

“A Sense of Wonder” / Job 38:1-7, 34-41 / 21 October 2012

On a ghost-towning trip out west, several years ago, my old college friend Eric and I ended up camping out at the bottom of a canyon in the mountains of New Mexico. Now, I've told you before about my ghost-towning trips. I mostly just sift through the wreckage of abandoned towns. Take a lot of pictures. Marvel at the people who lived their lives, and dreamed their dreams, and died their deaths in that inhospitable land. They were people pretty much like you and me, except that a day came when the well dried out or the mine ceased to produce, at which point they up and left. But the things they couldn't take with them still remain: their decaying buildings, their loved-one's graves, and sometimes even their furniture. These things are still sitting in many of these towns, just waiting for some snoop from back East to come and poke around in it. That's why I insisted on a campsite that couldn't be seen from the road. I felt conspicuous. I was in unfamiliar territory, among strangely shaped trees and plants, down among rocks that look nothing like the rocks in my native place. I felt foreign, and I was somehow afraid that my foreignness would be apparent to any drunken hooligans who might be wandering around the floor of the canyon that night. My friend Eric thought I was paranoid. He said, “Wow, man, y'all must have lots of crime back in New England,” for to him, any state that used to be a colony is New England.

The afternoon light faded rapidly on the east walls of the canyon, deep as we were, and darkness came down like a stage curtain, slowly being lowered, giving us a sense of urgency about setting up camp before it was too dark to see anything. Once we found a spot where I felt sufficiently concealed from gangs of roving bandits, and drug smugglers, and bloodthirsty cartels, our first task was to gather firewood, and fast!

We set up our tents. And soon, a beautiful fire was roaring, a fire of fragrant pinion pine and juniper. It smelled like some kind of evergreen incense out there under the desert skies. The silence down in that narrow gorge was intense, completely unbroken; not an insect or an owl disrupted the perfect quiet of the September night. The great, craggy rock faces of the canyon walls disappeared into the seamless dark, and as they did, another striking vision took their place: the universe itself. There were more stars visible on that desert night than I have ever seen in the skies above Pennsylvania. Great, huge swaths of the sky were illuminated by thick bands of gleaming stars. It was like sitting under the dome of some darkened planetarium, as the ceiling is lit up to imitate what the universe would look like if we were able to see it. The Milky Way and the millions of galaxies of the visible universe stood out in stunning array. The moon was nowhere to be seen, but all the night sky was awash in the light of millions of clearly visible stars. It was a sight I hadn't seen for nearly a decade, ever since leaving behind the dark nights of the African equator. All the galactic realms of heaven stretched out in the skies above, distant, untouchable, unreachable, and unknowable, but shedding their prehistoric light in splendor over all the rusty-colored rocks, and junipers, and pinion pines in that far-flung canyon. All I could do was stare, craning my neck to the skies in absolute wonder.

The sight was so magnificent that even my friend Eric closed his mouth, which was fine with me; we hadn't been traveling well together, two middle-aged guys trying to recapture the adventure of our college days, old enough to be set in our ways, old enough to call our wives every four hours, old enough to really work on each other's nerves.

Without speaking, we pulled our bag-chairs out away from the ring of firelight, out into the dark sagebrush that surrounded our camp. And there we stared at the skies, stupefied by the sight. I recall hearing once that the light from the nearest star—Proxima Centauri—takes four years and three months to reach the earth. The light of the more distant stars takes thousands and thousands of years to appear in the sky above earth. Shedding their rays above our New Mexico canyon, many of those stars were long-dead, and yet their ancient light still shone in our night sky. And there we sat, gaping at starlight older than the language we speak! Starlight older than Western civilization! Starlight older than the Scriptures that describe the glory of the heavens!

Now, I'm not declaring my belief in space aliens. I'm not. But I have to admit that, sitting out there under all those millions of stars, knowing that each of them is similar in its way to our star, the Sun, I had to wonder about—well—mathematical probability. I mean, what are the chances, mathematically speaking, that there's not another star out there with a planet in its orbit capable of supporting life? What are the chances, just mathematically, that there's not some *other* middle-aged bald guy out there, in some *other* far-flung canyon, on some *other* planet, a place where, instead of pinion pines and junipers their plants are even more foreign-seeming, a place made up of colors unknown to the human mind? And what are the chances that he's staring off at the light of my star, the Sun, and wondering at the immensity of it all?

