

“Reading the Psalms: Wonder”

Psalm 148

July 4, 2021

All of life moves a bit slower in the summer. Days lengthen; the sun takes its time moving leisurely through hot afternoon skies. We too follow this rhythm, enjoying a more relaxed pace and a less hectic schedule. As a child, I remember summer as the season of imprecise and unenforced bedtime followed by sleep that would sometimes last until noon. Games of hide-and-seek with all the neighborhood children would often break the ten o'clock barrier, the stars in full view through the trees that provided our cover. This year, as we gradually shift back to pre-pandemic routines and schedules, it is a blessing to change gears in summertime, when there is space for rest and renewal, perhaps allowing our souls to rejoin our weary bodies. Yesterday, our two sons and I spent most of the morning straining the juice from the blackberries we picked the day before in order to recreate the ink that George Washington used to pen his letters. When but summer is such a project even remotely realistic? Yes, a slower rate of speed can open us to new discoveries.

The Book of Psalms provides a similar shift in the rhythm of scripture. These poems in the center of our Bible represent a departure from the prosaic norms of the Old and New Testaments. Surrounded by historical recounting, detailed instruction, prophetic pronouncement, and theological reflection, the Psalms portend a purposeful pause, a chance to catch our breath and reorient ourselves to the beating heart of our faith. The Psalms are like the hymn in the middle of the worship service, a chance to respond to God with song that interrupts the monotony of spoken words.

It is both noteworthy and unsurprising that the Psalms most familiar to us emerge when original words are most likely to fail us. In the hospital room, when speech and memory are fading, we recall the poetry of faith: “I lift my eyes to the hills, from where will my help come?” In the face of unfathomable tragedy

and devastation: “Be still, and know that I am God.” Surrounded the sting of grief and the reality of human finitude: “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.”

The Psalms were the worship book of our faith ancestors, and in these powerful poems are contained the full range of humankind’s relationship with God. These ancient poems reflect the faith of a people who trusted God, who struggled to believe God’s promises, who knew sorrow and success, who felt pain and pleasure, who wrestled with what it means to live as God’s people in the real world. In other words, people just like you and me. I hope that you have some time this summer to meditate on the Psalms in your own devotional life. It was Dietrich Bonhoeffer who wrote, “The more deeply we grow into the Psalms, and the more often we pray them as our own, the more simple and rich will our prayer become.”ⁱ

As Psalm 148 begins, I can see the community of faith, gathered together on a summer evening, singing these words as the sunset turns the world to flame around them. Praise the Lord from the heavens, praise him in the heights! Praise him, sun and moon, praise him all you shining stars!”

This hymn is not a carefully constructed theological dissertation on the merits of intelligent design; it is the grateful response to a deeply felt sense of God’s miraculous presence in the beauty and majesty of creation. It is a Psalm of wonder. It was Plato who first suggested that wisdom begins in wonder, and I believe the same is true of faith. Our belief in a sovereign and gracious God is rooted in this overwhelming sense of surprise and admiration that we call wonder. It is a feeling that can come from any number of sources. We can be overcome with wonder through experiences of transcendence, of beauty, of excellence, of connection, of joy, of sadness, of

astonishment, of art, of grace, of forgiveness, of love. The Oxford English Dictionary has this tidy definition of wonder: “a state of bewildered curiosity.” When was the last time you felt this bewildered curiosity? What impact did it have on you? Is it possible that wonder can transform us, can open us to God’s presence in new ways?

In recent years, no one has written more eloquently or persuasively on the importance of wonder for the Christian believer than Bill Brown, a professor of Old Testament at Columbia Theological Seminary. In a wonderful essay titled, “Lost in Wonder, Found in Wisdom,” Brown describes his concern that the community of faith has surrendered wonder to entertainment, fear, and fatigue. Brown writes, “What’s more, we tend to think of wonder as immature. Somehow we adults have deluded ourselves into thinking that wonder is reserved only for children. Wonder is something we outgrow, to be replaced by knowledge and wisdom. But the thing is: wisdom has all to do with sustaining a sense of wonder... Put simply, wonder is what takes your breath away and gives it back. In common with all experiences of wonder is what wonder does to the one who experiences it: wonder places you on the boundary between fear and fascination, between awe and inquiry, between perplexity and curiosity.”ⁱⁱ

What takes your breath away? What places you on that boundary between fear and fascination? For the Psalmist, it was the incredible power of God revealed in the extraordinary beauty of creation: “fire and hail, snow and frost, stormy wind...mountains and hills, fruit trees and cedars...wild animals and all cattle...” The list goes on and on, beginning and ending with words of gratitude for God’s creative power. This gratitude, like faith and wisdom, is born in wonder.

In 1893, at the age of thirty-six, Katharine Lee Bates, an English professor at Wellesley College, took train trip to Colorado Springs to teach summer school at Colorado College. Several of the sights on her trip inspired her, and they found their way into a poem she wrote on the trip. These sights included the wheat fields of America’s heartland in Kansas, through which her train was riding on July 16; and the majestic view

of the Great Plains from high atop the old explorer Zebulon Pike’s fourteen thousand foot peak.

