

We have all seen the rapt wonder in the eyes of children on a Christmas morning as their gaze dances across the lights, the tinsel, and the gifts under the tree. But the real marvel is not the wonder in their eyes on Christmas morning, is it? It is the wonder in their eyes just any old day when they see a dog or a cat they have seen and petted and talked to a dozen times before, and seeing this family pet, they look upon it as though for the first time and see as if it were the strangest and most wondrous creature ever to emerge from the pages of mythology. We have observed the same experience when a child's gaze falls on a perfectly ordinary twig in the yard. Picking it up, they toddle toward you, holding the twig, bringing it to you. They place it in your hand as though to say, "Look what I have discovered. It's a miracle, a tiny, bark-encrusted miracle. Have you ever seen anything so amazing?"

The wonder is that children find wonder in everything, absolutely everything. Children are enchanting because their world is enchanted.

Scholars have long noted the "disenchantment" of the world around us. Some have chalked it up to the Enlightenment, to modernity, or post-modernity, or post-post-modernity. There is surely some truth in all their theories, though I am inclined to chalk up our "disenchantment" of the world to a tendency that humanity has had for a long, long time, the tendency not to notice.

Surely, our tendency not to notice could be tied to the assumptions we have carried around since the dawn of the age of science, assumptions that strain-out whole categories of experience from our observations, reducing the most amazing displays of the world around us to dry calculations. And, certainly, the fact that we have become acquainted with the rule of secondary causation has had some effect on our tendency to attribute everything that happens to God. But I suspect that some of the disenchantment of our world is simply because, as someone has said, as we grow older we grow calluses on our souls. Our touch grows less sensitive. We stop noticing just how utterly astonishing the world is.

I suspect that one reason, long after we achieve adulthood, we find ourselves drawn to tales of wonder—whether in the form of complex cinematic worlds peopled with science-fiction avatars or in the myths, fairy tales, and stories from C. S. Lewis, George MacDonald, and J.R.R. Tolkien we read to our children, our grandchildren, nieces, and nephews—is because we hunger to notice the world again in all its enchantment.

Of all the amazing scenes of the Christmas story, the one that never fails to amaze me is that of the shepherds who found their way to the manger, and who noticed something miraculous there. Having grown up on a farm, I can say with some authority that most farmers and ranchers are pretty unsentimental people, not given to flights of fancy. They don't go searching for elves under cabbage leaves, or wherever elves are supposed to dwell. Shepherds lived with both feet planted on the ground. But that didn't stop them from finding enchantment in a manger.

Undoubtedly lots of other people passed by the vicinity of the barn where Jesus was born and never noticed what the Creator of the Universe was up to inside. But, thanks to the intercession

of angels, a group of shepherds noticed that God had become flesh and blood, and was curled-up next to a young woman, his mother, on a bale of hay. They noticed—and wonder attended.

Especially at Christmas, I love to watch the old film, “Harvey,” starring Jimmy Stewart. It is not a “Christmas movie.” It is a sort of comedy of errors, really, based on a Pulitzer Prize winning play by Mary Chase. Even more, it is a comedy of attentiveness, reminding us of presences unnoticed, of a world wrought with wonders through which we pass yawning.

One of my favorite scenes in the movie occurs when Dr. Chumley, the head of a psychiatric hospital, speaks with Elwood P. Dodd, our young hero (played by Jimmy Stewart) who is in the process of being committed to Dr. Chumley’s asylum because he sees Harvey, a pooka, a six foot tall rabbit. Dr. Chumley’s problem—and the reason he is speaking to Elwood in this scene—is that he has begun to see Harvey too. Dr. Chumley, whose scientific world has unexpectedly crashed on the rocks of Celtic mythology in the person of Harvey, asks Elwood to tell him all about Harvey. As Elwood talks, the doctor grows even more enraptured. Elwood could talk for hours about Harvey, about how they met at the corner of 18th Street and Fairfax, about how Harvey and he have made new friends, and how Harvey has overcome “not only time and space, but any objections.” Finally, the Doctor leaps from his chair and says: “Fly specks! Fly specks! I’ve been spending my life among fly specks while miracles have been leaning on lampposts at 18th and Fairfax.”

Miracles indeed are leaning on lampposts at the corner of 18th and Fairfax, and on countless other street corners. The miracle that lies “away in a manger,” the child “asleep in the hay,” reminds us this is true.

The glory of God is that God is among us whether we notice God or not. And the Christmas story is a neon-lighted, tinsel-bright sign pointing out this fact that is always a fact whether we acknowledge it or not. The Christmas story invites us to be amazed like children enchanted by crystal Christmas balls, twinkling lights, the gifts wrapped in foil paper, and the freckles on the hands of the person by whom the gifts were wrapped. God is not a million miles away, so the story of Christmas reminds us. God is present with us. Enchantment follows when we notice again.

Merry Christmas

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