

Wait, Watch, Wonder - 2011

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Several years ago after searching for liturgical artists, I stumbled upon the glorious and colorful artwork of Christina Saj, who bases her work on Byzantine icons. After exploring her website, www.christinasaj.com, I fell in love with her art and her medium. I called her and arranged for Central Presbyterian Church to host an exhibit of her iconography in our Tull Hall Art Gallery.

Over the history of the Christian church, iconography has been at times controversial. Beginning as early as the fourth century, the eastern church, centered in Constantinople, incorporated icons into their worship spaces, arguing that worshipers venerated not the object, but the person who was visible in and through the image. In the same period, the western church, centered in Rome, rejected icons, but focused on relics, which for many brought the presence of the holy person through their bones or other artifacts. Finally, in the 11th century, this controversy contributed to the division of the church.

By the time of the Reformation and Counter Reformation in the sixteenth century, John Calvin argued that the highest and most direct way to grasp what is God's truth is not through icons, but by attending to the Word of God preached and enacted faithfully in the pulpit and at the table. Only in these ways can God's true majesty be grasped, by a faculty that is "far above the perception of our eyes."¹ At the same time, however, he wrote about the beauty in the natural world, "Let us not be ashamed to take pious delight in the works of God open and manifest in this most beautiful theater."²

By the twentieth century, however, members of the Reformed community in America were developing their own visual culture. Paul Tillich, in particular, gave the visual arts an important place in his theology, as Karl Barth did with music.³ In 1940, the Taizé community in France was formed by Brother Roger and a small group of largely Reformed Christians. During World War II they provided a place of safety for Jews and others fleeing for their lives, but over time it has become an ecumenical center of worship for more than 100,000 youth and adults each year.

From the beginning, icons have been used as a focal point of Taizé's worship. At Central, we have also come to incorporate icons in our monthly Taizé services, and Christina's artwork helped to expand our understanding and appreciation of the medium far beyond what we had yet to experience.

Our worship staff at Central Presbyterian Church in Atlanta, Georgia—which includes our pastor, associate pastor, resident pastor coordinator, three resident pastors, the director of music and fine arts Ministries, the organist, the worship, music, and fine arts assistant, the director of youth ministries, and the director of children's ministries—meets weekly to plan worship. We regularly finalize the upcoming week and work on the next two weeks out. In addition, we have two long-range planning meetings (August and February) in which we read the lectionary texts and discuss the overall themes and worship ideas that might stir our creative imaginations in illuminating the Word through music, preaching, movement, liturgical art, and sensory experiences.

At one of our long-range planning meetings, we were brainstorming our Advent 2012 theme. I mentioned that Christian Saj would be the featured artist in our Art Gallery in the interval beginning in November and running through mid-January, which would encompass the Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany seasons. Once we agreed on the Advent theme of *Wait, Watch, Wonder*, we commissioned Christina to create an original piece of art.

Having settled on the theme, the worship staff began to think creatively about how to shape the liturgy in conversation with this theme. As we moved closer to the Advent Season of 2012, we invited Christina Saj to join us for an Open House Artist's Reception in November. We invited the Introduction to Worship Class at Columbia Theological Seminary to attend the open house and asked Christina to teach a portion of the class. She helped us and the seminary students understand the history of iconography and shared an excellent slide show illustrating the role icons have played in religious faith and formation across the last millennium.

It was this process that informed all of our Advent worship and was the motivation for Gary to preach three sermons, each of which centered on one part of the Advent theme. The sermon on "Wonder" was the closing sermon and follows below.

Notes

1 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, I. xi.12.

2 Ibid., I. xiv.20.

3 William A. Dyrness, *Visual Faith: Art, Theology, and Worship in Dialogue* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 62.

Wonder *Luke 1:26-38*

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Wonder. I find it a word hard to define even though it is often on my tongue. "I-pads and Kindles are each a technological *wonder*." "The child's eyes were filled with *wonder* as she looked at the Christmas tree." "We watched the fireworks on the Fourth with *wonder*." "The disciples stood outside and looked upon the Jerusalem temple in *wonder*."

So what is the best way to define "wonder?" Is it as the dictionary says: "a cause of astonishment" or "the quality of excited amazed admiration" or "rapt attention" or "astonishment at something awesomely mysterious" or is it all of the above?

Sometimes I find it easier to say what a word does not mean. A staple of my elementary school lunches was peanut butter and jelly on "Wonder Bread." I promise you that when I removed that sandwich from its wax paper, there was no "cause of astonishment" or "amazed admiration" or anything "awesomely mysterious" about the plain, boring, white bread smothered with peanut butter and jelly. It may have been good marketing, but "Wonder Bread" derailed a really fine word for me for a long time.

In my experience, when it comes to defining "wonder," a dictionary is of limited use. When I have stumbled upon wonder, or wonder has stumbled upon me, it has