

“A Return to Wonder” / Acts 2:42-47 / 11 May 2014

“Awe came upon everyone,” we’re told. I wonder what 3,000 awestruck people look like! They sold their belongings, pooled their money in a common pot, and now they spend their time together praying and, of course, having potlucks. The Christian faith was born around a table, at a common meal. But why did the early church live like hippies at some sort of 1960s ashram in upstate New York? Notice the one little phrase on which all this unusual, utopian behavior hangs: “Awe came upon everyone.” They left their privacy, their careers, and their way of life because they were moved by a sense of wonder. Truly, at the heart of any genuine faith, there is profoundest wonder.

Let me tell you a story of wonder, and see if you don’t have one or two much like it. This past Wednesday, on my day off, I had a million springtime jobs to do around the house and garden. One of my annual tasks in May is to check the attic for bats, since they have a history of forming colonies up there. And so, reluctantly, I took a flashlight and went to the attic to poke around under the rafters. Ours is not one of those forgotten attics where nobody ever goes, accessible only by a pull-down ladder. No, we’ve got a nice, spacious attic with a full staircase leading up to it and windows that actually open. It’s not a spooky place at all, except when it’s filled with unexpected guests of the fluttering variety. The bats often come and install themselves in early May, and they stay through the end of August. But we’d taken some measures to keep them out this year.

With a sense of dread, I hesitantly shined my flashlight into all the dark recesses, and I was happy to discover no bats. But glancing out one of the windows, I came across something much nicer: a bird’s nest with three sky-blue eggs, perched just outside the rippled antique glass of the windowpane. I don’t care how old and sophisticated you are, when you find a bird’s nest with pale blue eggs in it, you’re a child again, filled with awe and wonder. Here they were, three little lives all encased in their perfect packages, the color of an August sky, smooth and full of promise. I had to marvel at the perfection of the nest itself, it was not an oval or a lopsided circle, but a complete circle—all the edges equidistant, and no sloppiness of any kind. It was a little cradle, perfectly bowl-shaped, round as a half-moon. I looked closely to understand the nest’s psychology. It had a strong, clay structure beneath the grass, with thicker, coarser grasses on the outside and fanning out toward the bottom, to keep the nest from tipping or blowing away. There were softer, lighter grasses on the inside of the nest, to give the baby birds a comfortable place to grow. Just as I was pondering the ingenuity of the nest and the simple beauty of the three blue eggs, Momma Bird herself came home to roost. She lighted softly on those little eggs, so fragile and elegant, and when she relaxed her body and puffed out her feathers, she became surprisingly round, so that she filled her nest exactly. It reminded me of those old glass candy dishes with a nest for a bowl and a hen for a lid.

Now, it’s an old-fashioned kind of insult to call someone a birdbrain, but as I gazed at the scene just outside my window, it occurred to me that the tender mother bird had all the makings of love in her bird-self. Here she was, nurturing her hopes for the future. She had constructed a home for her young that was not only functional but also aesthetically pleasing. The thought came to me, too, that I with my costly education, I with my tools—half of which I don’t even know how to use—I with my money, I have never in all my life built anything so lovely and symmetrical, so perfectly suited to its task as that nest. Whose trowel did Mother Bird borrow to build her nest so perfectly? Did she find a video on YouTube to show her how it’s done? No, just grass and mud and whatever it is in her ingenious birdbrain that tells her when, and how, and where to build. And each of those three lovely eggs, so weightless, so blue, so fragile, each of them contains within itself the same prehistoric knowledge that Momma Bird used to build her nest. And, God willing, each of them will fly off to find their own mates one day, and build their own nests, hopefully right here on this same windowsill where I can watch over them for bird-generations, until I’ve grown too old to climb the attic stairs. But in the meantime, my little girls and I will have a front row seat at the very drama of life unfolding: the hatching, the feeding, the learning to fly. Life! It’s a mystery. It’s a promise. It’s a reality so incomprehensible and yet so familiar that all we have to describe it is our stories. Life. We don’t know

where it comes from or where it goes. We can become vehicles of it, but we cannot make it. We can destroy it, but we cannot create it. Life. We earthborn, earthbound mortals with all our self-importance! We don't really even know what a bird knows. But if we can stand back and experience a sense of wonder, if we can marvel at those things that are beyond our ken and control, then we'll settle into a healthy humility. The life of faith—the church itself—and all our best hopes and dreams, these things begin with a sense of awe and wonder.

Consider the high cost of church membership back in those earliest of days that are described in the Book of Acts! They didn't just ask you to fill out a pledge card and sit on a committee when you joined the church. They asked you to give up everything: quit your job so that you can spend your days in prayer, and take your turn in the big communal kitchen that served more than 3,000 people several times a day. Like most utopian societies, the early Christians believed that the end was near. They thought that the risen Jesus would be returning any day, and so the old ways of life were moot. All that mattered was loving God and loving others until the Second Coming. And yet, despite the high cost of membership, still people flocked to the fledgling Christian movement. For in that strange season of communal life and excitement, the Christians were rapt in joyous expectation and awe and wonder.

