

Wonder!
Rev. Alida Ward
Christmas Eve 2017

I saw the new Star Wars movie last weekend:

The Last Jedi.

Our son Andres persuaded me that it would be a fun mother-son outing to catch it on opening day —

I actually didn't need much persuasion;

I'd seen the first Star Wars movie 13 times when it came out in 1977;

and I had had posters of Mark Hamill as Luke Skywalker all over the walls of my room.

And Mark Hamill's in this one.

Although it's a little jarring when your teen idol is now the elder statesman of the film —!

So anyway, there we were on opening day, me and Andres and a theater full of very excited people,

our eye glued to the screen for almost three hours, three hours of galactic battles and amazing special effects.

And when the lights came up, I turned to Andres and said:

"That was *awesome!*"

I was right back to where I was 40 years ago,

a 13 year old coming out of the theatre with her friends,

all of us going "How did they **do** that?"

and "That was so cool!"

and "let's go see it again tomorrow!"

Awe-struck and full of wonder.

The Christmas story is awesome like that.

Full of 'how did they do that' and 'that's so cool.'

Full of wonder.

There are dumbfounded shepherds with their mouths agape,
still staring at the night sky where angels had just appeared,
and wise philosophers startled by a star not seen before,
amazed,
and a young couple staring at a new baby sleeping in hay,
awestruck.

The incarnation is God's ultimate special effect.
It's the one that leaves you saying "how did they do that?"
and "that's so cool."
God being born among us?
That's pretty wondrous.

If you're a Star Wars fan, you have to wait years for the next installment.
But if you're a God fan, a Jesus fan,
you get to see wondrous things all the time.
You get "that's so cool" moments all the time —
because all the time, all around, are reminders of the wonder of the
incarnation,
the wondrous truth that God is with us.
As David said, you just have to look up.

I was thinking about all the moments since *last* Christmas Eve
when I've seen God's awesomeness,
all the moments when I've said "that's so cool."
All the moments when I've seen God alive in this world,
Christ with us.

For instance, right after Christmas last year, I took a group to India
just as I will this year.
In a tiny rural village,

at a home for the elderly poor,
I watched as an old woman made her way slowly over to our group,
I watched as our Mo Abrahamson stepped forward and opened her arms,
and the elderly woman melted into Mo's embrace.
And she cried and whispered words that Mo didn't know, but somehow
knew,
and Mo held her tighter.
And there it was: God with us, God present.
It was awesome.
And I was full of wonder.

In July, on the Appalachia Service Project, I visited a home at the top of a
little holler in West Virginia.
Being at the top of the holler means that when the rains come,
and the water comes down the mountain,
yours is the first home to flood.
And Brenda's house was flooded all the time; her foundation rotting out.
But I was there the moment when our crew of teens finished digging the
drainage ditch to end all drainage ditches — after four days of digging.
I was there to see Brenda laughing with delight as they proudly showed her
how they'd dug the slope just right so the waters would rush by her house,
not through it.
I was there as our teenagers crowded around Brenda for selfies with their
shovels,
all of them giggling with joy.
And there it was again:
God's amazing special effects. God with us.
It was awesome. And I was full of wonder.

But the moment this year when I knew, I knew that God was right there,
so much that it took my breath away — that moment was just a week ago.
And not in the movie theater. Right here.

Among the shepherds and sheep and wise men and angels in this year's Christmas pageant

were two very special angels.

Two girls named Ephrata and Bethlehem — yes, Bethlehem.

These two girls and their mother are refugees from Eritrea,

They arrived in Bridgeport last summer,

and who are being mentored, and loved, by a family in this church.

Ephrata and Bethlehem came to Vacation Bible School last summer,

and fell in love with being here.

So now they come to Sunday School, and they sing in the choir

— *and* they volunteered to be in the pageant.

I gave them the roles of Angels number 4 and 5.

And so it was that as our third-grade Shepherds fell to their knees up here, it was Bethlehem the Angel who proclaimed:

This will be a sign for you.

You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.

I had told our shepherds in rehearsal: remember to look amazed!

Remember that you are seeing something awesome!

And in that moment, as they earnestly gazed at the angels,

I knew that they were seeing something awesome,

that we were all seeing something amazing.

We were seeing

a girl from Eritrea by way of a refugee camp

a girl from Eritrea named Bethlehem

proclaiming that God had been born among us

in this old New England church.

And in that moment you knew it to be true.

And the wonder of that moment filled my heart. And always will.

Our God **is** an awesome God,
alive among us in ways that are so cool —
alive among us in moments that take our breath away
and give us hope.
May our eyes be ever open to the wonder of God's love.
Amen.