

## Open to Mystery

Isaiah 9:2-7

Titus 2:11-14

Luke 2:1-14(15-20)

Psalm 96

A few years ago, I went over to my brother's house at the holiday. He had been going through some rough things at work, and it was the middle of the day, so I was really surprised when I came in the door to find him sitting on the couch laughing. In fact, when I got closer, I realized he had tears running down his face from laughing so hard. I asked him what was going on and he asked **me** if I had ever heard of the Scary Snowman. Have you heard of this? It has become a YouTube phenomenon, but I had never heard of it. ... There is a person who gets inside a giant snowman statue on the sidewalk in busy shopping areas. The snowman is large and has a grumpy face. It's stationary except for the head, which can pivot, and the person inside can lift and turn as well. When people walk past, moving fast, focused and immersed in conversation, He occasionally moves his head or shifts his body. And people freak out! They aren't expecting the statue to be animate, and the reactions are hysterical. People launch themselves in the air, scream, some raise their fists, jump off the sidewalk, or knock over their friends. My brother told me watching the clips had become a kind of therapy for him. I don't know why watching people get surprised is so funny, but it is. We were in stitches. I don't often laugh that hard. So, if you need a good laugh, you can look up the Scary Snowman.

We live in an age of science. We have so many answers. We have cell phones that have all the world's knowledge at our fingertips. We are rational creatures, who live according to facts we can verify. And yet, we still have the capacity to be surprised.

The surprises of the nativity story may have been a one-time event, but the realities at work behind the scenes remain just as mysterious and just as alive today.

Isaiah says that the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. If all you have known is darkness, you can't even begin to imagine light. Nevertheless, it was into a darkened world that an unimaginable light shone. Have you ever traveled somewhere new in the dark and then watched the sun come up in the morning? It changes everything. That light reorients your understanding of the landscape in surprising ways.

Even so, we look at things and think that what we see is all there is to be seen. But that is never true. This baby Jesus, who could not yet even care for himself, had all authority resting on his shoulders. This infant, who had clearly not yet reached puberty, was the father of nations. This newborn, full of fresh life, was wrapped in strips of cloth as a sign. He would be wrapped again in strips of cloth at his burial, and it was those cloths, that would point to a surprising future for those who had so long waited for a military Savior to deliver them from their oppressors. And don't you think those shepherds who had gazed up at thousands of night skies thought they knew the heavens were filled with only stars. Imagine their surprise at seeing an angel and then a whole heavenly host shatter their illusion of what exists in that sky beyond what they could see. I imagine it was a bit like an encounter with a scary snowman.

It can be difficult for us to remain open to the possibility that things might be different than we think, different than what we have personally experienced. Most of us have not experienced angelic messengers heralding miraculous events. Therefore, it can be challenging for us to believe in the Biblical stories at all, and if we do, it can still seem impossible that the same God and the same angels are somehow alive and active here in our 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Which is why the Psalms are so great. They show us a model of existing in a world where things don't happen the way we want or expect. Today's Psalm was written when the Ark of the Covenant was being returned to the Israelites and into the temple. The ark was where the presence of God was housed but they had been separated from it in a military defeat years before. When David sings this song, after years of feeling like God's presence had been taken from him and his people, he's inscribing a memorial for them. He's reminding himself, the people, and even us all these years later, what is true about God even when we don't feel like we are personally experiencing it. When the ark was carted off, removing God's presence, it's difficult to imagine David fully believed in God's strength or love. Yet, on its return he says, "The LORD is King! he has made the world so firm that it cannot be moved; he will judge the peoples with equity." He wrote that when he **was** feeling it so God's people could always remember it even when they weren't experiencing it.

Friends, we do not know everything, nor have we experienced everything. Waiting for God's promises can sometimes feel interminable. The people of Israel **hoped** for a Messiah, but the shepherds on the hillsides surely didn't expect angels to rip through the heavenly veil and proclaim his birth. Maintaining belief in God, when we don't feel our experiences prove God will show up, can be challenging. Many Christians are functionally atheists. One of the best things we can do to overcome our disenchantment is to become evangelists to ourselves. David meant for his Psalm to be sung, loudly, and often, with conviction. We can take up his refrain or write our own when we see God's faithfulness. And the songs of God's faithfulness are not meant for us to sing alone. When we share our excitement over the work of God, we join the angelic hosts, we push back our unbelief, inspire others, and make it possible for all of us to see God's hand at work. We become God's hand at work.

One of my favorite parts of the shepherd's story is when the angel tells them not to be afraid. Have you ever had someone tell you not to feel your feelings? It doesn't always work very well. But there is a lot of wisdom in the angel's instruction. Some of us live in a constant state of fear. And when we experience fear, our cerebral cortex is impaired by the release of cortisol and adrenaline, making rational thought very difficult. The angel gives the shepherds instructions, indicating that their fear could be transformed if they could see what he was trying to show them. When we can see God's hand at work, we too can have our responses to the experiences of life and our feelings transformed. Sometimes angels rip back the veil and trumpet God's activity on earth. Other times it's more subtle and we must look for it to see it. On the night of Jesus' birth, many missed it because they had closed their doors against God's surprising entrance.

In Paul's letter to Titus, he proclaims the salvation brought to us through Jesus, while also acknowledging that we continue to wait for Jesus' return. The Greek word he uses for "wait" indicates an eager anticipation, a hospitable heart, ready and excited. To wait like this, we must be active participants in God's story, not merely passive observers. For David, Mary, Joseph, the shepherds, and the apostle Paul participation meant saying yes to God, believing what they were told, sharing God's joy and telling others about their surprising experiences.

Tonight, we revel in the mystery and beauty of the Christmas story. We imagine the angelic hosts, enthusiastic shepherds, and the holy family. We gaze into the mystery of the miraculous and allow it to transform our hearts. Our collect says, "Grant that we, who have **known** the **mystery** of that Light on earth, may also enjoy him perfectly in heaven". Paul's letter tells us the way we get there is through preparing ourselves, remaining open to the surprising work of God. You never know when an angel or a snowman might appear.

May we be a people who live the Christmas story, who labor expecting God to act, who listen for the voices of angels, who are so excited about the works of God that we share them with others, and who treasure these mysteries, pondering them always in our hearts.