

Rev. Anne J. Scalfaro  
18 December 2022

10:30 a.m. MT Worship  
4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Advent

Calvary Baptist Church  
Denver, Colorado

## ***“The Waze of Wonder”***

Fourth Sermon in the Advent Series: *Womb & Wonder* (Part III of “Spirit of Curiosity”)

***Matthew 1:18-25***

New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition

Moments of Wonder. Those moments that take our breath away with beauty – or cause us to hold our breath in awe – or perhaps gasp out loud with surprise. *I wonder* if moments of true wonder affect our breath, because we know if we attention to them, they’ll affect our very lives. Moments of Wonder can be the pivot point from Life Before to Life After; they can point us in a new direction and change the course of our lives, *if* we let them.

The Christmas story is full of such Wonder moments. Gabriel’s impossibly surreal announcement to Mary. The heavenly hosts’ middle of the night serenade to the shepherds. The star shining brightly in the East for the magi.

Joseph’s “wonder moment” – comes from an angel. And perhaps it’s because God knew that Joseph was an obedient, righteous, rational, ‘by the book’ kind of guy (and was probably not awake to wonder

on most days) that God sent the angel to Joseph in a dream. When we are sleeping, our defenses are down. When we are dreaming, we are not concerned with “how the world works,” nor are we confined to prescribed ways of being or reined in by reason. As we sleep and rest from the life we are living, perhaps God uses dreams – and other moments of wonder – to wake us up to the life that could be, to the world as God sees.

Hebrew Bible scholar, “Walter Brueggemann, reminds us that all the dreams in Scripture have something in common. They represent the intrusion of God into a settled world – an unbidden communication in the dark of the night that opens sleepers to a world different from the one they inhabit during the day – an intrusion that generates a restless uneasiness with the way things are until the vision and the dream come to

fruition.”<sup>1</sup> Preacher Thomas Long calls these dreams or these wonder moments “holy disruptions.”<sup>2</sup>

Jacob woke from his dream as a restless wrestler on the banks of the Jabbok River but is blessed in the end with a new name, identity, and purpose. Old Testament Joseph wakes from his dream on a prison floor and follows the vision he’s given and goes on to save his people. The magi awake from their dream about Herod and abruptly go home by another way. And in this text, Matthew’s Joseph wakes from his dream and embraces Mary as his wife and the Savior of the world as his son.<sup>3</sup>

Having been changed by their dreams, each of these people hear a promise and discover a new purpose for their lives – a passion to live life for someone or something beyond themselves.<sup>4</sup> They have an understanding that they are part of something bigger in the world. And that’s the thing about Wonder – it’s always

expanding our vision...never shrinking it.

These dreams – or moments of “holy disruption” and wonder – seem to be a clear way that God frees us and rebirths us and pushes us into new life. So it is with Matthew’s Joseph in today’s story.<sup>5</sup> Ironical, isn’t it? Joseph was so concerned with Mary’s pregnancy that he really had no idea that God was birthing something in and through him as well. And as you know, this isn’t the only dream that Joseph listens to. He will continue to be guided by dreams and angels until he brings Mary and Jesus safely to Nazareth after Herod’s decree to kill all baby boys under age two. For Joseph, awaking to the wonder of God’s leading means going to sleep and resting from his own thoughts for a while.

And I’m sure that Joseph had racing, ruminating thoughts at night. Because Joseph is an upright, righteous Jewish man. He followed the law to a T and the law said that he could not be a faithful husband to Mary if she

<sup>1</sup> Walter Brueggemann, “The Power of Dreams in the Bible,” *Christian Century*, June 28, 2005, 28-31.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas G. Long, *Matthew* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 13.

<sup>3</sup> Susan R. Andrews, “Matthew 1:18-25: Pastoral Perspective,” *Feasting on the Gospels – Matthew, Volume, Chapters 1-13*, eds. Cynthia A. Jarvis & E.

Elizabeth Johnson (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), 10.

<sup>4</sup> Andrews, 10.

