

Treasuring the Questions
Reflections for Advent 2022
Part 5 - Wonder

Isaiah 40: 12, 26, 11

Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand,
or with the breadth of his hand marked off the heavens?
Who has held the dust of the earth in a basket,
or weighed the mountains on the scales and the hills in a balance?...
Lift up your eyes and look to the heavens: who created all these?
He who brings out the starry host one by one,
and calls them each by name.
Because of his great power and mighty strength,
not one of them is missing...
He tends his flock like a shepherd:
he gathers the lambs in his arms
and carries them close to his heart;
he gently leads those that have young.

Wonder: n. A feeling of amazement and admiration,
caused by something beautiful, remarkable or
unfamiliar.

What, if anything, provokes wonder in me?

What does that feel like?

What do I want to do in response to that feeling?

Don't even try to explain...

You might like to read this short piece by the American writer Madeleine L'Engle thoughtfully and prayerfully. Notice anything which resonates with you, or "shimmers" for you, and spend some time with that, pondering.

Notice what happens in you as you ponder. Is there a response which wells up? Is there something you would like to say to God in prayer?

Each galaxy, each star, each living creature, every particle and subatomic particle of creation, we are all children of the Maker. From a subatomic particle with a life span of a few seconds, to a galaxy with a life span of billions of years, to us human creatures somewhere in the middle in size and age, we are made in God's image, male and female, and we are, as Christ promised us, God's children by adoption and grace.

Children of God, made in God's image. How? Genesis gives no explanations, but we do know instinctively that it is not a physical image. God's explanation is to send Jesus, the incarnate One, God enfleshed. Don't try to explain the Incarnation to me! It is further from being explainable than the furthest star in the furthest galaxy. It is love, God's limitless love enfleshing that love into the form of a human being.

Was there a moment, known only to God, when all the stars held their breath, when the galaxies paused in their dance for a fraction of a second, and the Word, who had called it all into being, went with all his love into the womb of a young girl, and the universe started to breathe again, and the ancient harmonies resumed their song, and the angels clapped their hands for joy?

Greater power than we can imagine, abandoned, as the Word knew the powerlessness of the unborn child, still unformed, taking up almost no space in the great ocean of amniotic fluid, unseeing, unhearing, unknowing. Slowly growing, as any human embryo grows, arms and legs and a head, eyes, mouth, nose, slowly swimming into life until the ocean in the womb is no longer large enough, and it is time for birth.

From Madeleine L'Engle, *Bright Evening Star*, Waterbrook Press, 1997.

To see a World in a Grain of Sand
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower,
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour

William Blake

Cherished notions of God

Occasions when we find ourselves shaken are opportunities to reflect on our understanding of God. We are sure to find that we are putting God alongside other things: supreme, beyond imagination, but still, basically, an object that, however transcendently, bears relation to other objects. This is, of course, no God. God is not an object... All we can ever lose is our own projections of God and this loss, painful though it may be at the time, is a blessing. We can no more eliminate the holy Mystery than we can eliminate the horizon. No matter how far we reach, the horizon is there ahead, unconquerable and ever beckoning... The holy Mystery is the unconquerable horizon of our thought, of our aspiration and longing for happiness...

We each have our cherished notions of God. We cannot avoid this. As human beings we must always imagine and express ourselves even to ourselves in symbols: that is, in ideas. Even the most abstract rational idea remains an image. An image is not an idol but can easily become one. We know when it has become one when we cling to it tenaciously, will not let it go even when, perforce, it is shattered before our eyes. Our part in our striving to know and love God is to purify as much as possible our image of God. What other way is there for us who believe in Jesus than to be always testing our God against his image and being willing to leave our own notion aside to embrace him?...

My long exposure to the gospels has brought me to the point where I perceive one message and one message only, namely, that God, Jesus's God, is total, unconditional, love.

From Ruth Burrows, *Living in Mystery*, Sheed & Ward, 1996.

A Journey of Discovery

To be aware that we have a distorted notion of God is to have made progress on our journey towards him. As the journey continues, we shall discover other distortions of which we were not aware. Such discoveries can be very painful at first, but it is pain we feel when our limbs are at last free after being constricted; it is the pain of freedom. The journey to God is a journey of discovery and it is full of surprises.

