

“Did You Know?”

Psalm 65

The Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

August 18, 2024

Rev. Anita Peebles, Seattle First Baptist Church

This month, I've been enjoying some time with family visiting Western Washington. Last week I took my cousin's kids, aged 12 and 16, to the Ballard Locks. This is one of the great tourist activities in Seattle, and a great way to learn about the keystone species of our Puget Sound ecosystem: the salmon. I've been to the locks many times, to watch boats large and small go through, and to sit and watch the salmon through the viewing window at the fish ladder as they try to swim from Puget Sound into Lake Union, and then beyond.

My cousin's kids were fascinated by the salmon! There were a lot of them, mostly Chinook and Sockeye at this time of year, swimming against the stream in an ancient journey that has marveled, and baffled, scientists, naturalists, fishermen and Seattle tourists for generations.

How does a fish navigate? How does a salmon know when it's time to return to its spawning grounds? How do schools of fish travel thousands of miles through the ocean, and then return to the exact stream from whence they came? Who taught them? What does the journey mean to the fish, to its predators, to indigenous people who rely on them for their livelihood? When you or I eat salmon, do we ever pause to think of how wondrous a journey these small animals make, or how important they are to the wellbeing of our whole ecosystem?

How is it that something so small can evoke such a feeling of awe? And what does it mean for our lives once we experience such wonder? What new knowing makes its way into our hearts when we marvel?

This summer, we have been gaining inspiration from the wisdom of Fred Rogers from Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood. One of the most meaningful impacts of Mr. Rogers was the encouragement for children, and their grown-ups, to wonder. Mr. Rogers did this through how he talked to viewers, asking questions, modeling curiosity, exploring play with his friends and the characters in the Land of Make-Believe. Mr. Rogers took ordinary people and ordinary situations and examined them with a thoughtful thoroughness that usually led viewers to learn something new or shift an understanding of something they'd thought they'd known, just a bit.

We hear this in Mr. Rogers' 1979 song “Did You Know?”:

Did you know? Did you know?
Did you know that it's all right to wonder?
Did you know that it's all right to wonder?
There are all kinds of wonderful things!

Did you know? Did you know?
Did you know that it's all right to marvel?

Did you know that it's all right to marvel?
There are all kinds of marvelous things!

You can ask a lot of questions about the world...
And your place in it.
You can ask about people's feelings;
You can learn the sky's the limit.

Did you know? Did you know?
Did you know when you wonder you're learning?
Did you know when you marvel you're learning?
About all kinds of wonderful,
About all kinds of marvelous,
Marvelously wonderful things?

Did you catch the repeats in the questions? Mr. Rogers asks “did you know?” twice, and “did you know it’s alright to wonder?” and “did you know it’s alright to marvel?” twice. Why do you think that is? I wonder.

I think it’s because we need to be reminded that it’s alright to wonder—it's ok not to know everything, it’s humbling to have things that remind us that we have much to learn about the world or about each other or about God. We can so often get hung up in needing to have all the answers, especially us adults. We want the security of knowing something with certainty. So here, in this song, I think Mr. Rogers is reminding adults to embrace the incredible capacity of children to wonder.

This is one of my favorite things about children. From the tireless questions as they learn how the world works to the dramatic imaginations that can create incredible fantastic worlds, children live into these words from Mr. Rogers: they are learning every time they practice curiosity, every time the feeling of awe strikes their young hearts.

An example of this proclivity of children towards curiosity is the poem “I Wonder” by Jeannie Kirby:

I wonder why the grass is green,
And why the wind is never seen?

Who taught the birds to build a nest,
And told the trees to take a rest?

O, when the moon is not quite round,
Where can the missing bit be found?

Who lights the stars, when they blow out,
And makes the lightning flash about?

Who paints the rainbow in the sky,
And hangs the fluffy clouds so high?

Why is it now, do you suppose,
That Dad won't tell me, if he knows?

As I read this poem, I think of children in my life who have asked similar questions as they explore God's Creation and their part in it. And I also remember being a child on a nature walk with my dad or my grandpa, asking questions such as these...and honestly a little exasperated because, clearly, they knew the answers, but they wouldn't tell me because it was "good for me to figure it out!"

