

**Double Rainbow Happiness**  
**The Gift of Wonder**  
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**January 2, 2011**  
**United Church of Gainesville**

Let me say it before you do: “What is that guy on?” This was the most popular response I got from those whom I told I was planning to show the Double Rainbow video as an illustration for our series on “The Gift of Wonder.” It will say something about my naïveté that I did not even think of this until someone else brought it up, but I did Google it, and Paul Vasquez, the man from the video, said on Good Morning America that he was “just on pure rainbow power.” The veracity of that statement notwithstanding, the reaction of my family and friends made me consider what it might mean for us, living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, to receive a “gift of wonder” and specifically, on this second Sunday of Christmas, what it might mean to experience Jesus as that gift.

Whatever else we might say about the “Double Rainbow” video, it shows a man overwhelmed with wonder; a man broken open by beauty, by gift, by grace, who can only repeat, “Oh God;” and who asks “What does this mean?” through his tears. It makes me laugh every time, but the first few times it also gave me chills, hearing someone in the throes of true power, true wonder. There is something potent and even fearful for me in this video. Vasquez is overwhelmed, overcome, mastered even, and I wonder whether some part of my laughter isn’t a nervous recognition at hearing someone in such a state, someone so vulnerable, so literally out of control; a recognition of the danger of this moment, the danger of wonder.

That danger, I believe, is why we as human beings seem programmed to seek control, to seek understanding. Like elements in a chemical reaction, we fall quickly into the most stable form possible. And when we receive that stability, that understanding, wonder comes to a close, we no longer need wonder. We study; we classify; we label, and we dismiss. This is an ancient habit. In the creation story of Genesis 2, every animal is brought to Adam, and he names them. We learn early on in science class, how, given any living thing, we can assign it to a kingdom, phylum, class, order, family, genus, and finally species, pinpointing its exact place in creation. We can stuff it, or pin it to a board and put it in a drawer. We can name it, and so cease to wonder about it. It is telling that in that taxonomy of our own creation, we have named ourselves, “Homo sapiens,” or “knowing man.” It is a point of pride that we are the ones who know, who understand, who need not wonder.

Yet, there are places and times when we do enjoy wondering. Having just celebrated Christmas, you can probably call up a few moments of wonder from the past week. As a kid, sitting under the Christmas tree and wondering was a particular pleasure, imagining the potential contents of each package, visualizing myself unwrapping any number of hoped for items. But this wonder too was mixed with a desire to know, and so I weighed each gift with my hands, noted its shape, and, when parents were not around, gave it a little shake. As my sisters and I got better at the guessing game, small things were placed in oversized boxes. Gifts were taped in unshakeable positions, and various other tricks were employed to keep up the mystery, to keep us wondering. And this was for our own good, because the most disappointing

feeling was when I was able to figure out what was in a package. That knowledge was the end of possibility, and somehow I knew that I had lost something. The mystery beneath the tree, that wonder-inducing enigma was suddenly simply an object covered with paper. That's why for me it is a rare Christmas in which the joy of opening presents can match the joy of wondering about them.

We both enjoy, and yet, seek to foreclose on the wonder we experience, to riddle out the gift, even if we wish we wouldn't have; to explain away the intense reaction to a double rainbow, even if it deprives us of some of its joy. Faced with the danger of wonder, its power and fear, it can be tempting to seek a premature resolution to the questions it raises. Nowhere is this more true than in the gift of wonder to which our worship theme points: the gift of Jesus. Even those who may readily wonder about other things often know just what they think about Jesus. And this is nothing new. Even before his birth, in those passages from Isaiah and the gospels which we read throughout Advent, the people who await Jesus have certain names and expectations for this gift. They call him "King," "Messiah," "Son of David," each name freighted with anticipated characteristics, each role complete with a box in which the hoped for gift will fit. The people waiting through that first Advent were not waiting for a gift of wonder to transform the world but were hoping instead for a Jesus-in-a-box.

But Jesus, I believe, does come as a gift of wonder, not quite in the same way as those wrapped gifts which inspire holiday guessing games. The wonder of Jesus is a little more like a present Rachelle received from my parents a few years ago, a present which she unwrapped and said, "O! Thank you. What is it?" What she found when she unwrapped her present was this: <Show pan.> Any guesses? Did I hear Aebleskiver pan? Yes. This pan is used for the traditional Danish Advent treat, the aebleskiver, a kind of spherical pancake. They are tasty, and they have become part of our Christmas tradition, but at the moment of its unveiling, none of us had ever seen or even heard of an aebleskiver.

Jesus is a little like that aebleskiver pan. When he finally arrives on Christmas he is not quite what anyone expected. Those who receive the gift of Jesus in the Bible are frequently described as amazed. Consider Mary and Joseph bringing Jesus for his bris. They have certain assumptions about their baby, when Simeon snatches their baby and declares, "This child is destined for the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed, so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed." That must have caused them to wonder a bit.

