

Christmas Eve
Church of the Good Shepherd
The Rev. W. Terry Miller
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The Magic of Christmas

"I don't think Christmas is as much fun as it was when I was a kid." That's what I heard someone say the other day. I'm sure what he said was true. The remarkable thing, though, is that the "aging" person who said this to me was 11 years old! My, how quickly the childhood fun of Christmas passes!

Those of us who are little further along in years than this fellow can nevertheless understand his feeling. Christmas—with its visits to Santa and toys under the tree and holiday light displays and renditions of 'Twas the Night before Christmas—seems to be geared towards children. And many of us have memories of childhood Christmases that have stayed with us and warm our hearts even today. I remember as a young child, one of my favorite things was to drive around town to see the neighborhood light displays and I would go to sleep entranced by the soft glow of candles in the window and carols on the radio. Who wouldn't love to go back and experience Christmas as a child again? I saw this longing expressed a few of years ago by a leading mail-order company that put this "poem" on their Christmas shipping boxes: "May you find among the gifts / Spread beneath your tree / The most welcome gift of all / The child you used to be." A greeting card from the same time suggested much the same, "Backward, turn backward, O Time, in your flight / Make me a child again, just for tonight!" And just this past week, I heard on the news the rise of 'kiddults', adults who are buying themselves toys this Christmas.

What is behind this longing to be a child again? It's more than a general desire to recover one's youth, to have our youthful looks and strength restored. It's something more, something especially acute this time of year, at Christmas. What is it?

If I might take a stab at it, what's behind this longing is, at least in part, a desire to regain the sense of wonder and awe we once had as a child. When we were children, Christmas carried a sense of mystery, a sense of something beyond the mundane. There's a kind of magic, a delight, a joy and significance that we don't sense at other times of the year. As grown-ups, we feel that pull again at Christmas. And so we come to church, even if we stay away at other times of the year, come early to listen to the familiar hymns, to enjoy the greenery and bows and candlelight, and to sit for a time and contemplate the mystery. The rest of the year, some 364 days, is spent rushing around, dealing with the pressures of work and family, the stresses of difficult coworkers and clients, and our attention is preoccupied with facts and figures, homework and deadlines, markets and news. There is little room in our everyday for wonder, for mystery. Except at Christmas.

Such was not always the case. The Christian apologist and children's book author, CS Lewis described the Modern Era as an era of "disenchantment," an age when wonder and mystery were replaced by reason and suspicion. He says, that before modernity, "the universe appears packed with will, intelligence, life, and positive qualities; every tree is a nymph and every planet a god. [But] The advance [of science and technology] gradually empties this rich and genial universe,

first of its gods, then of its colors, smells, sounds and tastes, finally of solidity itself, as solidity was originally imagined. ...[And here's the kicker] The same method which has emptied the world now proceeds to empty ourselves. The masters of the method soon announce that we were just as mistaken when we attributed 'souls' or 'selves' or 'minds' to human organisms, as when we attributed dryads to the trees. We, who have personified all other things, turn out to be ourselves mere personifications, projections, our selves, our souls mere fantasy. Man is indeed akin to the gods, that is, he is no less [imaginary] than they...And just as we have been broken of our bad habit of personifying trees, so we must now be broken of our habit of personifying men."

The world Lewis is describing, the world of the Modern Era, is a flat world, a two-dimensional world, a world that is characterized only by what can be seen and touched, measured and quantified, a materialist world, a world without magic. Such a world has no story, no theme, no cast of characters. The grand story, the grand narrative, is gone, replaced by the grand mechanism. Neither God nor humankind has a speaking part. We're just specks of dust, the chance occurrence a random event in cosmic evolution.

It is true that modernity has brought advances in medicine and communication and transportation, to say nothing of increasing the standard of living for countless peoples. Yet, we can also acknowledge that, in doing so, we have emptied the world not only of spirits, but also of spirit, of that quality of life that cannot be analyzed or measured, that cannot be harnessed for energy or sold for profit. That is the effect of the modernist disenchantment of the world, says Lewis, the elimination not only of superstition, but also of soul, the overthrowing of the grand narrative and with it the view of the world as being animated by a force, a power, an intelligence beyond the material realm.

And yet Modernity never really succeeded in conquering the supernatural. Such an effort would be like trying to seal a fire hydrant with your hands—all that happens is that water gets sprayed everywhere. Despite early 20th century predictions that spirituality would retreat as technology and science advanced, quite the opposite proved to be true. The very generation of people that was raised in a technological world of electric cars, gene therapy and smartphones has proved to be one of the most spiritually hungry generations in recent times. In fact, people today use one of the most dazzling of all technological innovations, the Internet, to explore spirituality by visiting a startling array of religious websites. But these spiritual quests end up being like the story of Winnie the Pooh, where Christopher Robin and company go off on an expedition to find the North Pole and, upon finding a long stick, dub it the "north pole," plant it in the ground and declare their endeavor a success.