<sup>5</sup> Susan R. Andrews, “Matthew 1:18-25: Pastoral Perspective,” *Feasting on the Gospels – Matthew, Volume, Chapters 1-13*, eds. Cynthia A. Jarvis & E. Elizabeth Johnson (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), 10.

had been with another man and indeed was having a child with another man. In fact, the law in Deuteronomy 22:13-30 says Mary should have been put to death! In light of this, Joseph's response to "dismiss her quietly" was a very caring, compassionate response, albeit all still within a system that silenced the voice and agency of women. That's part of what makes Mary's "yes" to Gabriel so powerful in Luke 1. But equally powerful is Joseph's agency in *not* saying *No* to Mary.

But. At first he was very clear that he WAS saying "No." In fact, he was so set on this decision that Matthew says he has "resolved" to dismiss Mary. In other words, his mind is made up. Period. End of sentence. Joseph may have made a "pros and cons" list, he might have studied to see if there was any way around the law, he might have consulted a trusted friend about what to do – but at the point we meet him in this text – Joseph had made his decision. And I don't get the feeling he was a wishy-washy kind of guy.

Many of us are like Joseph. We want to do the right thing. We have been taught what is the

"right" by our religion or our parents or some other societal standard and we live with that voice in our head telling us what to do and why. We might question it for a moment, but not usually enough to change our ways. It takes A LOT to make a decision that goes against everything we know about how the world works.

Making a decision as significant as the one Joseph has to make about Mary is not easy. He had received devastating and disrupting news to his life. Something happened to him that he did not ask for. He was following the rules and was doing things like he was supposed to. *Why did this happen? Why him? What did he do to deserve this? Why would God 'allow' this to happen to his engagement? His betrothed? Was he not faithful enough? Obedient enough? He prayed, he attended synagogue, he cared for his parents and community...he racked his brain – he didn't get it. Why, God?*

Maybe you know this feeling. The feeling of devastation when something happens in your life that you didn't ask for and that literally turns your world upside down. Once you get over the initial shock, then you have to

decide what to do; how to move forward. And in this kind of unexpected, unwanted situation just to get to a place of making any kind of decision is hard and exhausting work. Imagine finally accepting your plight as reality and dealing with it enough to create a plan to move forward from it and then just when you are ready to have it all behind you...

Everything changes.

Again.

The moment of wonder breaks in – the “holy disruption” that doesn’t feel very holy at all. These are moments that happen to us that are also unplanned and uninvited. But there is something different about them. They defy our “pros and cons” list. They don’t fit into our box of options. They aren’t even on our road map. They mystify us. A true of moment of Wonder breaks in like a tidal wave...maybe that rises gradually at first – but that ultimately always crashes down and tumbles us around inside it. It’s the moments when we’re looking at what we thought was the roadmap of our life and all the sudden we realize that the direction we’re being led is nowhere before us in our plans

and certainly nowhere behind us in our lived experience either. How can we go down a road that isn’t even on our map to begin with?

Well, by letting God pave a new road for us. By being open to new pathways of divine discernment that are not directions as much as they are discoveries. Wonderings. Invitations.

I have a confession to make. I am directionally challenged. It does help that I live in Colorado now and the Rocky Mountains are always due West – but for whatever reason – that does not seem to help me when I’m driving in the Tech Center or Downtown. Both of those areas of Denver are enigmas to me. So I use directional apps A LOT. My road map of choice is Waze.

If you don’t know what Waze is, it’s a navigation tool – like Google maps or any other GPS system – but it gives you real time information based on crowd-sourcing. Waze uses real time data from other users on the road to re-route you or let you know if there are police speed traps around or if there is a hazard on the road (which could be pothole, a stalled car,

road kill, or a wreck), or if there's a delay because of weather visibility on I-70 or a parade downtown or (as happens up in Estes Park in the fall) elk standing in the middle of the road.

As a Waze user you can share real time information by logging what you see, but just by having the app open while you're driving, you are contributing to creating the database of real time, ever changing information that helps out other drivers. This information allows Waze to tell you when you need to leave to get somewhere on time or if you have time to get gas without being late. It's what allows a re-route mid journey to happen without missing a beat.

