

## “Wonder”

Luke 1: 39-45 Luke 1: 47-55

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The House of Hope Presbyterian Church

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### Fourth Sunday in Advent

Have you ever been haunted by a poem? I have.

Ever since I was encountered by Alfred Lord Tennyson’s “Flower in a Crannied Wall,” I have been haunted by this image every Advent. It goes like this:

Flower in the crannied wall,  
I pluck you out of the crannies,  
I hold you here, root and all, in my hand,  
Little flower— but *if* I could understand  
What you are, root and all, and all in all,  
I should know what God and man is.

I keep on thinking: Really? The only way you could understand it... was to kill it? Seriously? You just had to pluck it.

But I am haunted by the image: of the flower in a crannied wall. At first, Tennyson seems to begin on the right track. And actually, when it comes to being plucked out -- that’s the world we live in: Where we feels as if we have to pluck things, grab things, dissect things, analyze things, use things, buy things, own things, manipulate people and things until they are thoroughly distanced, objectified, used up and discarded.

But then we miss the point all together. The point is not to pluck it out.

The point is to see it: to behold it: to wonder at it. To let the wonder encounter you and, if it happens, let the wonder overwhelm you. Wonder and then remember what you have seen.

This advent season, I have been inviting you to consider a series of spiritual practices:

Looking. Listening. Rejoicing. Today, I invite you to think about wonder as a spiritual practice.

I am so grateful for everyone who made last night’s Tableaux service so beautiful. That was about taking time to wonder, isn’t it? I loved hearing Handel’s Hallelujah Chorus. Especially, I wait for that moment near the end, the moment of silence. A moment of silence inspired by that line in the book of Revelation where in the midst of the overwhelming cacophony of voices singing before the throne of God, the elders and the angels and everyone singing, there is silence in heaven for half an hour. Why would there be silence in heaven for half an hour? Unless God was not there? Unless God had left heaven, and come down to earth.

That moment of silence leaves me with a sense of wonder. God with us, God on earth. Where? When? Here? Now? Opening ourselves to wonder helps us to prepare Advent is out time for the spiritual practice of wonder.

What brings you to a sense of wonder?

The Saint Paul Opera put on the opera first sung in Saint Paul, Silent Night, which like the movie *Joyoux Noel*, was inspired by a real story from World War 1: on Christmas Eve, when, after hearing music from the enemy trenches, there was a truce. Slowly, one by one, the soldiers from each side came out of the trenches, to meet one another in no man's land. To sing Christmas carols. To which one another Merry Christmas, even to give gifts. An impossible moment that became possible. In the midst of a devastating war, a moment of peace. As one college student very insightfully said, "There is something in this story which tells a truth which is more important than the war itself."

You can't explain this event, you can't pluck it out and dissect it. You can look at it in wonder.

The dictionary defines Wonder: A feeling of surprise, astonishment, amazement, awe, admiration, caused by something unexpected, unfamiliar, inexplicable, and beautiful.

Think about it, meditate on it, puzzle over it, be curious about it, and speculate about it. Be profoundly grateful for it. These Feelings are not of detached rationality, but interior connection. Where you open up yourself, nurture your feelings, be surprised by the connections. Practice wonder.

Theologian Mark Kline Taylor talks about wonder as admiration. Admiration: affirming the other in its particular differences. Experiencing "the radical alterity of the other." Instead of difference being a threat, wonder allows us to affirm the other in all of its difference. Seeing the difference of the other, and saying, "YES!" Affirming the difference of the other.

Then, in the surprise of wonder, allowing the other to make me aware of the otherness within ourselves.

Wonder: is about that flower in the crannied wall, whose slender roots grow in an impossible situation and mysteriously cling to and draw sustenance from that the rock hard wall. How does it do that? Wonder at how different it is, unique, beautiful.

But then allowing the other, the flower, to open us up to look within ourselves.

Wonder is about discovering the slender roots that I send out, which is to say: letting the other awake an awareness inside of me as to the otherness of my own self or being. That allows us to cling to a rock hard life. The otherness of the other allows us to discover the otherness within ourselves.

