great church councils had formed our creeds, and surely the Holy Spirit would have been present to inspire those Councils and prevent them from making any mistakes. They mentioned the Council of Nicaea and the Apostle’s Creed. Actually, there is a difference between the Nicene Creed and the Apostle’s Creed, which came sixty-five years later (390 A.D.) and was not in the form we know it today until the eighth century A.D. I may be stupid, dumb, and wrong, but I am not ignorant. The monolithic unity of the Catholic church has never existed. The Apostle’s Creed was never accepted by the Eastern church, and nobody who knows anything deeper than its title thinks it had any link whatsoever with the Apostles who were Jesus’ disciples.

At the Council of Nicaea in 325 A.D., called by Emperor Constantine because he wanted Christians to stop quarreling with each other and help him bring peace to his empire, the two great antagonists were Arius and Athanasius. If I told you what they were arguing over and got you involved in their debate, it would split this church right down the middle still today. And after the great Council was over, the decisions made brought such unanimity and clarity that *both* Arius and Athanasius spent most of the rest of their lives either in prison or in exile. Far from resolving anything, the debates got hotter and harder. Like me, many of you would admire and respect, even love, both Arius and Athanasius if you knew them personally. But my point is: Why did we (His church) so quickly revert to the ways of our world – to coercion and persecution and political power plays – as if we could *make* people be good or think right? Did Jesus not teach us a better WAY?

Is there any way to truly get back to the Wonder of Christmas: the Wonder of His coming, and the Wonder of what He is really like? Part of the Wonder is that the Message itself keeps expanding as life goes on here. Despite the bondage and sin, we *are* God’s children, so we do have our moments of awakening and awareness. And God is always bigger and beyond all that we imagine. Many of us have moved from concepts of a tiny Heaven, no bigger than a remodeled earth, to a universe of endless dimensions beyond our comprehension. The Kingdom – and our future – is not earthbound, as we imagined in first-century expectations of the Messiah and the New Age He would usher in. It is not time-locked, as in the early concepts of a Second Coming, where everybody waits in the grave until the curtain opens on a tiny, static, already-

finished “new” day. Many of us no longer imagine a one-chance-only experience for everybody on earth, where you get a few years here (seventy-five if you’re lucky; maybe one or two if you’re not) to pass the final exam on life and if you don’t pass, you are flunked forever, or worse, and it doesn’t matter where you were born or what circumstances you were born into.

Likewise, many of us no longer expect a one-dimensional “hereafter” – that is, sitting on a cloud and playing a harp for all of eternity. Nor do we expect all our problems to be over once we get there, as if the sheer act of dying will make us perfect and there will be no need or opportunity to go on growing, learning, accomplishing, or loving. Or do you imagine that love will forever be static – that it will be what we call “perfect”? Freeze – don’t change a thing!

Jesus kept trying but was unable to tell us “the half of it” – for sheer lack of vocabulary, and because our experience and our minds are too small to grasp it. The Vastness is so great, we are disoriented. But that is part of the Wonder. And what a shame that we have locked down so much of the Wonder, we barely feel the vertigo of the Mystery itself. If we insist on keeping our shame, let us feel ashamed that after all Jesus has done and gone through for us, we still have such a small conception of the magnitude of His love, the magnitude of God’s designs and purposes, and the magnitude of the future that awaits us.

And Wonder of Wonders, that Vastness is not merely “out there somewhere,” beyond us and irrelevant to us. It is a Vastness we are invited into – a Vastness of dimensions we are designed to be in and be part of. That is what is staggering and beautiful and intimidating and wondrous all at the same time.

The Holy Spirit was and is the Great Wonder. It always has been. What burned the bush? (What is the highest symbol of the flame?) What spoke to Samuel when he was still only a young boy? What told Jeremiah that a New Covenant was coming, six hundred years before it walked among us? The greatest and the greatness of the heroes of our Faith have all come from the influence of the Holy Spirit, who was “*In the beginning ...*” The Spirit has always been after all of us – seeking all of us – but only a few realize it. Then and now, those touched by the Spirit disbelieve their own experiences – close down, turn away, think it’s too good to be true, mistake guilt for humility – and go right back to shame and fear instead of onward into obedience and love.

Something had to be done to make the Holy Spirit clearer and more available to everyone. Not that the Holy Spirit was not here, but that humans needed to be more open and willing and trusting to receive what was being offered. It is hard to break through our bondage – hard to blast through all the shields of our fear, unworthiness, guilt, idolatry. But something – some *One* – was needed to lead the WAY: some ONE we could comprehend, identify with, follow into the Light of God’s true love and caring and presence, despite all the pain and travail of a harsh and cruel world. After all, we do not like to go to school, and much about this Classroom Earth is not to our liking. So we all have reason to fear and mistrust, if not hate, the God who put us here, especially when it hurts so much – ourselves and all the people we love – if we do not learn our lessons or follow the rules. And then, of course, those in rebellion against the classroom itself also punish and hate those who *do* try to learn the lessons and follow the rules. So we needed some One ... desperately. We needed a Savior.

It is no wonder that before we get to know the Creator, many of us just want out. Yet at the same time, we are afraid of where “out” might put us. If it is this hard here, maybe “out” is a burning, fiery Hell. Plenty of people have claimed this is so, especially if you do not learn your lessons fast enough or follow all the rules well enough. But fear is like greed: the more you listen, the deeper it sinks into you. Trying to be right or good enough to keep out of Hell turns out to be Hell itself, as more than a few of us have learned the hard way.

