

8 May 2016

Wonder

Job 38:1-18; Matthew 6:25-34

At the end of the story of Job, after Job has complained to God in frustration that the tragedy that has befallen him simply doesn't make sense, God finally replies. We read Job 38, verses 1-18:

*Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind:
'Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?
Gird up your loins like a man, I will question you, and you shall declare to me.
'Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?
Tell me, if you have understanding.
Who determined its measurements—surely you know!
Or who stretched the line upon it?
On what were its bases sunk,
or who laid its cornerstone
when the morning stars sang together
and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?
'Or who shut in the sea with doors
when it burst out from the womb?—
when I made the clouds its garment,
and thick darkness its swaddling band,
and prescribed bounds for it, and set bars and doors,
and said, "Thus far shall you come, and no farther,
and here shall your proud waves be stopped"?'
'Have you commanded the morning since your days began,
and caused the dawn to know its place,
so that it might take hold of the skirts of the earth,
and the wicked be shaken out of it?
It is changed like clay under the seal,
and it is dyed like a garment.
Light is withheld from the wicked,
and their uplifted arm is broken.
'Have you entered into the springs of the sea,
or walked in the recesses of the deep?
Have the gates of death been revealed to you,
or have you seen the gates of deep darkness?
Have you comprehended the expanse of the earth?
Declare, if you know all this.*

In Job, God pointed to the wonders of creation to restore perspective. In Matthew, Christ does the same thing. Chapter 6, vv. 25-34.

'Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and

yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? Therefore do not worry, saying, “What will we eat?” or “What will we drink?” or “What will we wear?” For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. ‘So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today.

For about 25 years I have been pursuing my own specific calling of trying to guide people to new levels in their faith, and one of the challenges of that I’ve discovered in that calling is the tension between *giftedness* and *maturity*. Let me try to explain what I mean. Working toward giftedness means helping people discover their own unique gifts and passions and then directing them to pursue that particular path. Working toward maturity, on the other hand, is helping people to broaden their experience into new areas, to do things that don’t necessarily come easily, and so become well-rounded disciples of Christ, appreciating and valuing those whose gifts are very different from our own. Both paths are good. We *should* build on our individual gifts. But the older I get, the more I value the depth and perspective of maturity. Let me use myself as an example. My giftedness, I believe, is in the area of teaching. It is in teaching that I find my greatest energy and deepest joy. But I am so glad that I don’t just teach. If I’d remained a university professor, I might have done just that, but I have a deep conviction that 25 years of being called Dr. Morris and treated as an expert by 20-year-olds would *not* have been good for me. To put it bluntly, I really don’t need encouragement to become a pompous know-it-all. In the pastorate, though, I am forced to do things that are *not* as natural for me: lead meetings, work with budgets and physical assets, do hospital visitation. But I do these things, and I’m gradually getting slightly better at them. More importantly, being forced to deal with my own weaknesses, I think, has made me a better teacher, too. So, as I say, I have come to value multi-dimensional maturity over single-dimensional giftedness.

All that is by way of introduction to our next sermon series, on identifying our own particular gifts but, even more, on learning from each other’s. We all have natural gifts, passions, personality types. Maybe these are genetic; maybe they result from our experiences; maybe both. I don’t know, or particularly care. What matters to me is simply that we are different and that those difference should not be divisions between us but rather opportunities for us to learn from others who have gifts that we do not. In this way, we become deeper, wiser, more complete followers of Christ.