And the saddest question of all: If these galactic armies of light, these stars, are always up there, why is it that I almost never see them? Is it because I go to bed too early? Is it because of light pollution? Endless cloud cover? The noisy distractions of a busy mind? Yes, all of those things. And yet, they're always out there, whether I see them or not. Their reality, their uncharted majesty, their unknowable mystery: it's all there. And it will still be there long after I have passed forever from memory. It calls to mind those words from the Psalms that I learned so long ago: "What is man that thou are mindful of him, and the son of man that thou visitest him?" Truly, the beginning of faith is this sense of absolute wonder!

Or, as a testy God puts it in the Book of Job: "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth, when the morning stars sang together, and all creation shouted for joy? Who has put wisdom in the clouds, or given understanding to the mists? Who can number the clouds by wisdom? Or who can tilt the water skins of the heavens, when the dust runs into a mass and the clods cleave fast together? Who provides for the raven its prey, when its young ones cry to God, and wander about for lack of food?" Wonder!

In this ancient parable, Job has been complaining about his miserable lot in life. And God replies by simply saying, "There are things, O Job, that you simply cannot grasp. There are things that are forever beyond your ability to fathom." They're as far from you as the stars of heaven. They're as unreachable as the starlight, but just as clear. The life of faith is not about having all the answers to all the deepest questions. There are times when the life of faith is more about having the wisdom and the inner calm to close your mouth, to keep quiet, to stand in awe and wonder.

But life in our world today does little to sharpen our sense of wonder. If anything, technological marvels end up diminishing our capacity to stand in awe of the created order. I recently saw a little video clip on Facebook entitled "Everything's Amazing and Nobody's Happy." On this clip, some guy's talking on "The Tonight Show with Conan O'Brien." I don't even know who the guy is, and yet, I consider him a foulmouthed,

modern day prophet. This guy starts off talking to Conan O'Brien about financial ruin, and he says, "Maybe it's good. Maybe we need to get back to a time when we're walking around with a donkey with pots clanging on the side. Maybe that would bring us back around to reality because...everything's amazing right now, and nobody's happy!"

He goes on to say, "When I was a kid, we had a rotary phone. We had a phone you had to stand next to. And you had to dial it; you were actually making sparks in your phone. And you hated people with zeros in their numbers because it meant more work. And then if someone called and you weren't home, the phone would just ring. And then, when you ran out of money, you had to go into the bank and stand in line, then write yourself a check. And when there was no more money in the account, you would just say, 'Well, I can't do anymore things now.'" Conan O'Brien asks, "Do you think now that we just take technology for granted?" And the guy responds, "Well, now we live in an amazing, amazing world, and it's wasted on spoiled idiots. This is what people are like now: They've got their cell phone, and they're like, 'Ugh, it won't do anything.' And I say, 'Give it a second; it's going all the way to space. Can you give it a second to get back from space?' I was on an airplane, and there was high speed Internet on the airplane. It was fast, and I was watching Youtube clips. And it broke down for a second, and they came on the loud speaker to apologize, and the guy sitting next to me, playing on his computer, says, "Sheez. This stinks." What? How quickly the world owes him something that he didn't even know existed ten seconds ago!" And on and on the man rages on "The Tonight Show." He talks about how people complain about flight delays, when it only takes five hours to fly from Los Angeles to New York, a trip that used to take thirty years if you survived it. He talks about how people complain that they had to sit on the runway for forty minutes before liftoff. And he says, "But what happened next? Did you fly like a bird incredibly? Did you take part in the miracle of human flight? Everybody on every plane should just constantly be going 'Wow!' You're sitting in a chair *in the sky*. But...it doesn't recline far enough."

