

Sermon June 23, 2024
[2 Corinthians 6:1-13]

Finding Awe in (Mostly) Ordinary Things
Pastor Dan Peterson

My sermon, as I mentioned at the outset of our service today, is called “Finding Awe in (Mostly) Ordinary Things.” Before I get to the topic, however, I would like to catch you up on the last few sermons I have preached.

Several weeks ago, I raised the question, “How do we live according to the Spirit?”

Then more recently, I raised the question, “Do you believe in miracles?” (Do you remember that slogan: Do you believe in miracles?) Do you believe in miracles? – I shared my story, that of the miracle I experienced in the incredible generosity of someone who donated a significantly large amount of money to the Pastor's Discretionary Fund, almost \$1,000 of which I have already given out.

Now today, I have another question for you: **What causes you to wonder?**

What fills you with awe? Is it being surrounded by nature? I think here of the psalmist who says that the heavens are the handiwork of God, who marvels at the dome of the sky. And I think here of a poet who once said that the world is charged with the grandeur of God.

Or is it being overcome by architecture? Many of you have visited cathedrals in Europe. You know the feeling? It's the same one I experienced when I first came into Queen Anne Lutheran Church and looked above at our amazing arched ceiling.

Or is it being grasped by the sound of music, or maybe the text of a hymn, or maybe a lesson that has been read? Maybe it's reading that you do on your own time – or maybe, just maybe, it's even something I said in a sermon.

Recently, a member, a beloved member of our congregation, Paul Abodeely, sent me a commencement speech he read called “Finding Awe.” The speaker was Angela Warnick Buchdahl, who is the Rabbi of the largest synagogue in New York City. Her task was simple: convince thousands of students graduating from Stanford University in the sweltering heat of a late spring day that finding awe, finding awe is a worthwhile task. Easy-peasy!

She begins with a harrowing story of receiving a phone call from a gunman who was holding a group of people, mostly Jews, hostage in a Texas synagogue. That, I assume, got the attention of those students rather quickly. Perhaps it captures yours. It certainly catches mine.

I'll return to it in a moment, but first, I want to share with you a fascinating study Buchdahl cites near the beginning of her speech. It's called, *Awe: the New Science Of Everyday Wonder And How It Can Transform Your Life*. In this study, this book, Dacher, Keltner, who is a professor at the University of California, Berkeley, shares research he

had conducted from 26 countries, showing that people find awe in eight common wonders of life. Eight common wonders of life.

If you'd like to remember that, I think of it this way: There are seven wonders of the world; there are eight wonders of life.

Would you like to hear what they are? Great, because I'd like to share them with you!

They are:

- **Nature.** I think, for example, of Magdalena Phillips, a marine biologist and recent graduate from Duke University, a member of this congregation, and the fascination she must experience, the marvel she must experience, working with and rejuvenating marine life.
- The second after nature is **visual design.** And I think of Virginia Stamey-Johnson and Mark Oplinger; when it comes to their eye for the order of things, as well as their colors.
- The third is **music,** and I think of Karen McCullough, as well as the rest of the choir, who must marvel, as many of us do, when we sing certain songs.
- The next marvel is **spirituality.** And I think of Connie Wurm, who has an insatiable curiosity about all things spiritual.
- The next one is **big ideas.** And I think of Carol Ann Davis, who has led the Christian Education committee for the last seven-plus years, who has been a great volunteer to work with, and who, I get to share the same wonder with her, and others who attend the forums.
- The next is **birth and death,** and when it comes to birth as a marvel of our experience, I think of Dolly Smith, who works in a maternity ward and must experience that marvel constantly in her work.
- The next is **collective movement,** and I have no idea what that means, possibly because I'm not coordinated, but also possibly because it could apply to a range of possibilities.

So those are the first seven. Nature, visual design, music, spirituality, big ideas, birth, death and collective movement. The eighth, which I'm about to share, also happens to be the most universal, the greatest wonder people identify when it comes to wonder itself. Can you guess what it is?

Turns out, the greatest source of awe in our lives is **other people.** Other people. More specifically, it's the awe inspired by the *moral beauty others exhibit.* Now, when Keltner speaks of the moral beauty of others, he means things like exceptional acts of **courage,**

self sacrifice – which explains why the cross can move us ever so deeply – to that he adds **kindness** and **resilience**.

The last of these, resilience, interests me, especially because it pertains not only to heroic moments that inspire awe like self-sacrifice, but the everyday struggle of being human. It reminds me, for example, those of you in our congregation who persevere in spite of chronic pain, who go on in spite of debilitating grief, or who move forward even though feeling isolated.

