

Living With Wonder: The Gift of Awe and The Path of Radical Amazement
Ephesians 3: 14-19

All this Fall our services have been built around “Living the Questions.” In this final sermon I want us to think about “Living with Wonder: The Gift of Awe and The Path of Radical Amazement.”

The great Rabbi Abraham Heschel, a spiritual genius, had suffered a near fatal heart attack in 1972. A friend came to visit him in his NY City apartment. Heschel said, “Sam, when I regained consciousness, my first feelings were not of despair and anger. I only felt gratitude to God for my life, for every moment I had lived. I was ready to depart.” Then he said in a weakened whisper, “This is what I meant when I wrote, “I did not ask for success; I asked for wonder.” His friend Sam later collected some of Herschel’s sayings in a book he entitled, *I Asked for Wonder*. I would ask for that today, every day.

So he lived. In one of his writings he said,

“Our goal in life should be to live in radical amazement, to get up in the morning and look at the world in way that takes nothing for granted.

Everything is phenomenal, everything is incredible, never treat life casually.”

The world is full of wonders, give us, O God, wonderment. The poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote:

“Earth’s crammed with heaven,
 And every common bush afire with God,
 But only he who sees takes off his shoes,
 The rest sit around and pluck blackberries....

Of course, picking blackberries too can be filled with wonder, popping the sun warmed berry into our mouth, its dark red juice running down our chin.

It is the vocation of poets to help us see, to evoke our wonder, to help us take off our shoes. One of our favorites is Mary Oliver, who wrote a poem called “Messenger”:

My work is loving the world.
 Here the sunflowers, there the hummingbird,
 equal seekers of sweetness.

Let me
 keep my mind on what matters,
 which is my work.

which is mostly standing still and learning to be
 astonished.

The phoebe, the delphinium.

The sheep in the pasture, and the pasture....

which is gratitude, to be given a mind and a heart

and these body-clothes,

a mouth with which to give shouts of joy

to the moth and the wren, to the sleepy dug-up clam,

telling them over and over, how it is

that we live forever.

We can be a messenger like that. Any moment can be like that. Eternal.

Jesus who as a boy romped the Galilean hillsides strewn with wildflowers, said to us, "Consider [don't forget] the flowers! Look at the birds!" Be astonished.

Once in Texas I returned from a private retreat in the Texas hill country. My next sermon was filled with poetry. A friend who was a successful business man asked another friend, "Why does Steve quote so much poetry?!" I guess because it slows me down, opens my blinkered eyes. Beloved fantasy writer Terry Pratchett says that the trick to seeing magic in the world is to open your eyes , then open your eyes again.

We may ask, what keeps us from wonder if we are made for it? If it is part of the feast God has set before us? And we already know some the answers. We

live too fast and dull our eyes. That's what poems do: they slow us down and open our eyes. And artists who create art from oil, pigment and water. But someone said that the average time a person looks at a painting in a museum is eleven seconds! That's how we live our days. And yet, we aren't average, are we? No one is.

And here's an issue: what we fill our minds with. In *Alice In Wonderland*, the Mock Turtle describes his school and what they learn. In mathematics they teach, not Addition, Division and Multiplication, but rather Ambition, Derision and Uglification. It's hard to escape that classroom today!

We might rightly say that children have a sense of wonder that we teach them *out* of! They bend down to pick up every small thing, a twig, a bug, a rock. Their hearts are more given to delight, their faces shine with it. So let's adjust our curriculum! Paul rightly urges,

Whatever is true,

whatever is honorable,

whatever is just,

whatever is pure,

whatever is lovely,

whatever is gracious,

if there is any excellence,

anything worthy of praise,
 think on these things.

The human heart can sometimes hold two things together at the same time, like joy and sorrow, but it can't hold derision and love at the same time, or grievance and gratitude, or sarcasm and praise. So Paul's words are crucial to our spiritual health.

Psalm 148 is full of wonder at the world in which we live. Look at the sunrise, the sea creatures, the snow and the mists! The Jesuit poet Hopkins wrote:

The world is charged with the grandeur of God,
 It will flame out, like shining from shook foil.

Paul's prayer in Ephesians is full of wonder.

For this reason —that is, as one swept up in the wonder of grace —
 I bow my knees before the Father
 from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named,
 I pray that according to the riches of God's glory
 that God may grant you to be strengthened in your inner being
 with power through the Spirit
 and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith;

that you being rooted and grounded in love
 may have the power to comprehend with all the saints
 what is the breadth and length and height and depth,
 and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge,
 so that you may be filled with the fullness of God.

