

Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

1045 Old Academy Road
Fairfield, Connecticut 06824

Telephone: 203-259-5596



Date: December 24, 2017
Sermon Title: Wonder!
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe

Alida and I were very proud of ourselves when we decided two months ago that our Christmas theme this year would be "Wonder." It turns out we are just trendy. *The New York Times* had a story last week about some movies of 2017 about "wonder," beginning, of course, with "Wonder," a great movie about a boy with facial deformities who became a source of wonder.

Then there was "Wonder Woman," a superhero filled with empathy. Then "Professor Marston and the Wonder Women" about the creator of "Wonder Woman." Then, "Wonderstruck" about two deaf children growing up in New York City and finding wonder at every turn, and Woody Allen's "Wonder Wheel," set in the Coney Island amusement park, where New York kids of my generation found wonder aplenty, from Nathan's Famous Hot Dogs to God to death-defying thrills. All of a wonder. So, wonder is now trendy! I'll take it.

I was reading a book review last week; part of it deals with the ongoing conversation among atheists and believers. The author says that part of the problem is that atheists often don't understand the hold that "wonder" has on believers. Wonder, and imagination.

Faith, by its very nature, almost by definition is not very provable. If you're going to be big on faith, heck, if you're going to come to Church on Christmas Eve, you enter the world of wonder and imagination.

In just these 50 minutes together, you're going to hear about Wise Men seeking, shepherds finding, angels singing, a special star shining, a miracle birth, and a miraculous escape. That's enough to make you wonder in both senses of the word: wonder as in, "Whoa, I don't know about *that!*" Or, wonder as in "Whoa, how about *that?*"

And that's before we get to the really good stuff of Jesus's life, death, resurrection, and everything in between; all the teachings and ideas and miracles to make your head spin, to make you wonder, or wonder your whole life.

And of course, if you are a Christian, and you go to Church a lot, you're used to having friends who are a bit skeptical. They sort of wonder about your wonder; they may say things like, "How can you believe stuff like that?" Or, "You don't really believe all that stuff, do you?" And they throw out Adam and Eve, Noah and his ark, Jesus walking on water, or, let's face it, the Christmas story. Sure, Christmas is pretty and fun . . . But there is plenty to wonder about. Childhood is filled with wonder as an explosion of possibilities. Adulthood is more filled with wonder as an explosion of doubts.

When I was a child at PS 90 in Queens, we had a school trip every year to the Hayden Planetarium at the Museum of Natural History. This was at the dawn of the Space Age, and everything there exploded with possibility and left us full of wonder. The best part was the planetarium. They had these big seats that tilted all the way back so you could look up at the light show on the ceiling. Then this wonderful deep voice like the voice of God would point out the Milky Way, Sagittarius, the Big Dipper, Orion. Remember, this was before any of the "Star Wars" movies, so this was the biggest cosmic show there was!

And then . . . and then, with a voice full of sacred wonder, he would show us the Christmas Star, the Star of Bethlehem, and explain how, just at Jesus's time, three planets came together to form a star that wandered from east to west! Wow! Everything we were hearing about in our little Sunday School in our little Church on 104th St. and 89th Ave., just up from the subway—it was all true! It all seemed well, wonderful. Wonder-ful.

Then, I grew up. Years later, I led a large group of volunteers on a three-week Habitat for Humanity work camp to the mountains of Peru. We flew halfway up, then took a long train ride higher and higher, so high the conductor came through the train with oxygen tanks to give everybody a boost. When the train stopped, the vans took us even higher, as far as we could go, to the worksite.

By then, it was night. Total night. No electricity anywhere. I gathered the group together. I had 35 people to care for, rooms to assign, work orders for the next day, rules to bark out, plus important spiritual declarations to make. In a gruff voice, heavy with responsibility, I made my pronouncements: "You are here to serve. You are here to build houses with the poor. This is not vacation. Work hard. You represent Christ. Rah, rah, rah," that sort of thing.

My children were there. They kept interrupting me, tugging at my elbow, trying to get my attention while I droned on and on and on. Finally I asked my kids, with exasperation, "What is it?" They said, "Dad, look up." I looked up . . . an ocean of stars so close—we were at 12,000 feet—stars so close you knew you could reach up and touch them; heaven so close it wasn't above us—we were *in* it!

Our own private Hayden Planetarium, right there; all of God's glory, right there; the universe at our fingertips, right there. Wonder, wonder, right there.

But I was too busy being a responsible adult. I was too busy being busy. I was too busy with my leadership responsibilities, with my preacher responsibilities, with my work crew responsibilities, too busy to see wonder all around me. Until my kids said, "Dad, look up!"

Yes, the theme of this year's Christmas Eve service, "Wonder," is inspired by the movie "Wonder." A few years ago it was the "One Book, One Town" choice. And the movie is amazing. You probably know the story. A boy is born with massive craniofacial deformities, and after 26 surgeries he has a face that is still closer to Frankenstein's than to George Clooney's. He's home-schooled until fifth grade, and the movie opens as a stoic little boy, with an astronaut's helmet over his head to hide his face, walks toward school for his first day in public. The rest of the movie explores all the dimensions of wonder: what makes wonder, what is wonder, how to be wonderful. How to look up. How to look deep. How to look past. How to see the wonder that's really there.

I'm not here to convince you of anything you can't convince yourself of. In this Church we are a place of wonder. Tonight, we tell of Wise Men who looked up, saw an unusual star, followed it to Bethlehem; we tell of shepherds who looked up, heard angels sing of peace on earth and followed their words into Bethlehem. Why didn't everyone in Bethlehem see the angels? Why didn't everyone in the Middle East follow the star? My guess is most people were like me in Peru—too busy to look up . . . and wonder. Tonight, we look up.

Please join me in singing our Christmas joy, Hymn No. 143, "Joy to the World"

*Joy to the world, the Lord is come!
Let earth receive her King;
let every heart prepare him room,
and heaven and nature sing,
and heaven and nature sing,
and heaven, and heaven and nature sing.*

*Joy to the world, the Savior reigns!
Let all their songs employ;
while fields and floods, rocks, hills and plains
Repeat the sounding joy,
repeat the sounding joy,
repeat, repeat the sounding joy.*

*He rules the world with truth and grace,
and makes the nations prove
the glories of his righteousness
and wonders of his love,
and wonders of his love,
and wonders, wonders of his love.*