From Gerard Hughes, *God of Surprises*, Darton, Longman & Todd, 1985

Closer to us than we are to ourselves

God approaches our minds by receding from them. We can never fully know Him if we think of Him as an object of capture, to be fenced in by the enclosure of our own ideas...

He is closer to us than we are to ourselves, although we do not see him. Whoever seeks to catch Him and hold Him loses Him. He is like the wind that blows where it pleases. You who love Him must love Him as arriving from where you do not know and going where you do not know...

Only those people are never separated from the Lord who never question His right to separate Himself from them. They never lose Him because they always realise they never deserve to find Him, and that in spite of their unworthiness they have already found Him.

For He has first found them, and will not let them go.

From Thomas Merton, *No Man Is an Island*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983.

Reflections at Christmas

It is often in the secular thoughts that preoccupy us at Christmas that the holy element comes close to us. This is simply because wherever we are open in our humanity the mystery of God is present among us...

Every one of us carries with us something that is very carefully protected from the strains and stresses of everyday life. In these times of silence that occur especially at Christmas, we recall moments during which we experienced life very intensely, times of suffering, great happiness, tender love, shy friendship or unfulfilled longing. A human face, a habitual gesture made by a long-lost friend, a colour, the shape of a countryside well known in the past — these we remember, sometimes with astonishing clarity. We like to keep such memories with us, dwell on them lovingly. At such times we realise that our lives contain certain unique elements, experiences of special grace and power, and that even insights that we had forgotten long ago can come to light and appear totally convincing again.

From Ladislav Boros, 'Feast of Silence', *Meditations*, trans David Smith, Search Press, 1973

Advent Calendar

He will come like last leaf's fall.
One night when the November wind
has flayed the trees to bone, and earth
wakes choking on the mould,
the soft shroud's folding.

He will come like frost.
One morning when the shrinking earth
opens on mist, to find itself
arrested in the net
of alien, sword-set beauty.

He will come like dark.
One evening when the bursting red
December sun draws up the sheet
and penny-masks its eye to yield
the star-snowed fields of sky.

He will come, will come,
will come like crying in the night,
like blood, like breaking,
as the earth writhes to toss him free.
He will come like child.

Rowan Williams

Treasuring and Pondering (again)

You might like to spend a little time this week looking back on this Advent Retreat. Don't try to remember everything, just sit quietly and see what drifts to the surface of the mind.

Are there moments to ponder? Or even to treasure?
Who is the God who is revealing themselves at that moment?
Is there an invitation for me?

A PAGE TO PONDER

“The world is full of magic things
patiently waiting for our senses to grow sharper.”

W. B. Yeats

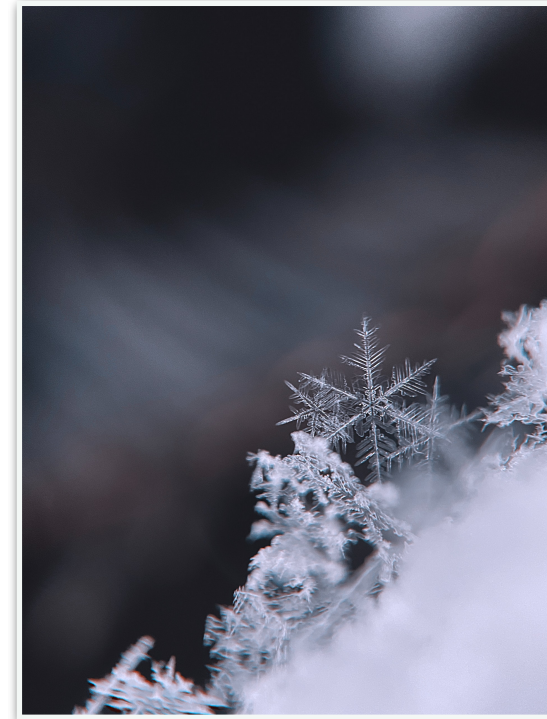


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Where do I see things that fill me with wonder?
How do I become more able to notice them?