The creators of Waze say, "Don't tell Mercator, but maps are meant to be redrawn. A static map could never tell us what to expect, because we don't know what the road has in store on a particular day until we're on it. A road could be blocked or under construction or just plain jammed up. By using data from cars already on the road driving around before you even get into your car, suddenly getting from Point A to Point B

is easier than ever<sup>6</sup> because we're connecting with each other and we're open to learning new information from each other even when we don't know where it's coming from or if it matches our previously known experience about a road.

Waze works best *when you don't assume you know the best route* because you "always commute the same way" – but when you trust that all the people driving around you have information right now that *you* don't have – and that you *need* – to get to where you need to go by the best way possible.

There are 140+ million Waze users today. According to the website we're called "Wazers." Any other Wazers out there?

I find the premise of Waze really fascinating – and appropriate – as we think about wonder and the "holy disruption" of how God works in our lives.

Let's think about God as the Waze app for a moment. (*I know, it's a stretch. But it's just a metaphor. You can let it go in a moment.*)

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<sup>6</sup> Information from [www.waze.com](http://www.waze.com).

What would it look like to assume that we do not know the best directions and road map for our life all the time? Not that our way or direction doesn't matter – in fact, quite the opposite. The direction we are going and the route we are taking contributes to the real-time data that God has about who we are and how we operate. The road we are on and the direction we are going is essential information...for us and for others.

But – what would it mean to trust that God (as the Master Wazer Creator) has information about the world and our life that we ourselves do not yet have yet or know – and that we need? What would it mean to not be so set on receiving turn by turn instructions based on the ways that streets intersect on a physical map (meaning everything we can see with our own eyes or know based on our own experiences) – but rather to be open to being led in a new way because of all that we do not know yet or cannot see yet? To let the laws of the road (and the layout of our lives) be informed and changed by how people are living and how God is working all around us? What would it look like to let Wonder have it's way with us?

Joseph knew the law. The law about what to do with a woman who was with child before you were married was laid out and written down. Imagine how the Christmas Story would be different if Joseph had followed that law as static direction? As a step by step absolute on what to do?

But he didn't. Joseph allowed his dream to awaken him to wonder – to a new possibility never thought of or routed before. He was open to receiving information that he did not know. God knew what was going on with Mary and the Holy Spirit. And through a divine messenger God shared that real-time information with Joseph so that it could inform his next turn. And it led Joseph in a direction he couldn't have imagined or routed on his own. But what a direction it was!

The “holy disruption” of a dream for Joseph was a complete reversal in thinking. In this moment he realizes “*The child in Mary's womb is not a violation of God's will, but an*

*expression of it, a gift from the Holy Spirit.”*<sup>7</sup>

Talk about a pivot point in understanding!

Joseph deciding to take Mary as his wife did not mean the path ahead for him was easy. He would have not been seen as “righteous” anymore by his peers, even as he was being faithful to God’s leading. And isn’t that a profound difference? To be “righteous” is to always be concerned about doing the ‘right thing’ as a moral judgment. To be “faithful” is to be listening and discerning to how God is moving and speaking in the world and in your life – and understanding that God sometimes moves and speaks in ways that the world does not understand or condone or celebrate.

Joseph becomes a model disciple for us in this moment. Someone we can look up to. Whose counter-cultural decision actually is just a precursor to the many times his son, Jesus, would make similar decisions to follow the leading of God instead of the leading of law or empire or religion.<sup>8</sup>

Following the leading of God’s spirit is always risky – only because it requires something from us that is probably new or unknown or unfamiliar to us.

Perhaps the ways of God’s Spirit and the Waze of Wonder are kind of like Waze, the app. Maybe one way we can understand Wonder – and the mystery of how these moments often defy our logic and rational thinking – is by thinking of Wonder as a collective source of wisdom and information that is beyond our own knowledge and experience as of yet – but that tells us something about the mystery of how God works – through all of us!

Much like the directional app Waze, moments of wonder help us discern the best decision when we allow real-time data to inform our course of action. And the best real time data we have in our life for all time is, after all, Emmanuel – *God with us*.

The “With us” of this text in verse 23 stands in a bookend relationship with the promise of the risen Christ in the last verse

<sup>7</sup> Long, 13.