Like Christopher Robin and company, today's religious seekers are in search of something quite grand but they have a tendency to label the first thing they find as being "it." They are hungry and thirsty for something, so they go to Barnes & Noble, stumble on *The Celestine Prophecy*, or *Eat, Pray, Love* or a book by Eckart Tolle or some other self-help guru. They see that someone has slapped a label of spiritual authority onto this work (someone with a PhD behind their name gave a glowing review), and suddenly they think they've found the secret to life. And six-months later they return for another book, another answer, because the first proved insufficient. Then again, who can blame them? When it comes to spiritual truths, "best seller" and "celebrity endorsed" aren't best qualifiers, if you want something enduring.

If a thoughtful sociologist were to take a fair and honest look at this behavior, at our proclivity towards spirituality and the supernatural, they would have to conclude that there must be something about the supernatural, about magic, that is important to who we are, to our well-being. It's as if we need to see the world as ordered, good and full of intelligence, as if that is how we are "wired." This helps to explain the popularity of the Harry Potter books, and of Disney movies, and Pixar films about animated cars and toys. These movies all speak to our longing for something magical, something beyond the flat, surface world, something exciting, that gives meaning and hope and joy to our otherwise prosaic lives.

The popularity of these movies, and the fact that there are so many of them, so many movies involving magic, points to what CS Lewis observed as one of the chief casualties of the disenchanted world—myth. By myth, Lewis didn't mean some legendary story told with dubious authority, but myth as a grand overarching story, an encompassing narrative, the "plot" if you will. Myth, Lewis said, is best defined not by what it is, but by what it does. Myth evokes awe, wonder, passion, and what's more, pursuit. A culture's myth is the story that animates men and women to have children and raise them in a certain way. It guides them in the present and points them towards the future. For Lewis, a myth answers questions like where we came from, it shapes identity and purpose, it instills hope, pursues justice, and sustains order.

The challenge today is that we have no myth, no grand story that we share, only little stories we make up for ourselves, stories found in books and in film, in philosophies and new religions. Of course, some myths are better than others, some more true than others. Christianity is itself a kind of myth, an overarching narrative, but with one difference, as CS Lewis acknowledged: "The heart of Christianity is a myth which is also a fact. [In Christianity] the old myth of the Dying God, [from pagan mythology] without ceasing to be myth comes down from the heaven of legend and imagination to the earth of history. It happens--at a particular date, in a particular place, followed by definable historical consequences." As we just heard from the gospel of Luke, Jesus, unlike gods from pagan mythology, was born not "once upon a time," but at a certain time, at a certain place, to a certain people. In Bethlehem, to Joseph and Mary during the reign of Caesar Augustus when Cyrenius was governor of Syria. A specific time and place. But by becoming fact, this story does not cease to be myth: *that* is the miracle!

And here we get to the point: As a myth, an overarching narrative, Christianity sees the world as enchanted, as full of magic, a world that is alive, not with dryads and nymphs and a pantheon of deities, but with God himself. You see, by God becoming human at Christmas, God assumed flesh, took it on, uniting himself to humanity and to the world at large. God joined himself to matter, imbuing all of creation with life and energy and purpose, with his grace. Now, this doesn't mean that God was absent in the world before Jesus. Only God is now present in a different way, a powerful way. So that now we can look on "nature" and see "God's creation." We can look on a birth and see a miracle. We can look on a helpless babe and see the face of God.

At Christmas, God, in making room for himself, opened creation to a greater depth, to another dimension, restoring and reinvigorating its meaning and purpose. To use churchy language, in becoming human, God *hallowed* matter, made it holy, able to bear the power of God. God took

creation, marred and crusted over by human sin, disenchanting as it was by materialism, and God re-enchanting it, restoring its magic, rekindling its inner light. We are now invited, all of us, to live in this re-enchanting world, a world a-fire with the magic of God's love and grace. For those of you who don't regularly come to church, that is what we are about on Sundays—learning what this means and how we live accordingly in this magic, the grace of God that is alive in the world and that imbues us with life. So if you want to know more about what that means, I invite you to join us on Sundays.

But tonight what I want to get across to you is that it's okay to be excited by the magic of Christmas. Christmas is a magical time, it was a magical event. But the point of Christmas is that, as a result of what happened some 2000 years ago, not only Christmas but all of the year, the whole of life, the full expanse of creation, is alive with magic—not the unicorn and wands kind of magic, but the magic of God, of God's grace at work in the world. Tonight let us rediscover the magic of Christmas—not the impossibly perfect Christmas we associate with our childhood—but the magic of God which stirs our imagination and draws us out of ourselves, magic that draws us deeper into mystery, into the mystery of the myth that became flesh. This magic is something we can wonder and adore and be in awe over, no matter whether we are a child or a grown-up. For the magic of Christmas is for everyone. Thanks be to God!