On the pinnacle of that mountain, Bates remembered, “I was very tired. But when I saw the view, I felt great joy. All the **wonder** of America seemed displayed there, with a sea-like expanse.” There on the peak, surrounded by the majesty of purple mountains, the words of the poem came to her, and she wrote them down upon returning to her hotel room at the Antlers Hotel. On July 4, 1895, the poem was first published in the weekly journal, *The Congregationalist*.ⁱⁱⁱ O beautiful for *spacious* skies. It was a song that began in wonder, when its author found herself lost in the astonishing beauty of God’s creation. As we sing its words this morning, we too can feel the sense of wonder that first overcame Katharine Lee Bates over a century ago, that took her breath away and gave it back. Wonder. It’s enough to make Psalmists of us all.

It might also draw us back to one another in a time when those skies seem a bit less spacious and our union feels deeply strained. How might reclaiming the gift of wonder guide us now?

What I love most about Bill Brown’s understanding of wonder is that it is just a beginning. Opening our senses and our spirits to the thrill of bewildered curiosity leads us to search for the source of that feeling. Wonder is a kind of gateway into deeper engagement with what matters most in life.

Becoming Wise is the title of a book by Krista Tippett, the author, journalist, and host of the radio program *On Being*. The book is an attempt to catalog the deep and diverse reservoir of insight that Tippett has collected in interviews with many of the wisest voices of our time. She begins with an observation that strikes home for me, “This daunting and wondrous century is throwing open basic questions the twentieth century thought it had answered...” How do we respond to this chaos? Tippett has a suggestion, writing “Religious and spiritual traditions have borne wisdom across time...they pay essential humanity an attention unmatched in our other disciplines—our capacities to love and take joy, our capacities to damage and deceive, the inevitability of failure and finitude,

the longing to be of service. I love the deep savvy about hope that religion tends, its reverence for the undervalued virtue of beauty, its seriousness about the common human experience of mystery. Our spiritual lives are where we reckon head-on with the mystery of ourselves, and the mystery of each other.”^{iv}

If wisdom is key to the good life and wonder is the beginning of wisdom, then I think we do best to make experiences of wonder part of our spiritual practice. I think we can cultivate a capacity for wonder in our individual lives and in our community.

Much has been made of how divided we are as a nation these days, and for good reason. Jesus knew that a house divided against itself cannot stand, and we all know the pain caused as the structure collapses. I don’t have the solutions for the dangerous disunity that plagues us., but I do have a suggestion for a starting place. What if we all decided to wonder a little more? We’ve tried heels-dug-in polarization to little positive effect. We’ve tried likeminded echo chambers. What if we explored wonder...opening ourselves to the real lives and stories of others, especially people unlike us? Could we find a deeper wisdom in pursuing bewildered curiosity rather than fearful withdrawal or mean-spirited hostility?

Some of you know the name Parker Palmer and his work with the Center for Courage and Renewal, creating circles of trust that build community across diversity. One of the touchstones of Palmer’s circles of trust is, “when the going gets rough, turn to wonder.” Here’s what I think this means in our time: find a person who is unlike you in some significant way and try to learn from them without judgment or defensiveness. Turn to wonder and release fear. When all else fails, turn to wonder in the world all around you. Rest in the beauty of what God has provided—both wild animals and unexpected friends; fruit trees and fruitful conversations; stormy winds and transformed understanding. Let wonder be your guide to deeper praise and wiser faith.

I close with the words of a contemporary Psalmist of wonder, the late poet Mary Oliver. Her poem is titled, “This World.”

I would like to write a poem about the world
that has in it nothing fancy.
But it seems impossible.
Whatever the subject,
the morning sun glimmers it.
The tulip feels the heat
and flaps its petals open
and becomes a star.
The ants bore into the peony bud
and there is a dark pinprick well of sweetness.
As for the stones on the beach, forget it.
Each one could be set in gold.
So I tried with my eyes shut,
but of course the birds were singing.
And the aspen trees were shaking
the sweetest music out of their leaves.
And that was followed by, guess what,
a momentous and beautiful silence
as comes to all of us, in little earfuls,
if we’re not too hurried to hear it.
As for spiders, how the dew hangs in their webs
even if they say nothing,
or seem to say nothing.
So fancy is the world, who knows, maybe they sing.
So fancy is the world, who knows,
maybe the stars sing too,
and the ants, and the peonies,
and the warm stones,
so happy to be where they are, on the beach,
instead of being locked up in gold.^v

This summer, do yourself a favor. Take a walk in the woods. Climb a mountain. Float aimlessly on the surface of a lake. Pick a flower. Hang a hammock in the backyard. Listen for birdsong first thing in the morning. Read a Psalm, or a poem, or a novel. Have a long chat with a friend. Slow down. Breathe deeply. Let the wonder of this world speak God’s word to you, and be renewed by it all. Amen.

ⁱ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “Life Together,” p. 35.

ⁱⁱ Bill Brown, “Lost in Wonder, Found in Wisdom,” <http://eerdword.wordpress.com/2014/02/26/lost-in-wonder-found-in-wisdom-by-william-p-brown/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Some of the story can be found here: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/America_the_Beautiful

^{iv} Krista Tippett, *Becoming Wise: An Inquiry into the Mystery and Art of Living*. Penguin Random House, 2016.

^v Mary Oliver, “This World,” <http://yearsrisingmaryoliver.blogspot.com/2010/07/this-world.html>