<sup>8</sup> Holly Hearon, “Commentary on Matthew 1:18-25,” *Working Preacher* (21 Dec. 2014), accessed on Dec. 17, 2022 at

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/narrative-lectionary/jesus-as-immanuel/commentary-on-matthew-118-25>.

of Matthew 28: “Remember, I am *with you* always, to the end of the age.” The birth of Jesus is a birth of a new world, even as the old one is tottering around us.<sup>9</sup>

Matthew very intentionally tells us at the beginning of his gospel that God is with us – and at the end that God is with us. Before the baby is born – God is with us. And after that baby is born, lives, is crucified and risen – God is with us. The Holy Spirit is present at the beginning of Emmanuel – God with us. And in the end, the Holy Spirit is what remains after Jesus dies, rises, and ascends.

The Holy Spirit – which is now represented by you and me. All of us. Sounds a bit like crowd-sourcing, doesn’t it? Did God crowd-source out God’s presence onto us? Maybe. But it all started with a baby and with Joseph and Mary who named him Emmanuel.

After all, Emmanuel means “God with us.” Or, another way to say it is: we have a “*With Us*” God. A God that doesn’t set out a static map or direction for us at the beginning and then

just leaves and watches us all run around and bump into each other and get stuck in traffic. But a God who chooses to come down and get on the roads with us as ONE of us. No matter our direction...God is with us...even when we are re-routed...especially when we are re-routed!

Every time I turn on my Waze app now, I think of Emmanuel – and just how amazing it is to have a “with us God” – a God who is not detached from our movements and longings and yearnings and struggles – but a God who wants to be involved in our discerning and decision making. And a God who shows up to us through each other. The incarnation – Word made flesh – God in human form. A God who uses all kinds of ways – from nature to dreams to celestial signs to scripture to the advice of a good friend to our own strong gut feeling – to be Waze of Wonder...moments where we can trust that something is telling us new information that we need to listen to...perk up to...awaken to...that we don’t know all there is to know about how the world works.

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<sup>9</sup> David Schnasa Jacobsen, “Matthew 1:18-25: Exegetical Perspective,” *Feasting on the Gospels – Matthew, Volume, Chapters 1-13*, eds. Cynthia A. Jarvis

& E. Elizabeth Johnson (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), 13.



The Good News of Christ's birth – is precisely his name – Emmanuel, *God with us*. Having a “with us” God means that we can't make a wrong turn away from the presence of God. God is with us always, in all ways. Even when we miss a moment of wonder – Christ is still Emmanuel – *God with us*. Even when we are defiant in our own direction – Christ is still Emmanuel – *God with us*. Even when we question whether there is a God at all or why the world is the way it is – Christ is still Emmanuel – *God with us*.

And don't get me wrong. Having a path you are on and a set direction you are following – is not a bad thing. It's all good to have a plan; as long as you realize that every plan we have will always be re-routed. I just think that how open we are to Wonder will indicate how many times we're re-routed and in what ways.

Ironically – it's probably because Joseph was always in the synagogue and praying and raised religiously – that he knew how to recognize a “holy disruption” when he

experienced one himself. The Waze of Wonder are not all about something new all the time – or following the whimsy of a moment. The Waze of Wonder are based on long-worn paths journeyed by others – and informed by their experiences and lives as they beckon us to join them.

Joy J. Moore says, “*You can recognize God in the present if you are familiar with how God has shown up in the past; this is why we read these stories.*”<sup>10</sup>

So what do you say, let's be “Wazers of Wonder” this Advent and Christmas...listen for your path – your next turn or direction in life – and as we are all faithful in that wonderment – and listening to and learning from each other...I have a feeling – no matter which way we're directed – we'll all end up in Bethlehem together – meeting at the manger – our final destination revealed once and for all – Emmanuel, *God with us*. And for us. Forever and ever...

Amen.

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<sup>10</sup> Rolf Jacobson, Joy J. Moore, and Kathryn Schifferdecker, “Narrative Lectionary Podcast 517: Jesus as Immanuel - December 18, 2022,” *Working Preacher*

(12 Dec. 2022), accessed on Dec. 17, 2022 at <https://www.workingpreacher.org/podcasts/517-jesus-as-immanuel-december-18-2022>.