

GraceCity Advent Study

Wonder



Study #1

November 28 & December 5, 2021

“Wonder at God” (Psalm 100)/“Wonder at Wandering” (Matthew 2:12-18)

“Look among the nations, and see; wonder and be astounded.

For I am doing a work in your days, that you would not believe if told.” (Habakkuk 1:5 – ESV)

In a world where so much goes so wrong so fast, where justice seems elusive – what does the Christmas season have to offer in 2021? God invites our questions, cries, and protests, and as He does throughout Biblical history, answers with the bigger picture of what He is about in His creation.

Let’s WONDER together this Christmas season and be astonished at the work of God in our midst. GraceCity, a revival of wonder in God’s work is not an all or nothing proposition. This Christmas season we’ll make incremental discoveries along the continuum of divine wonder that will no doubt be a change-maker in all of our lives. And you’re invited along with your family and friends.

Aristotle said, *“Wonder is the first of all passions.”* Psychologists tell us that “wonder” (*a sense of awe tinged with mystery*), remains a prized and all too rare emotion linked to our ability to step outside of ourselves to see a story that is bigger than ‘me’.

Can there be any experience bigger and more full of wonder than to encounter the God of the Universe in the person of his Son Jesus Christ?

Preparation:

- Define “wonder” in your own words. What feelings come to mind? Where do you experience wonder? Do you have to escape to find wonder or are you able to find wonder in the day-to-day?
- Many Christian songs invoke wonder. What are some that you can recall?

Joy to the World – “and wonders of His love...”

We Three Kings – “star of wonder, star of night, star with royal beauty bright...”

God of Wonders – “God of wonders beyond our galaxy, You are holy, holy...”

Read: [Psalm 100](#)

Notes/Definitions:

Wonder (partial definition from [Merriam-Webster](#)) – a cause of astonishment or admiration, miracle; the quality of exciting amazed admiration; rapt attention or astonishment at something awesomely mysterious or new to one's experience, a feeling of doubt or uncertainty

Questions:

1. Psalm 100 is a psalm of communal thanksgiving. Consider your friend group/your family/your small group/our church family. What reasons do you all have to give collective praise to God this Advent season? Share with them if you’re not doing this study together.

This study has been developed for personal reflection and group discussion. To participate in the conversation, join a GraceCity small group. For more information on times and locations, email smallgroups@gracecitybaltimore.org.

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2. What does this Psalm extol us to do in response to God?

Review the verbs that start each line—shout, worship, know...

3. Wonder of God often comes from recognizing our finiteness compared to God’s infiniteness. How is this right relationship expressed in this psalm? How does a spirit of thanksgiving evoke wonder?
4. What do we learn about God in this psalm?

God is the main character in the Bible. This is a good question to ask yourself in any study.

5. In Romans 8:18-31, Paul compares our present sufferings to the future glory to be revealed in us. When present sufferings feel all too real and overwhelming, how does that cloud our vision of God’s wonder? How does this psalm provide comfort or reassurance?

After four arduous days of hiking the Inca Trail, my group reached the Sun Gate, which would provide a first look at our destination, Machu Picchu. Yet when we arrived, a thick fog filled the valley, blocking our view of this Wonder of the World. To me, present sufferings are like this fog. We know the wonders of God’s goodness, God’s love, and God’s glory are still right there; however, our current circumstances can cloud our perception of them. -Allan

Howard Thurman put it this way. “One thing I know concerning my anxieties: they are real to me. Sometimes they seem more real than the presence of God.... Little by little, I am beginning to understand that deliverance from anxiety means fundamental growth in spiritual character and awareness. It becomes a quality of being, emerging from deep within, giving to all the dimensions of experience a vast immunity against being anxious. A ground of calm underlies experiences whatever may be the tempestuous character of events. This calm is the manifestation in life of the active, dynamic Presence of God.”¹

In his *Advancement of Learning*, Francis Bacon defines wonder as “*broken knowledge*.” To wonder is also to wander—to stray from society, to be alone, under threat, disillusioned and afraid. Sadly, many people do not open themselves to wonder, afraid it may distract or disappoint them. After all, wonder can be wounding, and in the Greek, *thauma* (wander) is only one letter removed from *trauma*. Too often we see it as something to be grown out of rather than encouraged or nurtured. But the wounding of wonder and wander invites repair, met in colossal and sacrificial terms by our God, giving rise to ever more exalted kinds of wonder—the wonder of insight and creation that delivers profound change. Such wonder encourages creativity by requiring us to step into uncertainty and recalibrate our understanding of the world.

Read: [Matthew 2:12-18](#)

Notes/Definitions:

Joseph – Of the house of David, Joseph is a carpenter by trade and betrothed to Mary. He is Jesus’ earthly father. The last reference to Joseph is when Jesus preaches in the temple at age twelve (Luke 2:41-52).