In each of these cases, I find myself in awe. How do they do it? Where do you find the strength to keep on, keeping on in the face of these obstacles?

For Buchdahl, on the other hand, it was the courage and sacrifice of the hostages in the synagogue that made the biggest impression on her. “I was awed,” she writes, “by the steadiness of the rabbi who kept the gunman from shooting for 10 hours, and I was awed” she continues, “by the selflessness of hostages, who made sure that the one among them who couldn’t run was freed first. And,” she says, “I was awed by the hostages’ sense of humor, especially the only non-Jewish hostage, who said, ‘If I get out of this alive, I’m definitely going to convert!’”

Of course, there are countless other examples I could cite that would presumably inspire awe when it comes to the moral actions or moral disposition of others, but the one that strikes me the most this morning is the example of Paul in 2 Corinthians 6, our Second Reading for the day. Listen to what he says, beginning in verse 3:

“We are putting no obstacle in anyone’s way,” he writes, “so that no fault may be found with our ministry. But as servants of God, we have commended ourselves in every way through great endurance and afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labor, sleepless nights, hunger, by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, and the very power of God. We are treated as imposters, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet we are well-known; as dying, and see, we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything.”

Everything. Wow. For those days where it's difficult for you to get out of bed in the morning, as it sometimes is for me, especially earlier in the year, think about Paul and the incredible hardships he and his companions endured for the sake of spreading the Gospel. I mean, who among us does not marvel at Paul’s incredible endurance, how he constantly risked life and limb to spread the good word?

Add to that, the likelihood that Paul was afflicted by a disease, possibly epilepsy, possibly malaria, and his perseverance becomes even more breathtaking. Paul, of course, calls it “the thorn in his flesh, put there by a messenger of Satan.” What an

incredible testimony to the Spirit-inspired strength that he and his companions exhibited to share the Good News throughout the ancient Mediterranean world.

Now you might be saying to yourself, I understand how people find awe in everything from random acts of kindness to self-sacrifice and courage, even endurance or perseverance, as we see in the example of Paul, and I even felt it when Buchdahl shared the story about the hostages. But what's the point? Why preach a sermon on "finding awe in mostly ordinary things"?

Well, I have two reasons, and I want you to listen closely. First, awe is good for your physical and moral health. Awe is good for your physical and moral health. It actually slows the heart rate. It orients your attention to others, and it prompts you and me to engage the world around us.

The second reason concerning why I choose to preach on "finding awe in mostly ordinary things" is this: Not only is it good for your moral and physical health, it is also good for your soul. For your soul.

Imagine, for example, looking at the stars on a cloudless night. Now, that might be pretty hard to imagine, living in Seattle with its never-ending cloudy skies, it seems. But imagine you are looking at what Carl Sagan used to call "billions and billions of stars." How do you feel? If overwhelmed, the awe you experience can transform yourself, making it small, quiet, and therefore, more humble.

This always brings to mind one of my favorite hymns, "How Great Thou Art," which induces the same experience in many of us, myself included. This explains why Buchdahl argues that "Awe is the most important spiritual stance." The most important spiritual stance. Why? "Because awe," she says, "can be a guiding orientation for a life of meaning, connection and joy. "

Rabbi Abraham Heschel, a 20th century biblical theologian and philosopher, confirms it. He writes, "Our goal should be to live life in radical amazement; to get up in the morning and look around at the world in a way that takes nothing for granted. To be spiritual is to be amazed."

I mean, think about it. What is your life? As we read in the book of James, "for you are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes." Your existence, however fleeting, however brief, like mine, is an absolute miracle. The odds of you existing are something like a trillion to one. What a gift Life itself is!

Or consider the song of "Amazing Grace." Why is grace so amazing? Because God embraces you and me in spite of our faults as well as our profound imperfections, warts and all, as Martin Luther once said, something we need to hear again and again when we experience moments, as I do, of self-disgust, or the unrelenting inner wheel of self-criticism.

Or ponder these wonderful, wonderful words by the poet e e cummings, upon the reconciliation he experienced with his estranged father. He writes

“i thank You God for most this amazing
day:for the leaping greenly spirits of trees
and a blue true dream of sky;and for everything
which is natural which is infinite which is yes”

And then think of those hostages Buchdahl mentions, their acts of incredible courage and selflessness.

All of these point to a single question: Where do you experience awe in your life?
Alternatively: What causes you to marvel, to wonder?

Let's close with a prayer. Dear God, you are the capital-M mystery of our lives.
Help us fill our days with awe and wonder,
so that we take nothing for granted,
but live lives of deep, deep gratitude
and help others in response.

In Jesus' name, Amen.