

## THE PSALMS' GREATEST HITS

### 7) Wonder

#### Psalm 8 / Palm 19: 1-6

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**August 28, 2016**

Over the past six weeks, we have considered some of the Psalms' greatest hits as we have touched upon the themes of God's absence and presence, upon our need for confession and grace, upon the importance of trust and joy. Not only have we considered the written texts of various Psalms that speak to the basic reality of our human condition, but we have paired them with the selected musical expressions of Bono, Van Morrison, the Pretenders, Leonard Cohen and Farrell. From a preaching standpoint, it has been fun to think about the linkage that many of these contemporary songs have with these ancient texts. Though they may express themselves with different words, the hunger and the hope that lies behind them is often much the same.

This morning, our series concludes on an appropriate note—the note of wonder. I say, “appropriate,” because, if you look closely, you will find that the thread of wonder is woven throughout the tapestry of the entire Book of Psalms. Even in Psalms of lament and despair, we often discover that there is, at least, a passing reference to the Psalmist's sense of wonder over the beauty and goodness of God. Even the pain and suffering of the current struggle cannot keep the writer from affirming his or her sense of wonder over the greatness of God and God's creation.

Our two selected Psalms of the morning, however, are not Psalms of lament, but just the opposite. Psalm 8 and Psalm 19 are Psalms that lose themselves in a sense of wonder. That much is clear when you read the opening lines...

**In Psalm 8:** “O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!”

**In Psalm 19:** “The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.”

What then follows in each of these hymns of wonder is a testimony to the beauty, splendor, and power of God and God's creation. This beauty is so wonderful, suggests the Psalmist in Psalm 19, that it cannot be captured in mere words...

***“Day to day pours forth speech, and night declares knowledge. There is no speech, nor are their words; their voice is not heard; yet their voice goes through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world.”***

There is, within the Psalmist, a deep and abiding sense of wonder—a feeling, if you will, of astonishment over the handiwork of God. Poet Mary Oliver has suggested that there are three basic instructions for the living of a life:

**1. Pay Attention 2. Be Astonished 3. Tell About It.** That is, I think, precisely what the Psalmist is doing. He is paying attention to the creation around him. He is feeling a deep sense of astonishment over what he sees and experiences and he is telling about through the poetry of praise.

In a time in which we are learning to live with a diminished sense of wonder, I believe that these three simple instructions for the living of a life offer the best prescription for re-kindling and recapturing our sense of wonder. Let's take a moment to consider each of them, one by one.

So, let me begin by asking the obvious. When it comes to the living of your own life, allow me to ask: Are you paying attention?

Do you take the time each day to notice the unfolding gifts that life on this planet has to offer? Now, we all know that we are supposed to pay attention. We all know that it is important to "take time to smell the roses," and yet, it seems that, once we launch into our daily routines and our weekly schedules, we are less and less inclined to notice the subtle beauties and intricacies of creation. We often find that we are simply too busy and far too serious to make room in our lives for wonder. And we are paying a considerable price.

**Annie Dillard** is a writer who has dedicated her life to paying attention and noticing the nuances of the miracle of creation. In her book, "**Pilgrim at Tinker Creek**," she shares the following observation.

**The mockingbird took a single step into the air and dropped. His wings were still folded against his sides as though he were singing from a limb and not falling, accelerating thirty-two feet per second per second, through empty air. Just a breath before he would have been dashed to the ground, he unfurled his wings with exact, deliberate care, revealing the broad bars of white, spread his elegant, white-banded tail, and so floated onto the grass.**

**I had just rounded a corner when his nonchalant step caught my eye; there was no one else in sight. The fact of his free fall was like the old philosophical conundrum about the tree that falls in the forest. The answer must be, I think, that beauty and grace are performed whether or not we will or sense them. The least we can do is try to be there."**

I think that she is right. "Beauty and grace are performed whether or not we will see or sense them. The least we can do is try to be there."

Your assignment this week, should you choose to accept it, is to "be there," to notice beauty and grace that often managed to get shoved to the margins of our awareness. If you find that difficult to do in the rush and crush of your daily agenda, why not actually make an appointment to pay attention to the world around you? Why not schedule a time to do nothing else but to breathe, smell, see, hear and feel the rhythms of nature? Go for a walk and simply notice whatever it is that unfolds before you.

John Muir wrote: “I only went out for a walk and finally concluded to stay out until sundown, for going out, I found I was really going in.” It is when we go out into creation and pay attention, we cannot help but “go in” to deeper awareness of who we are in relationship to the God who has created us and everything else.

