

“After the Amazement”
Luke 2:8-20

“And all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them.”

With those words, Luke begins to tell of reactions to news brought by the first visitors to the manger. Shepherds had been engaged in their ordinary work of keeping watch over the flock one evening when an angel appeared and God’s glory illuminated the sky. “Do not be afraid,” he says “for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people... This will be a sign for you,” the messenger continues “you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” Heavenly hosts briefly fill the sky and then everything goes dark and silent again. The shepherds decide to investigate what they have heard and having only the clue of bands of cloth and a child in an animal’s feeding trough, set out. Soon, they find the family. It is then that Luke says “When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them.”

Despite the countless times that I have read or heard or preached about those events, I had never paid much attention to the response to the first human messengers. “All who heard it were amazed,” Luke says, a reaction we would expect. The news those shepherds brought and the account of how they had learned of that birth would naturally cause persons to stop and scratch their head. Yet it wasn’t the response itself that got my attention, but the audience.

“*All* who heard it were amazed,” Luke says, but gives us no idea of whom he is speaking. Had the extended family of Mary and Joseph arrived to meet the little one? Had the new parents found shelter inside a home and their hosts were present when the shepherds appeared? Had friends also in town due to the census dropped by with the first-century equivalent of a casserole? We aren’t told, but what is implied as events proceed is that the impact of their news faded. The shepherds return home “glorifying and praising God,” but are never mentioned again. None of the unidentified ones at the manger are ever heard from either; not in the moment itself or years later. Instead, as far as the Bible tells us, the amazement of that night faded away.

That seems likely because of what we know about human behavior. When first married, we can be amazed the other one actually chose us, but with time can take that gift for granted. When we use some new technology for the first time, we can be amazed by how much easier it makes our life, but can soon start longing for the next upgrade. We can travel to places with scenic beauty that amazes us, while the locals barely notice. In all kinds of ways amazement fades, and while that is only natural, it doesn’t hide the fact that when it occurs something is lost.

As a young boy, one of my favorite things to do was to look through my father's collection of old coins and bills. He kept them in a green metal box on a shelf in his closet and on rainy days I would pull it down and pour over them again. I liked all of the old money, which included an authentic bill from the Confederate States of America, but spent most of my time looking at his Liberty Head silver dollars. I was fascinated by coins that were so much heavier than any in circulation in the 1960s and, in particular, by dollars dating back to the 1800s.

Each Christmas, those old silver dollars would appear in small boxes under the tree with one for each of the five children. There was never a name on the tag identifying the giver, but each year when we unwrapped the coins a familiar ritual would follow. As my father would first express his amazed delight over the generosity of our anonymous gift-giver and then would say "Let me give you a dollar bill for that heavy old thing"--and we would do it. We were very trusting children! For years, we agreed to that trade until one of us learned the coin was worth much more than a single dollar. So the next Christmas, when he offered to swap us folding

money for the cold, hard cash, each of his five children said "I'll keep the coin." To no surprise, that was the last Christmas any of those silver dollars appeared under the tree!

The end of amazement carries a cost and as far as Luke tells that was true of the first Christmas, too, as the incredible power of those events seemed to have endured for only one participant. For after telling us "that all who heard it were amazed" and before noting that "the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God," Luke offers the response of the child's mother. "But Mary treasured all these words," he says "and pondered them in her heart." She continued to reflect on all that she had seen and heard; a choice that is available to each one of us as well.

For what will we do after this night, after remembering again God's creative work that culminated in Bethlehem, after sharing in a meal begun by one who spent his first night in a manger and his last one in a garden, after lighting candles and singing of a night that was silent and holy, calm and bright? Will we respond as did the shepherds and the unidentified "all" who heard their news, returning home unchanged by those events that altered human history? Or will we take a different road, the path begun by the child's mother of pondering all that God did and has done since; allowing the tracings of that gift to linger on within us?

A pastor named Josh opened a staff meeting in Chicago with these words: "You won't believe this. Jesus fell off my car on I-80 yesterday. It was a bad tumble at 70 miles an hour. Fatal injuries." With that start, *Christian Century* publisher Peter Marty continued with the story of his own Pastor Josh. "It took a moment," Marty went on "for the rest of us to figure out he was talking about the bobblehead Jesus that some prankster had stuck on his Toyota a few months earlier. That little white plastic Jesus with a red tunic, spring-loaded neck, and hands upraised as if to send the wind gliding over the car, was the perfect hood ornament."

"With Jesus on my car," Josh explained "I followed every rule of the road. Kept within the speed limit. Made complete stops. He was my conscience. My compass. I always had an eye on him." Then it happened. Despite surviving rain, sleet, and snow, [the bobblehead] Jesus was no match for a massive gust of wind from a passing tractor trailer. One quick bounce off [the] windshield and he vanished, crushed beneath the weight of an SUV. [Marty] asked Josh if he missed having Jesus on the hood. "Yeah, I actually do. But part of him is still there. There's some residue I can't get off without damaging the car paint. It's glue of some kind."

"His comment sent me on a mental expedition," Marty continues "pondering all variety of residue and tracings Jesus seems to leave behind." He recalled, as a child, snuggling up to his mother at church on Christmas Eve and the smell of wine as she returned to the pew after sharing in communion. He told of a dried-out palm branch framed on a friend's living room wall; the frond having been held in church five days before her husband's fatal heart attack. He spoke of a chaplain who would regularly visit the mother of an adult daughter. The daughter always insisted the chaplain bring scented anointing oil to apply to gauze pads for her mother. "The fragrance of the oil was as important to this mother-daughter team as were the prayers" he said. "When the... fragrance wore off after a day or two, [the chaplain] was summoned back to apply more grace."

Marty then concludes "Sometimes the left-behind tracings of Christ, the residue of his work in the world, is what keeps our faith sustained over time. How strange but true; holiness may be as close as a dab of hardened epoxy on the family car, or a moistened gauze pad resting on your arm." (Marty, Peter W. "From the publisher" in *Christian Century*, 12/19/18, p. 3)

"All who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them," Luke says "but Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart." May we follow her pattern on this night and in all the days to come, allowing the tracings of his life to live on and guide us, too.