

**GRATEFUL FOR MYSTERY**  
Psalm 96

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22 November 2015

When we first began the process of building this sanctuary, around twelve years ago, we looked at the first design from our wonderful architect, Tom Ziska, and saw how high he wanted the ceiling to be. I don't think any of us expected a room quite so dramatic. He has designed many worship spaces in his career, and he is an active church person himself. He looked around the room at each of us and he said, "A place where you worship God - it should soar...it should cause you to lift your eyes."

It's a fascinating way to think about the religious life - as something that causes us to lift our eyes.

We often focus on how our faith helps us to live our ordinary daily lives with more meaning and joy. Jesus talked a lot about the very mundane elements of life in his time - he told stories about baking bread and caring for sheep.

But there is this other aspect to our spiritual lives, and it brings a beautiful balance to us. A focus on God can cause our hearts and imaginations to soar. And don't we need those experiences of awe and wonder? Don't we need to leave behind, for a while, the concerns and preoccupations with bills, with to-do lists, this week with recipes and travel plans and family seating arrangements? Don't we need to soar above, for a while, the news, the relentless chatter, the worries about which, frankly, we can't do much?

There is a place for beauty and mystery in our lives. It's not peripheral, it's not something we attend to only when we've accomplished everything "important". Beauty

feeds our souls. If we starve ourselves of experiences of mystery and wonder, we start to feel malnourished, we fall into complacency and boredom. We lose our motivation to make the world a better place, because we've fallen out of love with the world itself.

Jesus established a rhythm to his life. Not only did he get away into nature to be by himself, to pray and remember his calling, but he went away to be filled again with the awe-inspiring mystery of God's presence in the world. Then he could come back to the crowds who were demanding of him, and he had something to give.

Ralph Waldo Emerson once wrote, "Never lose an opportunity of seeing anything that is beautiful for beauty is God's handwriting - a wayside sacrament. Welcome it...and thank God for it as a cup of blessing."

I don't know anyone who considers themselves at all religious who doesn't associate their relationship with God with some form of transcendent beauty. For some people, music is the strongest connection, so that when they hear certain pieces of music, they feel that they are transported, almost immediately connected to God. For some people, it's visual art. I took my parents to the current exhibit at the Cleveland Museum of Art two Fridays ago, and I look forward to going back in a couple of weeks with Doug. It is a feast for the eyes, painting after painting of garden scenes - vibrant colors, room after room. Most of these artists were not just walking into a garden and painting. They were the gardeners themselves. They studied horticulture, planned their gardens meticulously and did some of the planting and pruning themselves, too. They were artists and creators at every stage. You almost wonder if they were able to see the finished product - a canvas that would be appreciated for centuries - and start from scratch, taking shovel to dirt. What does that kind of attention to beauty do to the

human spirit? How does that shape a person? Would it be possible for someone so immersed in beauty to commit acts of violence? Could access to experiences of awe and mystery be one of the solutions to the epidemic of violence?

Spending time in nature is the shortcut to spiritual experience for many people, whether it's the woods, the beach, the mountains, or the backyard. Seeing a falling star or the Milky Way, a hummingbird's wings dancing, a porpoise lunging through the surf, miles of trees, hearing a waterfall, not hearing anything except the sounds of nature, smelling the pines; it can all be profound. Praying with one's eyes open is more a part of the spiritual life than we usually acknowledge. Being awestruck implies a sudden experience of mystery, an awareness of beauty and power that transcends the mundane; it is the awareness and awe of being in the presence of God.

For all this we are grateful.

In 1831, at the young age of twenty-two, Charles Darwin obtained passage on the HMS Beagle to travel around the world. He traveled to regions that even today seem quite remote, places of which I have never heard. He traveled to St. Paul's Rocks, an isolated group of barren islets on the mid-Atlantic ridge that supports one of the densest shark populations in the Atlantic; the Cocos Keeling Islands, halfway between Australia and Sri Lanka; and most famously the Galapagos Archipelago. In his diary published in 1845, which he entitled The Voyage of the Beagle, Darwin recorded detailed descriptions of what he encountered. He wrote of cuttlefish with "chameleon-like power"; of musical frogs; of a giant water hog, which he described as "the largest gnawing animal in the world." He wrote of the noisy habits of jaguars; of flying spiders; of a hail storm that had "murderous force"; of "snowing butterflies" on the Patagonia

coast; of marine lizards that were at the same time “hideous” and “graceful”; and of giant tortoises on whose backs he rode (William P. Brown, *The Seven Pillars of Creation: The Bible, Science, and the Ecology of Wonder*, p.132). Detailing all that his senses of sight, smell, ear, taste, and touch encountered, Darwin’s diary was truly a “field book of wonder” (Brown, p. 132).

When is the last time you were struck with wonder? Did you have to travel miles away to some remote area? Is it necessary to be in remote natural environments in order to behold and be struck by the majesty, diversity, order, design, and interconnectedness of all things? I hope not.

But here’s the thing. Wonder is an emotion that is less available to us when we are rushed with routines and weary from work. It requires slowing down, even standing still. We do not have to look far. We just have to take the time to look. Such moments of wonder can color the world we wake up each day to see and can guide the choices we make.

Though the food and fellowship that we will enjoy this week may feel like enough to be thankful for, what I pray for you on this Thanksgiving Day is a gratitude mixed with awe: awe and gratitude for all that God has done, is doing and will do—for everything around us, more amazing and gracious than we could ever plan on our own.

Let us pray. Almighty God, we give you heart-felt thanks for your amazing creation, for the wonder it inspires and the wisdom it engenders. Make us a wise people who today and every day sing of your wonderful works. That the world may live and live well, we pray. Amen.