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Having admired the beauty of two Christmas songs, one sung by the old priest Zechariah and the other sung by Mary, today we shall admire the “choir of angels”. In keeping with our Prime Minister’s love of alliterations¹, a Heaven-dispatched jubilant, exuberant and buoyant signing-group, sent to announce to a group of startled shepherds, the good news that the Son of God had been delivered safely, and was peacefully resting in a manger in Bethlehem.

One of the reporters covering the launch of Apollo 17, the final Apollo mission (7 December, 1972), was Jack Needleman, who describes the flash of an extraordinary orange light, which was just at the limit of what one can bear to look at, that blinded everyone present, as the Atlas rocket rose slowly against the dark night. It took seconds for the sound to cross the distance and wash over the reporters with a thunder that rattled their bones. Needleman said, *"You could practically hear jaws dropping."*

As the rocket continued its journey and vanished into the edge of earth’s atmosphere and towards the depth of space, Needleman said, *silence ensued among the press corps. The wisecracks died out. Mens' eyes were filled with light, their mouths wide open, and their faces lit by the inner glow of sheer wonder.*

The group of seasoned reporters got up very quietly, offering to help one another. They were kind and reverent. When they did speak, it was in hushed, muted tones, fearful of spoiling the moment. Awe and wonder had done its work.²

¹ Our elected Prime Minister has ushered in a new age of alliterations, which started with a mild, “*A new dawn rises on a new day and a new government*”, and went on to, “*we broke the deadlock, we ended the gridlock, we smashed the roadblock*”; and ended with, “*Let's get Brexit done. But first, my friends, let's get breakfast done*”.

² Ian W. Steier, Linton, North Dakota. Leadership, Vol. 16, no. 3; online at www.preachingtoday.com. See also "Apollo 17" @ <http://en.wikipedia.org>.

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As Hollywood excels in more spectacular on-screen experiences beyond imagination, I fear we are in danger of losing that which is essential in awakening and stimulating our relationship with God, which is, a sense of awe and wonder!

If only we would surrender our quest to obtain answers to every possible question we think can think of, we can allow ourselves to be astonished and jolted by indescribable splendour!

A century ago, the English writer, philosopher and lay theologian G. K. Chesterton wrote, "*The world will never starve for want of wonders, but only for want of wonder.*"³

As we look into the Angels' song this morning, let the Holy Spirit surprise you with awe and wonder of what God has done through the birth of Christ. Let's consider that first Christmas.

I. Awe and wonder of Jesus' birth

... touched Elizabeth and Mary

Appearing to a teenage virgin girl soon to be married, and to an old man who together with his old wife were well beyond their child bearing days, the Angel said: ***God was about to make the impossible, possible:*** the young girl and the old lady would each give birth to miracle sons, who would be connected in a movement that would sweep the globe and change the lives of people, from that time onwards, forever after. Can you see, Elizabeth and Mary, embracing and weeping with joy?⁴

Awe and wonder, a Holy fear, gripped Joseph.

Joseph's life was set for huge reversals and challenges. Receiving news of Mary's pregnancy, Joseph thought and believed what any of us would,

³ GKC's compilation of essays in "Tremendous Trifles"

⁴ Luke 1:39-55

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until the Angel cleared it up for him. He couldn't wait to tell Mary the news!

"Mary! Sit down; there's something I have to tell you." Mary would have replied, "I'm so glad you've come; there's something I have to tell you too!"

They shared their angel stories, marvelling in the work of God Himself. The boy is to be named Jesus, which means "Yahweh will save," "because He will save His people from their sins."

Nervous laughter and fear would have given way, as they were gripped by the sheer awe and wonder of God's plans coming into place. Things that simply cannot be, are!

...Eternity and time intersect at Jesus' Birth.

He who spoke light into existence at Creation, would see with human eyes for the first time. He who sat on the circle of the earth, will be completely dependent upon Mary for His survival. He who sat on Heaven's throne next to His Father, was lying in a cattle feeding trough.

Then the shepherds, whose lives were changed by a song, sung by Heaven's backup choir⁵:

Glory to God in the highest heaven, and peace on earth to people He favours!

Such was the impact of the Angelic ***Gloria***, the shepherds left immediately for Bethlehem to *"see which the Lord has made known to us."* They found Mary, Joseph and the baby just as the angel said they would: lying in a cattle feeding trough. That night, they experienced awe and wonder!

The knowledge and experience of God is not strictly intellectual, nor is it only for the powerful, the educated or the deserving.

⁵ see: Luke 2:8-20

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Shepherds, one of six professions considered ritually unclean, were outcasts of society. Yet God chose them to be the first to know the good news and see it for themselves.

It is possible, familiarity has bred contempt: the Christmas story has become so familiar, it fails to move us any more. So, can we recover, awe and wonder this Christmas?

A. Wonder begins in the presence of God

The shepherds dropped everything and ran to Bethlehem, racing through the streets, ducking into every stable to search for newborns, until they *"found both Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in the cattle feeding trough."* It wasn't the resplendent light, nor the sounds of the angelic choir that struck them. Arriving in the presence of the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords, sight of the Son of God asleep in the hay, awe and wonder crowded out every other emotion.

There is no substitute to getting yourself into God's presence. He is here. Let the glory of His nearness to you, penetrate past your defences, and let Him bathe you with His love.

B. Wonder and Awe are contagious

Something wonderful, is to be shared! You experience it, and you just have to tell somebody else about it. And then they get in on it. You are excited and you spread it! To keep quiet is not possible because wonder is naturally contagious.

That's what happened with the shepherds. *"After seeing [them], they reported the message they were told about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them."* The reason many people do not talk about what God has done for them, is because they do not allow themselves to experience the awe and wonder and majesty of God!

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When you drop your guard and are overwhelmed by the glory of God, it will naturally flow from you, and spread around you.

C. Wonder births (*naturally gives way*) worship

Responding to their encounter with the majesty of Heaven, the shepherds acted in obedience. What did they do? "The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had seen and heard, just as they had been told."⁶ Wonder gave birth to worship. Discovery created delight. Truth had vibrated their bones. Their faith in God changed the core of their life was forever. That first Christmas was a day changed everything.

God still delivers His message to people we consider socially unacceptable, to whom society tells us not to give credence.

The Bible account may have stopped stirring your emotions, but God has not stopped loving you. He wants you to see Him without condition. Open your eyes - see the light. Open your heart - feel the emotions. Open your mind - understand the meaning. Open your ears - Do you hear God speaking? Everything is gloriously topsy-turvy as God breaks into this world and into your life.

Be stunned again with the remarkable truth that God has never left you. He has not given up when you chose to break faith in Him, nor resisting His many invitations. The Psalmist says, we are fearfully and wonderfully made. God loves you too much to let you go, but only you can respond to Him in awe and wonder when you consider His Majesty, and find yourself drawing closer to Him.

AMEN

⁶ Luke 2:20