The same pattern recurs in the next chapter when Mary and Joseph lose the young boy Jesus in Jerusalem and find him finally in the Temple, where a crowd is gathered around him, amazed at his understanding of the scriptures. And again in a couple chapters, when Jesus delivers his first sermon, in his hometown, the crowd initially welcomes him as the "son of Joseph," but after he speaks, they are ready to throw him off a cliff. Over and over again, the people around Jesus attempt to define him, to label him, to name him, and each time, Jesus amazes and often upsets.

And it seems to me that the same is true now. More often than not, those who receive Jesus, whether in faith or in scorn, or somewhere in between, receive something like that Jesus-in-a-box rather than that more complicated gift of wonder. There are many who claim to understand Jesus, to be able to tell us exactly what kind

of gift he is. They name him “savior” or “fraud,” “Son of God” or “figment of the imagination,” each name an attempt to tame that gift, that wonder.

Preachers, I think, are especially guilty of this tendency to try and tame Jesus. I remember once, a guest preacher was delivering a sermon on Mary and Martha, how Mary sat at Jesus’ feet while Martha cleaned and played the hostess. The preacher really got me going, got me wondering as he described the way Jesus revalued things for that family, and how he perhaps revalued things for me. I was amazed at what his words might mean for the intense sense of responsibility I carried around my neck. Might Jesus be calling me, like Martha, to choose a better way, to value relationship over responsibility and doing what is proper? Then in the final paragraph of the sermon, the preacher began, “Of course, cleaning your house is important,” and the spell was broken. Suddenly, I realized that this Jesus was not calling me to radically reorder my values, he just wanted me to relax a little, to be a little less anxious: nothing so wonderful, not much more than anyone else might ask. And the world is filled with such Jesuses: small Jesuses, boring Jesuses, Jesuses in boxes. Yet if we can learn anything from the reaction of Simeon and Anna, of all those who meet Jesus, it is that he is nothing boring, nothing small, nothing mundane, and the best sermons I’ve experienced were not those which told me who Jesus was but rather made me wonder, like our video, what Jesus means.

I too have vacillated between accepting the gift of wonder in Jesus, and trying to figure him out or narrow him down. Over the years, I have called Jesus friend, enemy, teacher, and God, yet like guessing at my presents, each of these definitions came with a sense of loss, the sense that I had foreclosed on possibility, that I had stopped wondering. Yet with Jesus, that loss of wonder seems an even more serious error than with my Christmas presents. In guessing at Jesus, in believing that I could name and label that gift, I robbed Jesus of part of his true nature, which is wonder, which is surprise, which is challenge and opposition to what is assumed and what is taken for granted. Both then and now, what is expected of Jesus is resolution: that he will restore Israel, that he will smite my enemies, that he will uphold my prejudices or grant my wishes. But what is received is movement, change, a rising and falling. It is not simply that he is unexpected, or that, when opened we are not sure what kind of gift he is. Rather, it is that Jesus is unwrappable; he does not fit in any box or bag, is not described by any shape or size. As the gift of wonder Jesus is fluid, a force more than an object, that force which bowls us over with simultaneous laughter and tears making us ask “what does this mean,” a force which both challenges and comforts us to our cores.

At least, that is what I’ve found. In reflecting on this “gift of wonder” I realized that the times I have been closest to receiving that gift were not those in which I had Jesus named and understood, but those moments when I was tripped up in my certainty, when I received Jesus as a sign of opposition to my assumptions, to my status quo. They were moments when I heard my own words of anger or exclusion echo back to me and knew, for the first time, that they were wrong; moments when I felt called to speak out against injustice even in socially awkward situations; moments when I heard the words of a parable speaking directly to my life, and breaking me open like that double rainbow. In these moments I have known that the Jesus I had wrapped and ready to

open was infinitely less than the baby presented to Anna and Simeon, than the gift of Emmanuel, God with us. It is that Jesus I hope to open again this year.

Last winter, on a trip to Paynes Prairie, (where all my sermons seem to end) Rachelle and I saw the bison for the first time. They were down by the visitor's center, and Rachelle ran in excitedly to tell the people inside to come out. The only people there were an older couple whom she approached merely breathless and beckoned them outside. "What is it?" the woman asked, and when Rachelle told her she said, "We're from Wyoming; we've seen bison."

It is easy to become jaded, to walk by amazing things every day, to understand the world too well and label it too quickly. This is what makes wonder a gift. It is a force capable of transforming everything else, a gift which makes all things new. Yet wonder is not only a gift for us, but a gift which the world deeply needs us to receive. For when we cease to wonder, not only do we miss the good things, the double rainbows, and the aebleskiver pans. But when we cease to wonder, we also miss the places in need of the transformation that such wonder brings.

When we cease to wonder why some people do not have enough to eat, when we allow it to become common place and give it names like "hunger" or "poverty," which seem to explain it, we can forget our duty and our ability to feed them. When we cease to wonder about the warehousing of human life in our prison system, when we name people "convict" or "criminal," we can forget our duty and our ability to love them. When we cease to wonder at Jesus, when we receive instead, a tiny Jesus-in-a-box, we deprive ourselves and the world of the surprising gift which has always left those who were open to it amazed into new life.