Herod the Great – The first king in a rather infamous dynasty. He came to power in 37 BC at a time when Rome was still sorting out political factions which had arisen following the assassination of Julius Caesar. Herod was a deeply insecure ruler—his title was “king of the Jews” but what dogged him his entire life was the fact that he was not an ethnic Jew. He was proud and arrogant, and while the Jews may have grudgingly given him credit for rebuilding the temple, they despised him and never accepted him as one of their own.

Magi – Middle Eastern astrologers, well versed in mathematics, science, and philosophy. Likely were descendants of the wise men who served Daniel (see Daniel 2:48) and would have had access to the Hebrew scriptures.

Mary (his mother in v. 13, 14) – A young woman from Nazareth, a small town with a poor reputation, and pledged to be married to Joseph. The angel Gabriel declares Mary is highly favored and will bear the Son of God. After the initial shock, Mary’s response exhibits her deep spiritual maturity and understanding (Luke 1:26-56).

“This was to fulfill what had been spoken” – Matthew introduces many of his direct quotations from Scripture with this formula (1:22; 2:5, 15, 17, 23; 4:14, etc). In his gospel account, Matthew casts Jesus as the true fulfillment of the Law found in the Torah.

Questions:

6. In verse 12, after being warned in a dream, the Magi return to their home country by another route. While this was a direction from God to avoid Herod, what wonder comes from taking another route?
7. In verse 13, Joseph again hears from the angel of the Lord in a dream. This time Joseph is directed to take his family to Egypt and “stay there until I tell you.” How do you think Joseph experienced wonder in this moment?

Although not the first time, Joseph surely felt wonder being in the presence of an angel of the Lord; however, the encounter also likely brought about a different aspect of wonder—doubt and uncertainty. “I wonder what our lives will be like in Egypt.” “I wonder how long we will have to stay there.”

8. Recall a time when you were forced to wander, to take a detour. What was the outcome? When have you found yourself in a place only God could have brought you?

Wandering leading to a chance encounter reminds me of an episode of Seinfeld where Elaine’s initial meeting with her future employer and boss, J. Peterman, occurs when she bumps into him on the street during a rainstorm. Already distraught and crying, she exclaims, “So sorry, I don’t even know where I am going.” To which, J. Peterman replies, “Well that’s the best way to get someplace you have never been.” When we desire a different outcome, we often must be willing to start on an unexplored path.

9. Contrasted to the Magi and Joseph, how did Herod react to uncertainty?

Instead of approaching the birth of Jesus with wonder, Herod felt fear and insecurity. He chose to order the murder of all boys under two in a feeble attempt to project strength and control over a situation in which he was powerless.

10. After being delivered from Egypt, God led the Israelites not by the most direct path to the Promised Land but by the desert road (Exodus 13:17-18). While the Israelites grumbled and longed to return to the knowns, the good and the bad, of Egypt and their journey eventually took years, how was their time in the wilderness still filled with wonder?

Among other things, God provided bread (manna) each day in an amount that would only be sufficient for that day (Exodus 16).

11. Nearly two years into this pandemic, we too have had feelings of wandering without direction or an end in sight. How have you experienced wonder in the wandering of the pandemic? How has God continued to work in our lives and in our community?

As a scientist, I am in awe of how quickly we developed incredibly effective vaccine, and I praise God for that. I also am amazed at how so many have continued to show up daily to serve others in the midst incredible hardship. -Christin

12. How do we wander with purpose instead of aimlessly? How do God’s character and the boundaries of his law give us freedom to wander?

Seasons of wandering away from God are part of a natural progression in the maturing of our faith. God can handle our doubts and desires the intimacy that comes with us expressing them.

13. In our Flavor Groups, we consistently remind ourselves of the [Approaching Differences Diagram](#). In brief, the diagram outlines two ways we can enter cultural differences. We may green-line, which is to approach the inevitable dissonance with openness and respond with curiosity, leading to deeper relationships. On the other hand, we can red-line and enter dissonance with a closed mind, respond critically, and leave with broken relationships. As we wander into issues that often divide, how does maintaining a sense of wonder (green-lining) allow for the deepening our relationships both with God and with one another?

Closing Prayer:

The Christmas season is filled with wonder for children. You can see it in their faces! As we age though, we allow that sense of glee to dull. Yet we are called to have a childlike faith. This Advent, let us rediscover our wonder. Pray that you would feel God’s presence in a fresh way. Go for a walk in your neighborhood by another route. Pray for those in the homes you walk by, for those you encounter. Be aware of Creation and the work of God. Continue to seek situations where you would only go because of God and take a friend with you.

¹ Thurman, Howard. *Meditations of the Heart*. Beacon Press, 1981.