

Micah 5:1-4a  
Psalm 80: 2-3; 15-16; 18-19 *R: O God, Return to us.*  
Hebrews 10:15-18  
Luke 2:1-20

## **Wonder and Ecstasy**

### **December 24, 2006 Christmas Eve**

Jane Via

Over the past 3 weeks, we have engaged in Advent work. We have waited, as does a pregnant woman in whom new life is growing. We sought new life within ourselves. We watched, too, looked in on ourselves, paid attention to our longing for God/de and the need for community. We visited. Many of us also witnessed to Advent and the coming celebration of God's life in humanity, some by seeking reconciliation, with ourselves, with our God and with those from whom we might be estranged. And now we arrive at the time of wonder. We set aside, for a few days, for the season of Christmas, the harsh realities of life and the demands of the gospel to let joy seep deep into our hearts and souls. For that to be possible, we must step temporarily out of time and space into an inner space nurtured by wonder and sprinkled with ecstasy.

Wonder refers to a state of astonishment or admiration, or the experience of exciting, amazed admiration. It can also refer to rapt attention or astonishment at something awesomely mysterious.

Ecstasy is a related, but different, experience. I'm not thinking of ecstasy in the sense that our modern, western, materialistic, consumer culture typically describes it, as sexual experience for instance, or an illegal substance; one that is, in fact, quite dangerous. Rather I'm thinking of the millennia of human experience that preceded the modern era in which ecstasy was, most often, a religious experience.

I had a wonderful discussion about ecstasy over dinner last Sunday night after Mass, with Kathleen Dugan, who is a professor of theology at the University of San Diego. She described ecstasy as "the uplifting without motion, the uplifting of the human spirit with joy." She described the "lifting of the self out of the mundane to communion with God/de", "the diffusion of self into the joy of the divine universe."

Although the word ecstasy appears only four times in the Jesus Scriptures, its meaning is related to the biblical concept of "glory", a word used to describe the experienced presence of God/de, such as that of the shepherds; that which surrounded the angels as they sang.

The glory of God is a concept that pervades the Hebrew Bible from its earliest to its latest writings. God's glory, when experienced by a human, suspends time and space, inviting the beholder into the diffuse divine spirit.

As we enter the Christmas season, we allow ourselves to step *out* of time, to connect with ancient events, to enter into pure awe and pure joy. The key symbol which evokes wonder and promotes ecstasy is the experience of a human birth, often described as a miracle because we experience human birth as miraculous. At Christmas, we believe, we celebrate and ritually remember the birth of Jesus of Nazareth. In doing so, we open ourselves to ecstasy and to wonder that lingers and lasts after the ecstasy has passed.

To evoke wonder, and possibly even ecstasy, we must explore the richness of the symbols in the story of Jesus' birth. One way to explore the symbols is to imagine what this birth might have been like. As Luke imagined it, Mary and Joseph seem to have been completely alone: no midwives to assist; no family present. They were in a town they did not know, and a strange place, one not particularly desirable for human birthing. The birth came at night. Was there anything to light the darkness except nature's night lights? Had they carried an oil lamp with them? Luke describes Jesus as Mary's first child. The process and pain of birthing was new to her. To indulge ourselves in historicizing the story, we can speculate that Joseph had not previously attended a birth. He may have known little about birthing, been shocked by the pain and the brutal physicality of it, the blood, the mucous. He may have felt uncertain what to do and how to assist Mary. In the circumstances Luke describes, the birth might easily have been a frightening experience for Mary and Joseph. Keeping vigil tonight, we remember not only the birth, but the birthing, the anxious hope as the birth process unfolds.

We know the ending. We know that Jesus was born, healthy, and apparently without complications. So we celebrate his birth, his newly "born-ness". Think about it. The experience of cradling a newborn feels like cradling God/de Godself. We hold a newborn with the same tenderness, delicacy, and amazement with which we hold God/de in our hearts. We look upon a newborn with virtual adoration,

stunned by the miracle of human life. We smell their sweet newness. We are compelled by some mysterious force from within to touch our lips to the newborn's head, hands or feet, tasting a bit of heaven. As we contemplate the newborn Jesus, we are invited to enter the diffusion of divine joy.

Indeed, it is inherently perfect to usher in the season of wonder with the image of a newborn child. It's why the angels say to the shepherds,

"I come to proclaim good news to you—news of a great joy to be shared by the whole people. Today in David's city, a savior—the Messiah—has been born to you. *Let this be a sign to you: you'll find an infant wrapped in a simple cloth, lying in a manger.*"

Jesus' birth IS a sign to us, too, two millennia later: A sign of God's love for humanity and all creation; a sign of God's commitment to us; a sign of the miraculous presence of God in the adult this baby will become, but also in and among us.

In liturgy, there is the possibility for ecstasy and wonder. The combination of ritual movement with sacred words, the stimulation of our senses by the incense, the colors, the touch of one another, the taste of bread and wine, the holiness of invoking the memory of this ancient birth, believing God/de enters into human experience, can combine to lift us out of the mundane into the joy of the divine universe.

As we worship tonight, I invite you to allow our ritual of remembrance to evoke the experience of ecstasy, so that throughout the extended Christmas season, you might experience, intermittently, the rapt astonishment of something awesomely mysterious, which we call wonder, as you carry the memory of the ecstasy in your heart. My wish for you is that this Christmas liturgy be a gift from God/de to you, in which ecstasy and wonder are wrapped with love, enough to sustain you the whole year through.