To begin, some of us have a tremendous capacity for wonder. By wonder, I mean the ability to be struck, enraptured, delighted, and moved by things that others may not even notice. Imagine for a moment taking a preschool child on a walk through the woods. That child has an apparently endless capacity for amazement. You know the awe that any one of us might feel upon first seeing the Grand Canyon, or Victoria Falls, or the Badlands? That preschool child feels that same awe upon seeing a fuzzy caterpillar crawling across a path, or a tiny yellow

flower. It doesn't matter that the tiny yellow flower happens to be a dandelion, which her parents have just spent a lot of time and money getting rid of; the child finds it astonishing. Wonder is the capacity to be struck suddenly by beauty, or fascinated suddenly by something new or unusual, to burst into laughter at something incongruous. It is the sense of being surrounded by miracles. It is what fills the psalmist of Psalm 139: *I am fearfully and wonderfully made . . . Such knowledge is too wonderful for me! It's beyond my comprehension!*

Wonder also involves the ability to step out of time. Remember that preschool child on the forest walk squatting over the fuzzy caterpillar? She's driving her parents crazy, right? They know how long this trail is, how fast they need to move in order to be done by lunchtime, and what the rest of day will be like if they don't keep moving. But the child neither knows nor wants to know any of that. She just wants to watch the way the caterpillar moves different parts of its body at different times and somehow captures another millimeter of dirt. Wonder doesn't care about the past or the future; wonder lives in an eternal present.

Perhaps most importantly, wonder is the capacity to lose yourself. Nothing prevents us from experiencing this sort of wonder more than worrying how we appear to others or what someone else might think of us. Maybe that's why preschoolers do wonder better than we do – they haven't gone to school yet and acquired the crippling insecurity that we all learn from the ridicule of our classmates. Wonder is the moment when you are taken out of yourself, when you feel your heart enlarge, and maybe burst into tears without caring if anyone is looking. It happened to me the first time I stepped into the Cathedral at Chartres, a space transformed by soaring arches and the blue light of a million pieces of stained glass. It happened again last January hiking in the Fjordland of New Zealand when I stepped out of the trees in and found myself in a valley surrounded on all sides by waterfalls. I simply began to cry. This is what I mean by wonder.

But these moments are rare, aren't they? At least for us grown-ups. We get used to the miracles around us and walk by them on our way to sit under fluorescent lighting and tap-tap-tap at a keyboard. It almost takes a slap in the face, a shock, to break us out of grown-up concern with appearances and our responsible tracking of our daily appointment calendars. And we do in fact have to work at our jobs and keep track of appointments, but somehow we need also to make room for wonder, for the sake of our very souls, because without wonder, we cannot praise God.

We read earlier from God's appearance to Job in the Book of Job. Job, a good man, has undergone tragedy after tragedy and has lost everything. He complains to God of the injustice of it all – and he's right. It's *not* fair. Finally God replies, but God's reply doesn't deal with justice. Instead God offers simply wonder. "Job, look at the stars! Look at the dawn! Where did they come from? Do you know? Did you call them into being? No? Then perhaps you could set yourself aside for a moment. Yes, your life has fallen apart. Like everyone else's. Fair? No. But look at the stars!" Now most people find God's answer unsatisfying. It doesn't answer Job's questions. But Job gets what he needs. In chapter 42, after God's speech, Job whispers, "Before, I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear. Now my eyes have seen you." And it is enough. When he remembers wonder, Job is again able to praise.

What wonder does is permit us to move ourselves out of our own line of sight. This is what Jesus was talking about in Matthew 6. "Look at all the things you worry about: food,

clothing, shelter. How is all that worrying working for you? Are you living longer? Are you happier? No? Then look at the birds. Look at the flowers. They're here today and gone tomorrow, but *look at them!* They're beautiful and alive. Do you think God cares for you any less? Stop squandering your lives with worry over how you're going to obtain the things that God is aching to give you. Just seek God. Look at the stars."

There are a few adults who somehow survive childhood and adolescence and retain the preschool child's capacity for wonder. We call those adults "mystics." But all of us can, perhaps, rediscover some of that awe. If you don't have a mystic handy, learn from a preschooler. Between your daily work and chores, go outside and watch a caterpillar. Before digging that dandelion out of your flower bed – and yes, it's still all right to dig it out – stop and look at it. What an incredible thing it is. You know better than to blow the puff ball at the top – that just spreads seeds everywhere. Do it anyway. It's cool. What a stunning mind God has to imagine this world! Such a God cannot be anything but good. God be praised. And look at the stars!