So what will it take to break through the shields and reach us so we will dare to open ourselves to the Holy Spirit? One to walk among us, yes. But why would we believe Him? It will take more than niceness, more than kind words, more than a pat on the head and an optimistic attitude. “It is hard to see the dragon that has swallowed you.” Who will slay the dragon? We have no idea of the extent of the bondage – or the thickness of the shields – if we think some good advice or some human construct of philosophy or spirituality is going to make a serious dent in human fear, mistrust, and all the experiences that have convinced us to try to take care of ourselves and do things our own way. It will take a Cross to blow away our pride, and then a Resurrection to give us trust and hope when our pride is gone, and then a Pentecost to put us back into the real plan – when the shields are down and we are open to walking a new WAY. So Jesus came. Indeed He did! Wonder of Wonders!

Yet despite the incredible Wonder of the Incarnation, we and our world can still turn away or reduce it back to the familiar if we insist. And of course, the world will always try to close up the WAY that has been opened. The world will always try to turn everything back into its old familiar ways of bondage. What did the former slaves of Egypt say to Moses when they were free? “Hey, this is too hard. We would rather be back in Egypt. Slavery was at least familiar and we knew what to expect.” In the same way, we are frightened by the prospect of walking with the Holy Spirit of our Risen Lord. Most of our world does not want to know anything about Jesus except for His birth. He came, but let’s leave it at that. Never mind why He came, what it was like for Him, what happened to Him, or what that means for us. Christmas is His birth; never mind the rest. But even then He is too dangerous and we need more distance between us. So let’s ring it with miracles so we know there is nothing we can do about it. He is born of a virgin – very different from us, and too divine to have any relevance to our condition. Let’s honor Him and lift Him up until He is so high there is no possibility of our “following Him.” And we will put it all down in a book, though He never tried to do that. Then we can study it, argue over it, and write thousands of books about The Book – so that we will not have time to pray, to encounter His Holy Spirit in our own lives, or to turn our own lives over to His true and living influence and guidance. And oh yes: Remember how safe it was when we were only *waiting* for Him to come? A little lonely and bleak, perhaps, but it was nice to be waiting. Then we could have HOPE without having to respond to anything directly. So let’s go back to waiting. We waited for Messiah to come. Now we can wait for Messiah to COME AGAIN. That way we can go back to the same old ways as if nothing has happened – as if He never came at all, and is not here beckoning to us even now as we live and breathe. And most of you realized, even as I just now said it, that this is true. That the Spirit is often calling to you, and that you frequently turn it off before it can take hold of you. It is easy to do that, with all the noise and busyness and distractions we keep handy.

The Wonder is so much bigger than all the ways we have tried to hide it, obscure it, and keep ourselves safe from its light. The WORD did walk among us, die for us, and rise again to be with us – inviting us into the Light of a New WAY, starting the moment we are willing to open to it. The Light of the WORD is the presence of God – the Holy Spirit of Jesus the Christ – available; eager for us; loving us more than we love ourselves; and (what many people miss) full of plans, purposes, and possibilities that match our gifts and our true identities and that lead us, no matter

what evil and pain we encounter here, toward fulfillment and abundant Life that begins here and never ends. Meanwhile, the caring God waits right beside us – twiddling thumbs, drumming fingers – waiting for the moment when our shields might go down for a moment so he can say again: “I AM here! Come with me! Wake up! Let’s go! I have so much to show you, and it is all filled with WONDER!”

If the Prince Charming of your dreams (or if the woman you have always hoped and prayed you would someday find) came for you – suddenly came into your life, though you had long since concluded that he did not exist (now, I realize this has already happened for many of you, but go with me for a minute, okay?) – if the Prince Charming of your highest dreams suddenly came for you, what would be your very best response? This is a little multiple choice exam:

- A.) Pretend you don’t even notice him.
- B.) Spend the rest of your life checking into his family tree and his pedigree, trying to decide if he really is who he says he is.
- C.) Spend the rest of your life developing definitions and a mission statement so that you will know who to invite to the wedding, which will never happen here but might possibly take place after you die.
- D.) Welcome him with sincere wonder and delight, no matter how scary it is to trust that he really loves you, and go with him for the rest of your life.

Of course, D is the only possible answer, the only sane choice. Yet seldom is it the answer we choose in real life. But don’t worry if you didn’t get it right. We get this same exam every morning of our lives.

“Behold I stand at the door and knock – but most of my people are too busy with other things or too busy playing theological or creedal charades to let me IN so we can have Life together.” Religion is more than right views. It is more than reciting creeds, saying you are born again, or naming the date when you were “saved.” It is also more than decorating trees, singing carols, or knowing that babies are really cute.

Go to Jesus in the quiet, when there is no possibility of hype or peer-group pressure or any of the other outer motivations. He will be there waiting for you, whether that seems obvious at first or not. And say to the presence of His Holy Spirit: “I have noticed what You were like and what You did when You were here as one of us. I am beginning to understand something of why You did it. As it gets clearer, so does my awareness of how much it cost You, and of the Wonder of Your Love. So even though the world around me takes such things for granted and lets such things ‘go without saying’ – and even though being loved this much, with no possibility of fully reciprocating, is embarrassing and unnerving – I need to tell You that I, myself personally, appreciate it. I am in Your debt. Words are so small, but I find myself loving You back. It seems audacious, and it seems like there is not enough evidence for You to believe it, but I love You too. In me, from now on, You will find a true and faithful friend.”

I am of the opinion that Jesus would happily trade that for all the statues and stained glass, for all the creeds we have ever written, for all the cathedrals we have built, and for all the ecclesiastical councils, hierarchies, and denominations that go with them.

A few friends are all He has ever asked for. Friends who would also befriend others in His name. And however imperfect I know myself to be, still I am one of His friends. All I truly care about is that you be one too.

The baby is born. The baby grows up. And nothing about Christmas matters in the least unless you become His friend.