

Christmas Eve 2023
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Cathedral of the Incarnation, Long Island

“The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness - on them light has shined.” Isaiah 9:2

Two weeks ago, I found myself on retreat at our summer chapel in Saltaire on Fire Island. Always bustling in summer, the place felt remote and hauntingly beautiful in winter. As I went to bed, I was distracted by an intermittent twinkle of light that caught my attention. Curiosity drew me to the window, where I had an unobstructed view of the Fire Island lighthouse across a dormant landscape. Every 7.5 seconds, its beam pierced the night, interrupting my tranquility. So, I did what any reasonable person would do; I closed the blinds and went to bed.

Throughout the season of Advent, we have been contemplating the mystery of our life with God alongside those navigating their own shades of darkness.

The ancient prophets warned their neighbors to let Love rule their lives before time ran out. John the Baptist cried out in the wilderness urging a new path of grace and truth. And then there's Gayle Boss, a new friend and guide, who wrote the book *All Creation Waits, the Advent Mystery of New Beginnings*.

With Gayle, we witnessed some of God's creatures adept at surviving darkness, primed for light and warmth.

We plunged into the depths with a Painted Turtle, burrowed in mud for the winter, in order to emerge anew with the change of seasons.

We encountered Wood Frog, frozen in ice, later thawing to leap into spring.

We nestled with a Striped Skunk and her companions, witnessing their survival tactics to make it through a winter of drastic change.

These creatures, and many more, embody resilience that leads to emergence from darkness into light. These creatures echo the lesson taught by the prophets and Christ Himself: God resides even in the deepest shadows.

Despite this promise, so many of us often feel isolated, powerless, and lost in the dark. We don't perceive the significance of Bethlehem past, just as we struggle to comprehend the region of Bethlehem present. Our grown-up way of seeing things obscures the enchantment we effortlessly appreciated as children.

We think, wrongly, that to be an adult is to no longer see the world as a mysterious gift; an inconceivably magical place, charged with the grandeur of God.¹

And yet, there are moments when brilliance seeps through the cracks in our grown-up facades and we see rightly, if only briefly. Unexpected lapses in our defense mechanisms allow us to perceive the world as we once did, without cynicism. These moments (and Christmas may be one), offer a refreshing glimpse of our sacred worth and life's unfathomable beauty.

In his inspired book, *God in Search of Man*, Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote: "Mankind will not perish for want of information; but only for want of appreciation. [A]...life without wonder is not a life worth living. What we lack is not a will to believe, but a will to wonder."

¹ Homage to Gerard Manley Hopkins

That, my friends, is the key to the treasure that is Christmas. The Incarnation is not information to be understood. It is an immersive encounter to be entered and explored. Put another way: Christmas is not about belief, but rather; wonder.

I'll show you, if you have a minute. Do you have a minute right now? Great. Recall a moment of wonder in your life. What did you see? What did you hear? How did you feel? Were you beneath a starry sky or before an open ocean? Did you witness an act of unexpected kindness? Did music move you? Did you find rest in a holy silence? Were you on a journey, or listening to a story, or giving birth to your own child? Did you experience the warmth of friendship, the return of something or someone lost? Was it in receiving or offering forgiveness, or unconditional love?

These experiences of awe and wonder are portals into the mystery of God with us. Christ's birth in Bethlehem - His perpetual rebirth in us – can only be comprehended through wonder. Without it, the light is lost. Christmas remains an empty beacon, veiled behind closed curtains.

We come here tonight for many different reasons. By grace, we may leave with a common hope: that Christmas stirs us from our slumber and shatters our comfort with the world's shadows.

Just as Painted Turtle, Wood Frog, Striped Skunk and every newborn child is born into a world of possibility; Christ draws us, through water and the Spirit, into his life of love, joy, freedom and peace - into what Christians call the Kingdom of God; A place where all belong and none are lost.

It can be hard, as an adult, to believe such a place exists and that it is here and now. The wonder of Christmas gives us entry.

If you are looking for hope this Christmas, open the blinds. At least every 7.5 seconds, you will see the light, and wonder will lead you home...

Hush, little one, let me sing you to sleep
Moonlight has come, now, drift off to a dream
Sail from the day to the wonders awaiting you out there
In the deep

Off little one, chase the wind on the waves
Adventure is calling, so go and be brave
But if you get lost as you're tossed in the dark of the sea
Look for me

I will wait at the shore for you
I will weather each storm standing by 'til
Safe, you return from the night
My love is a lighthouse
So darling, my darling
Look for the light

*Look for the Light: Sara Bareilles / Justin Paul / Benji Pasek
Only Murders in the Building*