**Mary Oliver’s second bit of advice for living life is to “be astonished!”**

Can you remember the last time you were astonished by what you saw and felt, what you smelled or heard? I hope that you can because those are the moments that gift us with a renewed sense of gratitude for life and for living. Our astonishment, of course, need not to be limited to the experience of the natural world—as astonishing as it is.

No, there is something to be said for the experience of astonishment over the power of compassion and the strength of love. There is something to be said for the ability to be amazed at the human capacity to care, to touch, to heal and support.

In a world that so easily resorts to hatred and violence, I am often astonished by those who find the courage to embrace those who are different from themselves with acceptance and grace, with kindness and consideration.

I am astonished by the witness of those who act, not out of their own self-interest, but out of their interest for the welfare of others. And yes, I am astonished by the simple witness of those who are clear that their purpose in this world is not to amass a great fortune, or to become more powerful than anyone else, but to invest themselves on behalf of others, to give themselves away for their sake and indeed, for the sake of the Gospel.

In his book *The Magnificent Defeat*, Frederick Buechner says that “The love for equals is a human thing — of friend for friend, brother for brother. It is to love what is loving and lovely. The world smiles.

*“The love for the less fortunate is a beautiful thing — the love for those who suffer, for those who are poor, the sick, the failures, the unlovely. This is compassion, and it touches the heart of the world.*

*“The love for the more fortunate is a rare thing — to love those who succeed where we fail, to rejoice without envy with those who rejoice, the love of the poor for the rich, of the oppressed for the oppressor. The world is always bewildered by its saints.*

*“And then there is the love for the enemy — love for the one who does not love you but mocks, threatens, and inflicts pain. This is God’s love. It conquers the world.”*

And it is love that is worthy of our astonishment.

**Mary Oliver’s final instruction for the living of life is to, “Tell about it.”**

The experience of paying attention that then leads to astonishment is not one to be kept to yourself. It is something that is meant to be shared—something that, in many ways, cannot help but be shared.

Perhaps you can think of a time in which you experienced something especially wondrous. Maybe it was a sunrise over a High Sierra lake...or, the experience of holding a newborn child close against your cheek. Maybe, it was a spontaneous act of caring that was completely unexpected...one that offered light to someone who could see only the darkness. My guess is that your first reaction to that experience was to want to tell someone else about it; to explain how it felt, what you sensed and how it might have changed you. Indeed, as the old Swedish proverb suggests, “a joy shared is a joy doubled.” Telling about it does indeed, double the joy we experience.

Anyone who enjoys fishing is certainly aware of this reality. I sometimes think that fishing would not be nearly so exciting were it not for the ability to tell someone else about the experience of hooking the “big one” that was caught or the one got away, or the sight of the beautiful colors of a brook trout glistening in the white foam of the rapid. There is, I think, a sense of mystery and a sense of meaning in the telling of the story—even if it is an exaggerated one.

There is something powerful, something deeply spiritual about being able to share your own experience of wonder, your own sense of astonishment with someone else.

Your assignment, should you choose to accept it, is simply to tell it with great delight, passion and joy.

In a world that often relies on the intellect and its ability to analyze and scrutinize, we must learn to recapture our lost sense of wonder—the same sense of wonder that guided us through childhood and into the early stages of adulthood before we felt the need to set it aside. It’s not too late. Beauty and grace are performed whether or not we will see or sense them. The least we can do is to try to be there.

I suspect that it is only fitting that I conclude, this morning, by quoting Mary Oliver, one more time. In reflecting upon the gift of life that will one day come to an end, she wrote,

***“When it's over, I want to say: all my life I was a bride married to amazement. I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms. When it is over, I don't want to wonder if I have made of my life something particular, and real. I don't want to find myself sighing and frightened, or full of argument. I don't want to end up simply having visited this world.”***

We are intended to do more than visit this world. We are intended to live into it by learning to savor the mystery and the wonder and the beauty that is to be discovered the moments of life that are both large and little. We are intended to notice, to be astonished and to tell others all that we have seen and heard, tasted and touched.

As many of you are aware, Van Morrison, the Irish icon, has a definite sense of the mystery of the Holy in much of the music that he has written. Many of his songs deal with the mystical sense of

wonder and praise that he has experienced in the presence of God. The song that I have selected to pair with our two Psalms this morning could have been written by either one of our Psalmists. It is entitled, "Give Me My Rapture Today" and speaks to his hunger to experience the wonder of God's presence in all that surrounds him.

You will find the lyrics on your bulletin insert. I invite you to read, listen and, if you are so inclined, to make this your prayer.