

The Geography of Awe: The Fields
Luke 2:8-20
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Rick Jensen
First Christian Church
Third Sunday in Advent

Don't you find it just a bit odd that the title of this sermon in this series "The Geography of Christmas" speaks of "awe" and "fields" in the same breath? Really: Is anything *less* awe-inspiring than a drive across one of the Plains States, and seeing mile-after-mile of cornfields? With all due respect to agriculture as the central cause for the rise of great nations,¹ fact is, nobody calls farmland "breathtaking." Sunsets on the Plains maybe! But if you want "awe" go to the mountains. That's where the Bible goes: Mt. Sinai, where Moses receives the 10 commandments or Mt. Zion, where the Temple in Jerusalem was built!

So, why the fields for the geography of awe? Because that's where one of the most awesome events in the Christmas story occurs: "*There were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.*"² Some translations say "afraid, terrified, or astonished," but it's all the same: they were awestruck by the appearance of the angel announcing the birth of the Savior!

And why wouldn't they be? Savior birth announcements were usually reserved for highly elected officials, for rich fat cats, for the folks who live in the penthouse; not to shepherds tending their flocks in the fields by night!

Shoot, shepherds were so despised they were considered liars and not admitted to testify in court.³ What's awe got to do with them?

And yet, isn't it just like God to pick society's outcasts to step to the front of the line? Except for their bravery protecting their flocks, in most respects the shepherds were no more than mere children.

And yet, as Virginia Owens says in her book *And the Trees Clap Their Hands*, we're really put in the world as children to become "spies" and to discern the meaning of things. Children see wonder all around them. But as we get older everything becomes "merely." It is "merely water or merely snow or merely fire or merely colored leaves or merely sand or merely matter. Its connection with the Lord of creation has evaporated. It no longer points to a heaven beyond, saying, 'You think this is something, wait for the other!' It is merely what it is and no more. How sad!"⁴

Then, lacking enough awe and interest in our lives, we fill in the gap with plans. Plans are what we develop on our own when life doesn't turn out as we had hoped. Trouble is: after a while "we have too many plans and not enough dreams."⁵ But God is always offering us miracles and mysteries to break through our carefully crafted plans. So God sends Jonah to Nineveh. God interrupts Moses' shepherding and sends him to Pharaoh. Gabriel interrupts Joseph's smoothly run engagement to Mary with a baby announcement. Shepherds were out in their fields, tending their flocks at

night, when, suddenly the angel appeared and announced, “*Unto you*, out here in the middle of nowhere, God has sent a Savior, Christ the Lord.”

Are we as reluctant as Jonah and Moses and Joseph to participate in the wonderful new things God has dreamed or are we as open as Mary and as eager as shepherds exclaiming, “*Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.*”⁶ Are we open to God’s awesome interruptions?

Maybe we have given up on being awe-struck any more. Perhaps like the preacher Ecclesiastes we have reached the point of saying, “*All is vanity. There’s nothing new under the sun.*”⁷ Perhaps our lives have been reduced to a long list of “merelys.” Or perhaps we’ve bought the myth that science and technology and human and artificial intelligence will tell us everything we ever need to know, because the world is nothing if it can’t be explained. If so, it’s time for us to say to the culture that shaped us,

You’ve taught us a lot and given us much. Thanks for the telephones, the airplanes, heart monitors, TV’s, and computers. But you don’t know everything. And the world you’ve passed on to us—de-populated of angels and often of God—is in a big mess. We’re going to look at things with different eyes—with the eyes of the Bible. We can see realities with those eyes that you can’t see.⁸

You see, Advent is a time not just for awaiting Christ’s coming. It’s also a time of preparing for his coming with contrite hearts. It’s a time for us to admit how foolhardy we were in believing we could master mystery, when,

like the shepherds and Mary we are to learn to be mastered by mystery: including the supreme mystery of all: God's love. Somehow we have to regain that childlike wonder that God can disclose miracles and mysteries right here amongst the fields and plains of our all-too-often-dreary lives.

If I hadn't seen it I wouldn't have believed it. I was 20, driving from Yellowstone to Glacier National Park late one July afternoon along with 4 of my co-workers from the park. The drive across Montana's High Plains up to that point had been uneventful. It was before sunset under an azure, cloudless sky, crossing Montana's ranchland. But up in the sky all by itself floated a fairly small puffy white cumulus cloud. All alone. By itself.

Just as I was about to turn away, I suddenly saw a red streak of lightning flash inside the lonely cloud and turn it red. Once. Twice. At least 3 times. It's as fresh in my mind as yesterday. It was awesome! I often think of that cloud because, even in ministry, it's easy to lose the sense of wonder, the mystery, and the miracles happening all about us all the time.

When Einstein was questioned about his belief in God, the theoretical physicist replied, "The most beautiful emotion we can experience is the mysterious. It is the fundamental emotion that stands at the cradle of all true art and science. He to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer wonder and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead, a snuffed-out candle."⁹

Poet Ann Weems captures our sad indifference to awe in her poem

“Sitting on Hillsides”:

Most of us who gather in Bethlehem on this night
 Are not the star seekers.
 We’ve not traveled our dreams
 month after month and year after year,
 poring over predictions and promises.
 Most of us sit on our hillsides
 tending our sheep,
 business as usual.
 Oh, we’ve heard rumors of stars,
 but we don’t really give ourselves to seeking.
 After all, there’s more than enough to do
 in the daily tending.
 We’re simply not on the lookout for stars,
 nor expecting any light in our darkness.
 I suppose the important thing is,
 in the light of the glory of the Lord,
 to recognize the voice of an angel
 and to get up,
 and to get up,
 and in spite of our sheep
 to go even unto Bethlehem
 to see this thing that has happened.¹⁰

How do we find the awe and wonder that can propel us off our hillsides, in search of the Savior? The prophet Isaiah, in the magnificent prophecy which we read each year in this Advent season gives us a hint when he says, “*A little child shall lead them.*” For at this time of year, it is often children who show us the way to wonder and awe.

A year or two ago, at our children’s Christmas program, it was time for the baby angels to sing. Jo and Angie herded them onto the chancel,

lining them up in front of the stable and the manger. Most of these littlest angels were busy tugging at their halos or waving at their parents, but Caroline was totally engrossed with the stable. Turning her back on the congregation, she studied it carefully, then turned around to exclaim, with all the joy of Christmas in her voice, “Look, Mama, its Baby Jesus!”

. We laughed; but not at her. We laughed at ourselves, because we wondered in that moment of her innocent exclamation how we could have ever doubted the message that had come to shepherds and has also come to us: “*Unto you—unto us—is born this day a Savior, which is Christ the Lord.*”

¹This is the major theme in Jared Diamond’s Pulitzer Prize winning book, *Guns, Germs, and Steel: the Fates of Human Societies*, NY: Norton Books, 1999.

²Luke 2:8-9 (NRSV)

³Lowell D. Streiker, Commentary for December 25, *Biblical Preaching Journal—Fall 1994*, p. 37

⁴John Killinger, “Recovering Wonder,” *Pulpit Digest*, Nov-Dec 1991, pp. 10-11.

⁵Martin B. Copenhaver, “Living the Interruptions,” *PD*, Nov-Dec 1999, pp. 18-20

⁶Luke 2:15

⁷Ecclesiastes 1:2, 14

⁸“Angels,” from a compendium of sermons.

⁹Walter Isaacson, “Einstein and Faith,” *Time*, 4-5-07, found in *PreachingToday.com*, keyword: *Glory of God*.

¹⁰*Kneeling in Bethlehem*, Westminster: John Knox Press, 1980, p. 57