Wonder at the baby Jesus in this way, see, behold, and admire this baby born in a barn. We tend to make the barn sound comfy cozy. It was not. Let's be honest: when you weigh 7 ½ pounds, a cow is terrifying. A goat is not all endearing. Don't even get me started on the geese.

The baby in the barn, in a manger, a feed trough: total vulnerability. A flower in a crannied wall. An image of God incarnate. The vulnerability the babe in the manger that speaks of God. That embodies God's love. As one of our Presbyterian confessions says:

God's reconciling act in Jesus Christ is a mystery  
Which the Scriptures describe in various ways.  
All expressions of a truth which remains  
Beyond the reach of all theory  
In the depths of God's love for humankind.

Expressions which we can only experience through eyes of wonder. Maybe it's the stories of vulnerability that help us wonder at what the baby Jesus means.

As I was writing this sermon, a visiting guest of our carillonneur Dave Johnson started playing the bells, pealing out across the neighborhood: His first song: "I Wonder as I wander." I thought, "Good timing." But it rang true: Practice wonder as you wander.

The House of Hope engages in mission in the name of Jesus all year long. I wonder: what are the moments that endure in different people's hearts? A song in choir school learned over some weeks or months But whose beauty and depth will endure a lifetime. A word of the gospel that is heard for the first time in church or Sunday School that guides and gives light in the darkest hour? A home built out of the love of this church that protects a family every day?

You all overwhelmed me last week when I mentioned that 110 children who would go without gifts unless we responded. Before worship was over, we had enough to bless every child to receive gifts this Christmas day and who will know that someone out there cares about them.

Some movies you see, and they never quite leave you. Ingmar Bergman's *The Seventh Seal* is that way. It's the story of a knight coming back from the crusades but he's lost his faith. The shadowy figure following him turns out to be death, who has come for him. But the knight challenges death to a game of chess. Death like to play chess. But the knight says, Death can't take him until the game is over. The knight bargains for time to do one thing of meaningful before the game is over.

On the coast, the knight meets an innocent young couple and their baby. As evening falls, the couple, who have almost nothing, share what little they have, their only food, with this stranger. Wild strawberries and a bowl of fresh milk. They have nothing, they share it all so joyfully. A beautiful moment.

At the end of the meal, the knight says, "I shall remember this moment. The conversation. Your faces. The bowls of strawberries and milk. I will carry this memory between my hands as carefully as if it were a bowl filled to the brim with fresh milk. And it will be an adequate sign – it will be enough for me."

Soon, Death comes for the knight, and for others he had met on the journey. But the knight had saved the young couple and the baby. He had helped them to escape. He regained his faith, his soul, and his hope.

The knight says: I shall remember. That is what wondering is. Wonder has to do with those surprising moments of kindness, innocence, community, beauty, vulnerability, sharing love, saving grace.

When you see a flower in a crannied wall, When, in the midst of a waring world, some voices sing in an unbelievable moment of peace; When a poem or a picture catches your imagination and brings tears to your eyes; When a story of grace redeems your sense of humanity; Remember. Wonder.

Make the connection with the wonder of all wonders: The God of love brings to us the glory of heaven come to be incarnated on earth, in the most innocent, vulnerable form, to evoke in us a sense of wonder.

The world will not perish if you do not become rich or great; Your children will not suffer half as much from lack of food as from lack of hope; We will not be overcome by walls of stone, As long as we have this image in our hearts: Of a flower in a crannied wall, of the God of love, who comes to us in the manger, who comes to us in our rock hard world, comes in greatest vulnerability, to give us love, to show us love that finds a way against all the odds.

This Christmas, hold the image of the baby in the manger in your heart, in your hands. Wonder at the love that finds a way, that comes to us in a manger. Hold that picture in your heart and hands. Wonder. And say: "I will remember."

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Sources:

Mark Kline Taylor. Remembering Esperanza. Orbis Press.

John Vannorsdall. Sermon Given at The Church of Christ in Yale University, Christmas Eve, 1980.