That's the real business of the church, or the first: Christ dwelling in our hearts,
 being strengthened in the inner person through the Spirit, contemplating the
 wonders of God's love, being filled with the fullness of God!

II

I've been thinking about and reading about Awe these days. That's AWE,
 not Aww!, the cuddly feeling we get when a puppy licks our face , or seeing a
 baby's bubbling sounds and smiles, or watching a kitten playing on the rug.

Awe seems an old-fashioned word, but it is essential to our spiritual,
 physical and mental health. What is awe? One defined it: "The feeling we get in
 the presence of something vast that challenges our understanding of the world,
 like looking up at millions of stars." O, the vastness, the incomprehensibility, the
 smallness of our minds and the greatness of God.

There was an article in The NY Times earlier this year entitled "How A Bit
 Of Awe Can Improve Your Health." A bit of awe. Maybe we couldn't stand more

than that. It's like when Moses asked God to see God's face, and God set him in the cleft of a rock so all he could see was God's back, his trailing glory.

Awe! There is a sense of overwhelmingness about it. There's a new book out by Dascher Keltner entitled, "Awe: The New Science Of Everyday Wonder And How It Can Transform Your Life." He cites research that says that awe, like joy, contentment and love, is critical to our well-being. Science has identified before six basic emotions —anger, surprise, disgust, enjoyment, fear and sadness—but Keltner's research identifies awe as another, as "its own thing".

Awe slows down the heart rate, quiets our negative self- talk, the critical voice in our heads. It gets us out of ourselves. And, we can develop it. We can create "intentional awe experiences."

So if awe is important, how can we increase its presence in our lives? Here are some "how's". Register where and when you have experienced awe. The birth of a child? Seeing the Grand Canyon? Watching a sunset so vivid and beautiful you want to walk into it. The sometimes frightening beauty of a thunderstorm.

From the beginning of our species, religion has been a place to cultivate and to respond to awe. In Rudolph Otto's formative book, *The Idea of The Holy*, he says religion at its core is our response to what he calls the "numinous", the realm of divine mystery, that transcendent dimension of life. He described it with these words:

“The feeling of it may at times come sweeping like a gentle tide pervading the mind with a tranquil mood of deepest worship. It may pass over into a more set and lasting attitude of the soul....”

True worship evokes awe, along with the other soul experiences. Sometimes music does it. “Holy, holy, holy,” we sing, and sometimes it happens in worship, this holy sense of awe.

Here are some other guidelines to intentional awe experiences. Regular walks in nature. Develop “mindfulness”— which is a slowing down and paying attention. One of our friends from the local mosque last Tuesday night at our Thanksgiving service urged us, in his words, “Wherever you are, BE there!”

Here’s another: Focus on the moral beauty of others . Pay attention to the simple acts of goodness you see in others. Learn more about those exceptional people whose goodness has inspired many. Our heroes and prophets and saints. As Paul said, whatsoever is good, pure lovely, gracious, just keep your minds on these things.

Here’s another: Choose the unfamiliar path. Go to new places, somewhere you’ve never been before, take a walk along a different path. Open yourself to new experiences. Get out of the rut of the familiar.

Where has Awe gone in our lives? A little knowledge is a dangerous thing, it has been said. It can hamper our awe. There is a little song we used to sing as a lullaby to our children:

Twinkle twinkle, little star
 How I wonder what you are
 Up above the world so high
 Like a diamond in the sky

Today's version might go more like this:

Twinkle, twinkle little star,
 I don't wonder what you are!
 Full of gas, light years away,
 Listen to what the teachers say.
 Twinkle, twinkle, little star
 Twinkle on. I know what you are!

We hear the word "awesome" everyday. It means "full of awe." It means seeing what you've never seen before, it means taking a journey outside yourself. It means going beyond the mind you have.

A few years back when Muslims in America were under fresh attack, some of us went to worship with our Muslim friends at Masjid Al- Muminum. Their

Imam, or clergy leader, Tamir, tried to teach me how to pronounce it last Tuesday at the service. *Al-Muminum!*

When we showed up to worship with them that Friday, they showed us how to remove and store our shoes as we entered the Masjid. That is how they enter... in reverence. There was a weekly Buddhist prayer group that met every Sunday morning at my last church. When I would pass the closed door, shoes would be lined up outside the door. I was always touched to see them. Reverence.

When, where, do we take off our shoes?