Life in our world today erodes our ability to experience wonder. Eighteen years ago, I worked in a library where people called up and asked reference librarians to look things up for them. A person would call and ask about fossils, or sumac bushes, or raising ducklings. The librarian would take the patron's info, crack a few books, and if he or she were a taxpaying resident of the right county, she would mail the person a little report about fossils, or sumac bushes, or ducks. Today, anyone in the world can get to Wikipedia with a few taps of the keyboard. We're all experts in every field. And we're all entitled to our eighty or ninety years of life, even if our grandparents were only entitled to sixty-five or seventy. We're all the beneficiaries of wonders that we understand—really—no better than our ancestors did. We benefit from infrastructures, and modern medicine, and modern dentistry...which is my personal favorite because I wouldn't want to live in a world without it. Some of us may be specialists in this field or that, but which of us could have developed the technologies that make all those things possible? Which of us could have created the all the complex systems that prop up our living and make us feel so superior to space, and time, and illness, and mortality? Our sense of wonder is gone, replaced by a foolish pride that says, "I'm self-sufficient."

Our lifestyle is fragile, too. For the past forty years, books and movies about an impending apocalypse have been popular, mostly—I think—because people sense that it would take relatively little to reduce us to living in caves and hunting groundhogs with

sharpened sticks. The problem is, we don't really know how to do that either! But consider the deep, life-giving humility that comes from cultivating in yourself a sense of wonder. Consider the deep peace that would come from nurturing in yourself the awareness that there are mysteries that you will never grasp; there is power that will never be yours; there is starlight that has seen more in its long life than any of us will ever see. We're not in control. It sounds scary, but believe me, you would be far more scared if you really *were* in control. If everything really did depend on you and your understanding, you and your health, you and your knowledge, where oh where would you—or any of us—be? That's why I say, there is greater peace when we can manage to feel a sense of wonder that tells us clearly, "I am not self-sufficient. I am a creature. In the great scheme of things, I'm really pretty small. I did not orchestrate the world or much of anything in it. There's a world beyond my knowing, a universe beyond my understanding. And I am free of the burden of governing it."

Once, long ago, I stood on the edge of the Grand Canyon with about one hundred or one hundred and fifty tourists. There were buses of people there from all over the world, but it seemed that most of the folks were from Japan, Germany, and Australia. We stood there, all 150 of us pressed up against the railing at the overlook just outside the visitor's center, staring out at that wondrous old canyon, that spectacular work of art that a mere trickle of water dug slowly over long centuries. And we were speechless, all of us. Literally, without speech; not a person uttered a word. It was too magnificent for words. In a group that large, silence is a strange, almost eerie thing, but each one of us was rapt and caught up in a sense of our own smallness beside that immense canyon. We were all caught up in a sense of our own youngness beside that ancient canyon, a sense of our own finitude beside its seeming infinitude. We all knew, all 150 of us, from all different countries of the globe, we all knew that we were creatures, that something, or someone out there was far bigger, and far older, and far wiser than us. I'm sure we all processed that knowledge differently. Some of us directed it toward God. Others of us probably directed it toward Mother Earth. Some others of us still may have directed it toward Nature or some other deity. But regardless of how we processed it, it was the same feeling of smallness, dependence, finitude, weakness. And do you know what? It came not in the form of fear, but in the form of purest peace. It gave humility and peace.

It's good for us to be reminded from time to time of our creatureliness. If I call you small, or dependent, or finite, or weak, you probably will not respond to me with humility or peace. You'll respond in anger, and that anger will be motivated, at its heart, by fear. Everybody fears being insignificant. We fear being a blip on the radar screen of eternity. And yet, when the Grand Canyon reminds us of those things about ourselves, or when the Milky Way does it, or a very old tree, or a certain slant of light, or an old tune we remember from way, way back...well, then we experience our creatureliness, and it brings us peace. Peace in the knowledge that there are mysteries beyond our knowing. Peace in the knowledge that there is more to life than the surface things that meet the eye. Peace in the knowledge that this big old world will keep right on turning on its axis even if we stop our hand-wringing, and our barking orders, and our planning, and strategizing. And so, cultivate in yourself a sense of wonder. Amen.