

“Where is the Wow?”

Twenty-sixth Sunday After Pentecost - November 21, 2021

Christ the King Sunday

Bishop David Alan Bard

Texts: Revelation 1:4b-8; Mark 9:33-41

Children’s Time

Good morning. I am Bishop David. Does anyone know what a bishop does?

I am here to celebrate with you. Your church has been around for 65 years, and five years ago another church came together with you.

There is another celebration this week – Thanksgiving. What are some of the things you are thankful for? We don’t need a special day to be thankful. One of the reasons we get together in church every week is to give thanks.

Sermon

I am so very pleased to be here with you all today to celebrate the 65th anniversary of Lake Harbor United Methodist Church and the fifth anniversary of Lakeside UMC joining together with you. In my last pastorate, I worked with a church merger and know that it is work, but important and blessed work. It is a joy when two congregations can come together to enhance ministry for Jesus Christ.

Sixty-five years. Wow! For sixty-five years you have sought to be a place that makes disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. You have continued to hear the call of God’s love to welcome all, to empower them in Christ and to send people to serve. Think of all the grace and love that has been shared. Consider all the ways lives have grown in God’s love. Ponder all the good that has been done. Children have been baptized into Christian faith, and then nurtured in that faith. Young people have been given opportunities to understand their path in life. Adults, too, have grown in faith in Jesus Christ through the faithful ministry of the church. God’s grace has been shared through communion. God’s praises have been sung in worship. Prayers for the sick, the hurting, the wounded, the lonely, the left out, the confused, the hungry have been offered - prayers for people close and dear, and prayers for people on the other side of the world. Through this church, hungry children and families have been fed, the homeless have been housed, broken lives have been mended, relief has come to victims of storms and wars. Through this church good news has been shared and people have come to know God in Jesus Christ. This church has touched lives with God’s love in Jesus Christ in this community and in the far-flung places across the world. People’s

marriages, and births, and successes have been celebrated here. We have grieved with people here. We have challenged ourselves, our community, and our world to live more justly, to care for God's good creation, to seek peace and reconciliation, to live out God's unconditional love for all people.

This is all cause for celebration. This is all Wow! In addition to celebrating with you today, I also want to explore with you the importance of "wow" in the Christian life. You have been working with Anne Lamott's book Help, Thanks, Wow: The Three Essential Prayers and we have come to Wow. Wow is pretty easy today. We are celebrating an anniversary. Wow is pretty easy this week. It is Thanksgiving. We take time to remember all that we can be thankful for.

Not every week is an anniversary. Not every Thursday is Thanksgiving. Yet "wow" is an important part of following Jesus.

Anne Lamott does a nice job of describing Wow. *The third great prayer, Wow, is often offered with a gasp, a sharp intake of breath, when we can't think of another way to capture the sight of shocking beauty or destruction, of a sudden unbidden insight or an unexpected flash of grace. "Wow" means we are not dulled to wonder.... "Wow is about having one's mind blown by the mesmerizing or the miraculous.* (71). Awe and wonder. In his great hymn "Love Divine, All Love's Excelling," a meditation on the wild and extravagant love of God, Charles Wesley envisions the work of God in our lives as leading us to "wonder, love and praise" (Hymnal, 384).

The Scripture readings for this morning point us in the direction of "Wow." The beginning of Revelation is a visionary "wow" experience. The writer, John, offers a remarkable vision of Jesus "who is and was and is to come," and a celebration of the God who "loves us and frees us" in Jesus. *Look! He is coming with the clouds; every eye will see him.... I am the Alpha and the Omega.*" This would be what Anne Lamott calls "an upper-case wow" (74), those moments when God feels remarkably close and you feel incredibly and wildly loved by this God who created the moon and stars, the rivers, lakes and oceans.

I am from Minnesota and for seven years I served as a district superintendent for the northwest district. On the north it bordered Canada. On the west, all of North Dakota and part of South Dakota. The headwaters of the Mississippi River were located in a state park in my district – Itasca State Park. I drove a lot, and sometimes the weather made driving a challenge. I hold in my heart a vivid memory of driving back from a church conference on a snowy November night. The snow was falling at a pretty good clip, and I needed to take some care as I drove. The highway I was traveling bordered Itasca State Park, and tall, majestic pine trees lined the side of the road. I am not sure what it was, but something in me invited me to stop the car, pull off to the side

of the road and simply get out and listen. There were no other cars around. I got out, stood on the side of the road and watched and listened for a few moments. The snow was beautiful. The pine trees lovely. The wind whispered loudly. I was, for a few moments, lost in wonder, love and praise. I hold that experience in my heart and soul – an experience of breathtaking beauty, an experience of awe, wonder, mystery, feeling at home and loved.

There is something in us that allows for such upper-case wows. The social theorist Ernest Becker put it well: “There is a sense of curiosity and mystery, a spontaneous natural delight, a stirring toward beauty and the unfolding of beauty, a pulse of hope that draws on natural wonderment.” Maybe that capacity for wonderment is part of the image of God within us, something we want to nurture as followers of Jesus.

“Wows come in all shapes and sizes,” writes Anne Lamott, “there are lower-case wows.” One way to look at the story in Mark 9 is as a lower-case wow, maybe three lower-case wows. First Jesus tells the disciples that the simple act of caring for a child connects us to him. Caring for children connects us to Jesus. Every time I hold a baby for baptism, there is a wow, sometimes lower-case, occasionally upper-case.

The story goes on. “Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him because he was not following us.” Jesus responds. “Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me... Whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward.” Giving a cup of water connects us to Jesus. A lower-case wow. And Jesus is wanting the disciples to pay attention to places where wow can happen. They were limiting where wow could happen, and Jesus encourages them to see wow in unexpected places.

