

## “Rebirth of Wonder”

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Isaiah 9:2-7 + Luke 2:1-14 = Wonder

When I was in middle school, my home congregation was led by the Senior Highs in the annual Youth Sunday. Previous Youth Sundays had been rather tedious affairs, organized around adults scripting the youth ~ an annual nod to the older members patting themselves on the back that they actually had youth. Yet definitely not a time for the youth to bring their own message or speak in their own voice.

This particularly memorable Youth Sunday, the youth sponsors thought it was about time for the youth to speak for themselves. It turned out to be memorable all right, but in the bad way ~ ‘notorious’ is a better word to describe it. I remember it vividly ~ one of the highlights of my youthful days at church.

That Youth Sunday all proceeded through the liturgy as per usual, until the point of the Youth doing the Sermon. Then suddenly the talking head behind the pulpit disappeared. We all stared at the rose window above the abandoned chancel as a disembodied voice thundered out over the sound system ~ reading a poem or two.

Whatever else there was in that so-called sermon, I only remember the one poem, *“I Am Waiting”* by Lawrence Ferlinghetti. That’s when the stuff hit the fan. My own grandmother was outraged. When I hit Senior High, we never had the opportunity to wrestle from the adults creative control of the Youth Sunday liturgy. Closely supervised ever after, you can bet the Youth were never again given any freedom to “try anything new” in that congregation.

I wonder if the outrage stemmed from the theatricality of that particular Youth Sermon, or rather the fact that a beat poet was read in church, or what is most likely, that one or two lines of the poem were just a little bit raunchy. I am not sure, but it did have an immediate incendiary effect on the older generation in my staid congregation.

That incident impressed me so much that when I got the chance to hear Ferlinghetti in person, you better believe I took it.

**A**n old beat-up Volkswagen Karman Ghia was the car which took me through College ~ or tried to, I should say. Sometimes it would actually start without being pushed. Deep in the winter of 1973 my sister-in-law Sharol and I risked it to drive from Tulsa over to Stillwater to hear Lawrence Ferlinghetti do a poem-reading in a crowded, sterile upstairs classroom at OSU. Memories of that infamous Youth Sunday certainly were a motivation to hear him in person.

Like Bob Dylan another of my heroes, Ferlinghetti was also not particularly impressive at reading his own poems. Like Bob Dylan his voice was gravelly and broken from too many shout-outs and late nights playing to smoky dives. Nevertheless, he got a standing ovation when he read his best known poem: *"I am waiting."* Why? Despite the black mark of being from the beat generation, the repeated refrain of that poem transcends its inherent cynicism:

"I am waiting for a rebirth of wonder."

It begins innocently enough:

"I am waiting for my case to come up  
and I am waiting  
for a rebirth of wonder"

It is punctuated with pithy and witty turns of phrases like:

"I am waiting  
for the Age of Anxiety  
to drop dead"

After being pummeled with image after powerful image expressing deep, enduring longing for a secularized but spellbinding version of the reign of God, the poem ends with yet again, the haunting phrase:

"and I am awaiting  
perpetually and forever  
a renaissance of wonder"

Aren't we all!!

Oscar Wilde defines a cynic as “one who knows the cost of everything but the value of nothing.” I would add a cynic is anyone who has lost one’s sense of wonder. Even Ferlinghetti could see the need, longed for it, sought it in his poem, but could never quite cross over ~ never could find the lost chord ~ never could recognize the source of all wonder. We do need, we do long for, do hunger and thirst especially in this season for *“a rebirth of wonder.”* I know I do.

Moneta Prince, a dear friend and mentor from the mission field, has said quite truly about Christmas and Easter and all the other significant days in the faith, that “the preachers need to get out of the way and let the artists take over.” She is so right.

On these occasions words do fail, and preachers’ words never seem to capture the deepest, powerful significance of the occasion. The artists and musicians seem the only ones capable of carrying us to where we want to go, where we need to be. When words fail, we turn to the simplicity of Lessons and Carols. We turn even to a secular poet or two, ones whose vision longs for, hungers and thirsts for a transcendent realm. Who are:

“perpetually and forever  
awaiting a renaissance of wonder”

Ferlinghetti is right, we are waiting people. Yet more accurately we were waiting, but the wait is over, the time is fulfilled, fearfulness no longer reigns, cynicism is vanquished. Come to the stable and kneel with the shepherds, discover with all the gathered hosts the real source of renewal, of restoration and of wonder ~ the babe in a manger.

<sup>6</sup>For unto us a child is born, unto us a son given; and the government shall be upon his shoulders; and his name shall be called: Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.