

# Wonder

November 27, 2022

## Wishes and Darkness

Do you ever find yourself going down an internet rabbit hole? You start looking for an easy answer or a bit of inspiration, and hours later need to hit the back button three dozen times to remember what it was you were looking for to begin with?

That happened to me yesterday. I had remembered that there was some sort of significance to two of Santa's reindeer's names, but I couldn't remember what it was. I searched for "Santa's reindeer's names." I found a Wikipedia article that jogged my memory—that Donner and Blitzen mean "Thunder and Lightning" in German—but in reading that Wiki, I saw that Rudolph's story was originally written in verse as an ad campaign for Montgomery Ward's.

Knowing that Ward's had been big around here, I then had to click on some links about that chain's history, wherein I learned that their catalog, commonly known as their "Wish Book," started being published in 1883, and by 1904 was being mailed to over 3 million households and weighed more than four pounds. Oh, how I remember thumbing through Christmas catalogs as a child. Our household received the Sears Wish Book, and I would pour over it, making notes in the margins about how many accessories came with each dolly, in order to get the best bang for each wish I'd tell Santa.

Does anyone remember what I was looking up? Oh yeah, Donner and Blitzen. Thunder and Lightning. Nothing about wishes.

Today, the church starts our season of Advent, our four weeks of waiting and preparing for the inbreaking of Christ into our weary world, and this idea of wishing is nowhere to be found. Instead, during this first week of Advent, the church invites us to focus on hope. Hope is very different from wishing, isn't it? Both are forward thinking, but hope is active while wishing is passive. Hope, while aspirational, is grounded in reality, whereas wishes are often pie-in-the-sky.

The church asks us to focus on hope this week, but I'm so conscious that it's been a difficult week in a lot of people's lives. Between Club Q and the Idaho students, the grocery store, the Walmart, the Virginia students, to continued war in Ukraine, to very real and present health struggles for many of our loved ones and friends, I've been hearing about a lot of struggle. Sure, we just celebrated a holiday about gratitude, but Thanksgiving can be an experience of navigating landmines for many, and even the Packers can't be depended upon to bring the immediate gratification we've come to expect in recent decades. And with all of this swirling around us, the church tells us this week that we're to be about hope.

## The Scriptures

The two scriptures that are assigned today have nothing to do with the baby Jesus being born, and everything to do with preparing our hearts to be hopeful when the world is difficult. Our first reading, the passage Ed read from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah, speaks of people streaming to the mountain of God to learn God's ways. And in some of the most beautiful and important poetry in all of scripture, we are told that when people from far and wide live God's ways and

walk God's paths, we won't have to study war anymore, and we will be able to transform our means of destruction into means of production and sustenance.

One hope that God has for us, one hope we are called to lend our energy to, is beating our "swords into plowshares and our spears into pruning hooks." It's interesting that this was written at a time when the Kingdom of Israel was at war with Assyria and Judah was being subjugated. Isaiah knew horror and atrocity and fear and political turmoil. And the vision that God gave him was of peace through diverse people learning together God's ways and then walking those paths.

Those of us who have been reading about the horrors at Club Q will see this attitude in direct contrast to the perpetrator's father. Godly hope comes not from might making right, but from mutuality. It can't be stressed enough that the vision the prophet describes here which will bring about this peace includes "all the nations" streaming to learn God's ways and walk in God's paths. A peaceable world is not a solitary undertaking, nor is it an experience of dominance or control. Mutuality and diversity are key, both to hope on an interpersonal level and to hope on a global level.

Whereas our passage from the prophet Isaiah offers us a vision of community and connection as our hope, today's Gospel tells us to be watchful and ready. We're told to stay awake, because we don't know when the Son of Man is coming.

This is a hard concept for us to grasp, especially as Christians have been celebrating the birth of Jesus on December 25th for centuries. Sure, we know that our churches will put the Jesus figurine into our nativity sets on Christmas. We will tell children that we're celebrating Jesus' birthday. Some churches even have a birthday cake...I wonder if they put 2,000+ candles on it? (...here's another thing to look up online later...)

But really, this idea that we don't know when God is going to break into our lives with Grace and hope is the real message of this season. It might be next Tuesday at 4 o'clock, or it might be three months from now.

### **Wonder and Hope**

As someone who has learned to tell her in-laws not to come early because I'm still getting ready in the hour before a party, this idea that Christ will break into our lives without warning could be terrifying. I'm someone who likes to have everything set by the time guests show up, so that I can spend my time with them, rather than on preparations.

With this hosting image in mind, I think that what this Gospel is inviting us into is to have our hearts and minds in such a state of preparation, that when Christ does break in, there isn't a mountain of dishes in the sink and dirty laundry isn't strewn everywhere. I fear I'm mixing metaphors too much here and may not be clear. God isn't telling us to have a clutter free house. Advent is not a divine invitation into a Marie Kondo lifestyle. Advent IS a season in which we re-center ourselves on virtues that will prepare our hearts and minds to be collaborators with God, namely hope, peace, joy, and love. Perhaps we can think of it as spending one week on four different rooms in our "spiritual house" to prepare ourselves to better recognize how God's grace manifests in our world.

This week, we work on the “hope” part of our spiritual house. Next week we’ll continue to focus on hope, but we’ll add to that the practice of cultivating “peace” as well, and so on.

As we focus on hope this week, as we work on shoring up that foundational spiritual practice, I’d like to suggest that we use the practice of wonder to cultivate our hope this week. The Oxford English Dictionary says that “wonder” refers to “a feeling of surprise mingled with admiration, caused by something beautiful, unexpected, unfamiliar, or inexplicable.”

Cameron Trimble, a UCC pastor and innovator suggests, we make Advent a season of wonder by wondering about a series of prompts. You may want to grab something to write with and, if I go too fast, know that I’ll post these on the church’s Facebook later today, and the text of this sermon will be available on the church’s website mid-week.

Trimble offers these starting points for making Advent a season of wonder.

I wonder:

- if I would feel more energetic if I \_\_\_\_\_ .
- what would happen if I learned \_\_\_\_\_ .
- why I am scared of \_\_\_\_\_ .
- if what I need most right now is \_\_\_\_\_ .
- if the most important thing to me right now is actually \_\_\_\_\_ .
- if my most urgent challenge might be teaching me about \_\_\_\_\_ .
- what would happen if I stopped doing \_\_\_\_\_ .
- if I focused on what was right in my life, I might discover \_\_\_\_\_ .
- if a loving (but appropriate) gesture would make a difference for \_\_\_\_\_ .
- if God is up to \_\_\_\_\_ .

### **Conclusion**

Friends, I know that there’s a lot of difficulty going on in many of your lives and in the world. And the secular answer to that is the modern day version of the Wish Book, a four-pound glossy, colorful escape from our hurts and fears. But the Bible isn’t a Wish Book. It’s a hope book. It’s a book that invites us into the wonder of what can be when we immerse ourselves in God’s ways and dedicate ourselves to God’s paths. This Advent season, my prayer for us all is that, as the Gospel admonishes us, we will stay awake to hope, that we will recognize the inbreaking of Christ in our midst.

Rev. Bridget Flad Daniels  
Union Congregational United Church of Christ  
Green Bay, Wisconsin  
**Isaiah 2:2-5; Matthew 24:36-44**  
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