There is something about following Jesus that opens us up, makes us more sensitive to the quiet wow experiences in life. That is to our good. Theologian and spiritual writer Sam Keen writes: “these twin demands of the human spirit for wilderness and home, wonder and welcome, adventure and security... may be considered structural principles for the authentic life” ([Apology for Wonder](#), 191-192). We need some wonder, some awe, some adventure to be all God created us to be. One of the actions of God’s Spirit in our lives is to open our eyes, our hearts, our minds to everyday wonder and wow.

Anne Lamott writes, “Wow is John Muir, Walt Whitman, Mary Oliver,” and Whitman penned a poem that is the epitome of lower case, everyday wow.

“Miracles”

*Why, who makes much of a miracle?
As to me I know nothing else but miracles,
Whether I walk the streets of Manhattan,
Or dart my sight over the roofs of houses toward the sky,
Or wade with naked feet along the beach just in the edge
of the water,
Or stand under the trees in the woods,
Or talk by day with any on I love...*

*To me every hour of the light and dark is a miracle,
Every cubic inch of space is a miracle,
Every square yard of the surface of the earth is spread with'
the same,
Every foot of the interior swarms with the same*

Anne Lamott: "Poetry is the official palace language of Wow" (79).

Where is the Wow? It is in all kinds of places. It happens in all kinds of ways, lower case, upper case, with others, when alone. It is beauty appreciated. It is kindness shown. One of the actions of God's Spirit in our lives is to open our eyes, our hearts, our minds to Wow, to awe and wonder. "Gorgeous and amazing things come into our lives when we are paying attention," Anne Lamott reminds us (85). Another action of God's Spirit in our lives is to encourage us to be occasions of wow for others – by our kindness and love.

If there are a lot of occasions for Wow, I want to explore briefly the why of Wow. Why does Wow matter?

I have already made mention of a couple of reasons. There is something in us of the image of God which is expressed in Wow experiences, a sense of curiosity and mystery, a spontaneous natural delight, a stirring toward beauty and the unfolding of beauty, a pulse of hope that draws on natural wonderment. We also seem to have a need for wonder, awe, adventure to live a more authentic life.

Another why of wow is that when we connect with Wow, our curiosity increases and our reactivity decreases. Experiences of Wow embrace a healthy letting go of self. The psychologist Scott Barry Kaufman writes: "Healthy self-loss does not involve fear. Rather, it is characterized by curiosity and openness to the present moment and one's inner experiences." (Transcend, 204). Wow and wonder evoke curiosity, and curiosity is something we deeply need in our lives and in our world. There are multiple reasons why our struggle against racism in this country stalls, but one of them is our incuriousness

about the lives and experiences of others different from ourselves. For those of us who are white, we can be too incurious about the experience of persons of color in the United States. Some of the polarization in our country is attributable to our lack of curiosity. We label more easily than we wonder. Our curiosity sometimes travels no farther than clicking a “like” or “thumbs down” button on social media.

If we are plagued by our lack of curiosity, we are also plagued by cynicism. Cynicism tells us that nothing can change. It goes beyond a healthy skepticism to an unwarranted assertion that everyone is really only in it for their own benefit. Wow experiences do open us up not only to wonder, but also to hurt and pain, not only to beauty but also to brutality. We see it all, and Christian Wow remains hopeful. Among my favorite definitions of hope is one offered by Anne Lamott in another one of her books, Plan B. “Hope is not about proving anything. It’s about choosing to believe this one thing, that love is bigger than any grim, bleak [stuff] anyone can throw at us” (275, edited).

We need Wow. The psychologist Abraham Maslow studied what he called “peak experiences,” something akin, I think, to Wow, and in studying them he found they were often profound and transformative for people. “The person is more apt to feel that life... is worthwhile, even if it is usually drab, pedestrian, painful, or ungratifying, since beauty, truth, and meaningfulness have been demonstrated to exist” (in Kaufman, Transcend, 197).

We need Wow, and one of the actions of God’s Spirit in our lives is to open our eyes, our hearts, our minds to Wow, to awe and wonder. Another action of God’s Spirit in our lives is to encourage us to be occasions of wow for others – by our kindness and love.

As you celebrate 65 years of ministry, let it be an experience of Wow. These have not exactly been the 65 easiest years for the church, and here you are. Wow. As you look to the future, dedicate yourselves to being, among other things, a place that nurtures and cultivates Wow. In her book Christianity for the Rest of Us, Diana Butler Bass shares the story of a pastor friend of hers named Eric. Eric was on a study leave at a cabin, contemplating, among other things, how he might help enhance worship for his congregation. While pondering on a dock, Eric saw the biggest bass he had ever seen. “I stood up and gasped as a sense of awe and wonder provoked a surge of adrenaline through my body.” Then he thought: “This is the foundation of worship. If you can take an hour on Sunday morning and open people to experiencing just a quarter-second of awe, wonder, and surrender you just experienced, it is accomplished.” (173)

Be that kind of place. Be a place that nurtures and cultivates Wow, that helps people see differently and so live differently in the name and Spirit of Jesus. Be a place

that nurtures and cultivates Wow so that lives are changed, and we marvel together at changed lives. Be a place that nurtures and cultivates Wow so that we can be a people of tenacious hope. Be a place that nurtures and cultivates Wow so that we can be a people with the strength and courage to love. And because we will be people of hope and people of love, people of kindness and people of justice, we may be the occasion for others to also experience Wow. May it be so, by the power of God's Spirit. Amen.