In an article on "the wonder approach to learning," education scholar Catherine L'Ecuyer writes,

"Not only is the idea of wonder as old as Greek philosophy, it is also a universal phenomenon, well-known by any parent. *Why is it not raining upwards? Why is the moon round and not square?* Children have asked these questions since the beginning of time. When children ask these questions, they might not be demanding an answer. Rather...they are wondering because it rains downwards and because the moon is round. When children ask these questions, they are, as Plato and Aristotle suggested, philosophizing. They are surprised at the mere fact of seeing that things "are"."

But wondering is good practice, and asking questions is good, too. Not just good for learning, but good for living.

In an article on the science of awe, Dacher Keltner wrote, "Awe is the emotion that arises when we encounter vast mysteries that transcend our understanding of the world." Talking about his research from 26 cultures, he writes that it

"shows that people find awe in the "eight wonders of life," which are: the moral beauty of others, collective movement, nature, visual design, music, spirituality, big ideas, and encountering the beginning and end of life...Awe unleashes what William James called the "saintly tendencies" of religious experience—sharing, cooperation, and care...Awe is registered in bodily responses—perhaps the kind that led Walt Whitman to observe: "If the soul is not in the body, then where is the soul?" Experiences of awe activate the vagus nerve, which wanders from the top of your spinal cord through your throat, heart, lungs, and digestive organs. Awe slows your heart rate, orients your attention toward others, and prompts you to explore and engage with the world. Awe's effects on the lacrimal glands (tear ducts) make our eyes well up with tears that studies find are accompanied by a sense of shared identity with others. Awe is associated with a goose-tingling sensation in your arms and at the back of your neck...that arises in many social mammals, including humans, when responding to peril together. Awe is a basic state of mind, a primary form of consciousness. We can find it, other studies would suggest, readily. There is everyday awe to enjoy."

But how do we do it? How do we get ourselves in a headspace to feel that awe, how do we calm our bodies enough to welcome the experience of feeling connected? Must we divorce ourselves from reality and all of the aspects of life on our planet right now that grieve our hearts?

No! We embrace awe because it is really embracing connection—with each other, with the world, with God. And people since time immemorial have been experiencing the same thing. We *wonder* in the face of reality, as children do.

Perhaps you feel wonder when you explore texts that are sacred to you, whether the Bible or something else. The Bible, particularly the poetry of the psalms and the wisdom literature, contains human reactions to the beauty, complexity and awe of the world—and can inspire those feelings in us. Or perhaps you feel wonder when you encounter a pure emotion in someone else—when you are astounded by their kindness, their compassion, their thoughtfulness. Or maybe you witness a child in your life learning something new, or you sit with an elder you love as they reflect on their life. Or maybe you make music that feels *just right* for a life situation you are going through, or you feel totally in sync with other musicians, like when you breathe together in a choir.

Beloveds, when was the last time you paused to wonder, to feel awe, to marvel at something new you were learning or at something old that you were seeing with new eyes? When was the last time you recognized the beauty all around you? The beauty within you? When was the last time you said, “I am wonder-full!”

Go ahead, say it! “I am wonder-full!”

Because you are! The fact that we can experience connection to something outside of ourselves, that we can find an understanding of how small we are in relation to big things like these trees, our watershed, our ecosystem, our planet? That we are a small part of community, of a web of life, of love, of grace?

That is wonder-full!

That’s what I see here today.

The gospel reading earlier in the service ended, “we have seen amazing things today.” And indeed, we have, here today, in this gathering!

Here under the trees that offer oxygen and shade, here on the grass that is home to many insects and animals, here beneath the sky that is capable of showing marvelous colors from the lightest pink of morning to the richest orange of sunset to the deepest blue-black of midnight...we have seen amazing things today.

Here, with young and old gathered together. Here with singing and speaking and laughing. Here with heart-heavy cares shared among friends and family and those we have yet to meet and get to know and live alongside. Here, where our hearts reach for connection in the face of a world that tells us it is better, more noble, and easier to do everything ourselves. Here, where we attest to

the profundity of our individual lives as we are born, grow and die, and where we are witnessed as our true selves.

Beloveds, make time for wonder. It is a good way to learn, and an even better way to live. God's creation calls to each of us through the curiosity in our hearts—did you know I am right here with you? In this tree, in this insect, in this neighbor, in the motes of dust and the sunshine and the rain last night and the breath in your lungs. The Holy is among us, let us marvel in God's creation together—and dedicate ourselves to protecting wonder in each other and in our world.

May it always be so. Amen.