

Prayer for Illumination

Gracious God, you come into our lives in so many ways. In the faces of children, in the thoughtful words of friends and neighbors, in actions of kindness and compassion that embody your grace in the world. As we enter into this time of reflection, may your Word speak to us in new and challenging ways. Let your Holy Spirit draw us into the light of your grace that we may be both humbled and inspired so that our words and actions may come from the deep well of your Word. In the name of Jesus Christ, your living and loving word, we pray. Amen.

1 Peter 1:3-9 (NRSV)

pg. 281, New Testament, Pew Bible

³ Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, ⁴ and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, ⁵ who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.

⁶ In this you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials, ⁷ so that the genuineness of your faith—being more precious than gold that, though perishable, is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. ⁸ Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, ⁹ for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

Lost in Wonder, Love, & Praise

Some years ago, Johnny Cash covered a song originally penned by Trent Reznor entitled “Hurt.” It’s a deeply poignant song about addiction, a requiem about the loss and pain we bring upon our lives and the lives around us when we’ve lost the capacity to feel.

*I hurt myself today
To see if I still feel*

*I focus on the pain
 The only thing that's real
 The needle tears a hole
 The old familiar sting
 Try to kill it all away
 But I remember everything*

Our post-Enlightenment, Western mechanistic ways of thinking have conditioned us to value facts over feelings. Logic is rational. Feelings are irrational. Place your trust in what you know rather than in how you feel. But human beings are not automatons simply going through life completely numb to the stimuli around us. Feelings do matter. If we are indeed created in the image of God as the author of Genesis tells us, then our emotions are part and parcel to the human experience. Just as our ability to reason is a gift of God's grace, so is our emotional base. Wonder is a feeling—an essential one. The loss of wonder is the loss of feeling. And when we lose that feeling of wonder, life can become almost unbearable.

Beauty. Mystery. Wonder. These are words that belong together. The primary human response to an encounter with overwhelming beauty is wonder. I had an artist in the congregation I just left who shared about visiting the van Gogh Museum when she was in Europe. She said that when she finally saw van Gogh's famous painting, "Sunflowers," she was moved to tears because of its beauty. Wonder is the transcendent sensation we experience when we find ourselves in the presence of an awe-inspiring sunset, an artistic masterpiece, or a newborn baby. Wonder is the unique human reaction to the sublime. Wonder is a large part of what it means to be human. Properly defined, "wonder is a feeling of surprise mingled with admiration caused by something beautiful, unexpected, or inexplicable." We wonder at two things—the beautiful and the mysterious. A life stripped of beauty and mystery is a life barren of wonder, and a life without wonder is a kind of impoverishment.

One of the great beauties of childhood is the innate sense of wonder. I remember walking around our neighborhood, probably nine or ten years old, before the

streetlights were put in that created a great deal of light pollution. My dad, who considered himself kind of a junior astronomer, would point out constellations and star clusters—the Pleiades in Orion’s Belt, of course the big and little dippers, the red giant star Betelgeuse. I remember being simply overwhelmed by the size of the universe. I tried to think about where God was in all of it and how God could have imagined and then bring such a wondrous sight into fruition.

There are some mysteries so transcendent, so sacred, so otherworldly, that they cannot be adequately communicated in prose; only poetry will do. This is why the Bible contains some of the most well-known poetry of all time. After all, how can the finite words of mortals have the capacity to describe an infinite God? When we read about the creation of the universe in the book of Genesis, only poetry can begin to describe such depth of mystery.

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

The prophets of the Old Testament often expressed their feelings in poetry. For example, writing to the exiled Judeans in Babylon, Isaiah chose the poetic to offer words of both hope and comfort.

Have you not known? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable. He gives power to the faint and strengthens the powerless. Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted; but those who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.

The Psalmists of course were the most prolific of all the biblical poets, offering hymns of praise and lament, hymns imploring God to protect or rescue God's people, hymns expressing every feeling and emotion encountered in earthly existence. One can just imagine the Psalmist, who penned the words of the 8th Psalm we shared together this morning, standing there, looking incredulously into the night sky, the Milky Way stretched out from horizon to horizon. In awe and wonder he questions rhetorically—because that's what you do when there aren't really any satisfactory answers available— “What are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?” Can you feel the sense of wonder in those words?

If we think of Jesus during his three-year ministry as Superman flying around being God all over the place, we do a great disservice to the mystery of the Incarnation—that is, in Jesus, God became flesh. Yes, Jesus was fully God, but he was also fully human, and his divinity did not obviate his humanity. Jesus' humanity wasn't a costume or a disguise; it was his true identity. Jesus' divinity was enfleshed in a genuine and authentic humanity. Everyone who encountered Jesus of Nazareth regarded him as fully human. This is evidenced by the fact that Jesus' own brothers did not believe that he was the Messiah, much less that he was God. Of course, Jesus performed miracles, witnessing to his divinity, but these miracles flowed through Jesus' humanity; they didn't bypass it. This is the sacred mystery, the greatest wonder of all, that the Word of God eternally begotten from the Father became flesh—not as a mere garment, but in true being. As the soaring words that mark the beginning of John's Gospel inviting us into the mystery that is the Christ: “The Word became flesh and lived among us.” If you look more closely into the Greek in which John was writing, the word “lived” here means literally, “to pitch a tent.” In Jesus, God came and “pitched a tent” with us, fully part of the human experience. Using poetry John echoes the words of the creation story from Genesis bringing them into a new context, a new creation brought into reality through the Christ event.