Of course, no utopian society lasts very long. Eventually folks begin to look at their watches and wonder why Jesus hasn't shown yet. The Pennsylvania countryside is littered with the remnants of old utopias where German immigrants came to await the Second Coming. Ephrata. Harmony. Old Economy Village. At a place called Sabbathday Lake, in Maine, the world's last four Shakers are still holding out and praying for new members. They made great furniture in their day, but who wants to share everything? Who wants to give up all their personal belongings, their dreams, their privacy, their vacations on the Jersey Shore, and nights out on the town, and dinners in the restaurants of their choice, all their personal freedoms; who wants to trade these for a life of complete community, not to mention chastity? These societies fade out for many reasons, but in part because asking people to maintain their sense of religious wonder is like asking our children to stay small. As much as we might long for it, it cannot be. Wonder is a stage in our development, and we lose it all too quickly. The jadedness of the world seeps in with time and teaches us to take things for granted. It woos people away from their simple, wide-eyed faith, teaches them to gaze on life and its marvels more disinterestedly. A sunset, a distant star, the joy of fellowship with others, the spine-tingling awareness of God's presence in our lives, made known to us in the familiar tunes and lyrics of a half-forgotten song, the homelike comfort of a smell or a sound: these things touch us less profoundly as the years pass. It's not until we're old that they come to us again to speak as they did when we were small.

Faith begins with a deep sense of wonder, but then it tends to stray away into other things—like rules, and procedures, and presbytery meetings. But when it's at its best, faith should still visit us with a profound awareness of the mystery and the beauty all around us, visiting us with a sense of wonder. Years ago, shortly after I'd arrived in Africa for my five-year stay, I began to notice that each little Presbyterian church I visited had the same three words written at the front, just above the pulpit—which was always central. Painted in big red letters were the words “Etyi, Etyi, Etyi.” Once I asked the guy sitting next to me what “Etyi” meant. He said, “Oh, in the local tribal tongue, it means 'forbidden' because only the pastors are allowed up there.” Somehow that didn't seem right to me, not in a Presbyterian church, so I continued to ask around and discovered that “Etyi” can mean forbidden, but in a religious sense, it can also mean “holy.” In our day and time, the word “holy” has a high-sounding tone to it, as in “holier-than-thou.” But in the old original languages of the world, in Hebrew and in Greek, holy doesn't mean morally incorruptible. It means something a lot closer to “forbidden.” “Holy” means mysterious, awe-inspiring, ineffable, unknowable, removed from the realm of humanity. Holy means otherworldly. It refers to all that is beyond the domain of human understanding, all that can fill us with the deep awareness that we, too, are creatures, and Someone out there—or Something—is infinitely greater than we are. An experience of the Holy is to stand on the edge of the Grand Canyon and to be reminded of something we forget in our middle years: the fact that we are

small. Beauty, biology, chemistry, art, needlepoint, the joy of human love: all these things, if they move us to awe, can bring us into an encounter with the Holy, as does a robin's nest full of three perfect cerulean blue eggs in a place we thought we owned to ourselves. Wonder makes us to know that we are small, that we don't have all the answers, that we don't have things under control, but that it doesn't matter, because we don't need all the answers, and we don't need to be in control. The birds build their nests all the same, and they do it beautifully according to methods that we don't understand, in places we believed to be our own domains.

A few years ago, we used to hear the military expression “shock-and-awe.” Our way of life nowadays leaves us dealing with a lot of shock and too little awe. Our human systems are shocked by the long hours we work, by the isolation we feel, by the lack of physicality in our daily routine. Our systems are shocked by the flood of information that constantly barrages us, by deadlines, and bills. We're shocked, too, by the inhumanity of our world, by the kidnapping of schoolgirls in Nigeria. Our tendency is to numb ourselves to the shock of life, to seek escape by means of our televisions, and radios, and computers, or anything that keeps us from seeing the rapid passage of time, the fact of our smallness, the fact that mortality is our lot. But numbing ourselves to life's shocks also numbs us to its awe...which is unfortunate, for we need to stand in awe every once in a while just to get life in perspective.

It's significant that “awe came upon everyone” when they were living, and eating, and praying together. When we're isolated, we forget that life is more than just the list of tasks in front of us. But the community of faith reminds us that there is a sacred Mystery at the heart of all life, that the Mystery can seem fearsome, but mostly it's good. Church community reminds us that there's more to life than our crowded inboxes, and our busy calendars, and our performance reviews. Life is more than our boredom, loneliness, or our pain. It's in community that we dare to experience life's Mystery as friend. The faith community, if it's doing its job, reminds us to look beyond the shock of life to see the awe and wonder.

Make time in your life for community. Take time in your life for wonder, to marvel at all that you cannot fully understand. Life. It's a mystery. It's a promise. We don't know where it comes from or where it goes. But we can dwell in its beauty, its joy, its wonder—not needing to control it or understand it, but only seeking to share it, only seeking to exist simply as creations of God's love. The life of faith begins with wonder. Amen.