This is the wonder we long for, the wonder we find in the sacred mysteries of the faith—words to which we can turn to recover our sense of wonder. In Jesus, God is born, God grows, God learns. We can do nothing but tremble in the mysterious

paradox of the “both/and” of Jesus—how the Eternal can be born, and how omnipotence can grow, and how omniscience can learn. As Jesus comes into adulthood, we find the God who labors, who sweats, who sleeps. And because Jesus did such things, these human experiences acquire a kind of sanctity, a holiness. Other than sin, nothing that belongs essentially to human experience was exempted in the Incarnation. Finally in Christ we find a God who weeps, a God who suffers, and most astonishingly of all, a God who dies! Whatever it means for a human being to experience death, God in Christ has experienced. The very reason we can be saved from death is that God in Christ fully entered into it. Christ descended into death that he might lead the way out of it. The lost beauty of God’s good creation is recovered in the Incarnation...the birth, the teaching, the suffering, the death, and the resurrection of Christ. The beauty of the image of God distorted by human sin is what the Incarnation redeems.

In his book, *Above All*, the late Brennan Manning describes a time when he was overcome by the awe and wonder of Christ. He writes:

When the Korean War ended in June 1953, our United States Marine Corps company was sent to Camp Gifu, Japan, fifteen miles south of the city of Nagoya. My military operational specialty was ammunition-demolitions expert. In October, we were redeployed for one month to Camp McNair near Yokohama, 250 miles north, in order to learn about recently developed military hardware.

Our train reached Yokohama at 11:00 p.m. and Marine Corp transportation got us to our destination around midnight. In the dense blackness of a moonless night, we pitched tents and crawled into our sleeping bags, comforted by the news from the company commander that morning reveille would not sound until 7:00 a.m. Rising early, I grabbed my shaving kit and headed toward the latrine to take a shower. I lifted the tent flap and stepped out into the brisk morning air. No one in our platoon had stirred. I was utterly alone. The sun had just risen on Mount Fuji, and the resplendent peak was a magnificent sight.

To this day I am uncertain about what happened next—either I fainted, swooned, or had a dizzy spell. Collapsing backward, I hit my head on the still-soft ground. When I awakened fifteen or twenty seconds later, my mouth was agape and my eyes transfixed. Riveted by the shimmering snowcapped beauty of the fourteen-thousand-foot mountain, I slowly raised myself to a sitting position. Feelings of terror and tenderness swept through my trembling body. At age nineteen, in my first-ever experience of transcendence, I kept muttering, “O God, O God.” Awe and wonder mingled with fear at the indescribable majesty and beauty of a God I did not know and who in his total otherness remained unknowable. In retrospect, this experience beyond words, speech, imagery, and conceptuality, inducing a silence deeper than the mind, was a remote preparation for my startling encounter forty years later with the luminous beauty of Jesus in his present risenness.

Through the stunning mystery of the Incarnation, this same Jesus is present to those caught in a midlife crisis, to those suffering debilitating illness or addiction, to those in the dark woods of depression, despair, and overwhelming fear. With compassion that knows no boundary or breaking point, Jesus startles those caught up in the love of pleasure, trapped by fierce pride, or consumed by ravenous greed with a flash of insight, suddenly revealing that their lives are a senseless, chaotic blur of misdirected energies and flawed thoughts.

As theologian Robert Barron puts it: “He is the heartbroken God who heals the heartbreak of humankind. Jesus of Nazareth is the coming-together for which we have longed since Eden.” Discussing the extraordinary impact of the person of Jesus on culture and art, Barron continues:

Jesus is lovingly depicted by Byzantine iconographers, by the artists of the catacombs, by the sculptors of the Middle Ages, by Giotto, Leonardo, Michelangelo, Caravaggio, Rubens, Rembrandt, Manet, Picasso, and Chagall. His shadow falls on the works of Dostoevsky, Hemingway, Melville, Eliot, and Graham Greene. His cross—that strange and disturbing

reminder of his terrible death—is the dominant and most recognizable symbol in the West. Jesus is, quite simply, unavoidable. Our language, behavior, attitude, perspective, our aspirations, our fears, our moral sensibility have all been indelibly marked by his mind and heart.

And I have seen this beauty here, just over the past several weeks that we've been in Waynesboro. It is this same Christ whose beauty becomes incarnate in the actions of those who volunteer in the food pantry as they provide life-sustaining nutrition to persons in need. It is this same Christ whose beauty becomes visible in the grandmother who lovingly brings her autistic granddaughter to church. It is this same Christ whose beauty becomes real in the hands and heart of the one who faithfully prepares the Communion table on first Sundays, paying careful attention so that everyone can touch and taste the goodness of our Lord. John Wesley, founder of the Methodist movement in England would call this “sanctifying grace”—the work of the Holy Spirit working in and through us to restore the image of God within us—a beauty that may be best described in Charles Wesley, John's brother, in his hymn from 1747— *Love Divine, All Loves Excelling*:

*Finish, then, thy new creation;
true and spotless let us be.
Let us see thy great salvation
perfectly restored in thee.
Changed from glory into glory,
till in heav'n we take our place,
till we cast our crowns before thee,
lost in wonder, love and praise.*

Closing Thought/Benediction

Madeleine L'Engle from *And it was Good, Reflections on Beginnings* (1983)

“When I look at the galaxies on a clear night - when I look at the incredible brilliance of creation, and think that this is what God is like, then instead of feeling intimidated and diminished by it, I am enlarged . . . I rejoice that I am a part of it.”

May the mystery and beauty of God's creation fill you with awe and wonder...

May the compassion of the Incarnate Christ inspire you to actions of service and love...

And may the fire of the Holy Spirit ignite within you the power of unceasing prayer and praise...

Go in peace to love and serve the Lord! Amen.