

Soul Stretching: Wonder

Isaiah 43:18-25, Mark 2:1-12

February 19, 2006

One story lingers in my mind from Robert Fulghum's book, *It Was On Fire When I Lay Down On It*. He writes, "Somewhere out there in the world is a young woman who, if she reads the letter that follows, will sing out, 'Hey, that's me—that's my story!' This letter is written out of gratitude.... Out of one person's moment of comic despair has come perspective for all.

"Dear Fellow Pilgrim:

There you were, Hong Kong airport, end of the summer of 1984, tensely occupying a chair next to mine. Everything about you said, 'Young American Traveler Going Home.' You had by then exchanged jeans and T-shirt for sarong and sandals. Sensible short hair had given way to hair long and loose. The backpack beside you bore the scars and dirt of some hard traveling, and it bulged with mysterious souvenirs of seeing the world. Lucky kid, I thought.

"When the tears began to drip from your chin, I imagined some lost love or the sorrow of giving up adventure for college classes. But when you began to sob, you drew me into your sadness. Guess you had been very alone and very brave for some time. A good cry was in order. And weep you did. All over me. A monsoon of grievous angst. My handkerchief and your handkerchief and most of a box of tissues and both your sleeves were needed to dry up the flood before you finally got it out.

"Indeed, you were not quite ready to go home; you wanted to go further on. But you had run out of money and your friends had run out of money, and so here you were having spent two days waiting in the airport standby with little to eat and too much pride to beg. And your plane was about to go. And you had lost your ticket. You cried all over me again. You had been sitting in this one spot for three hours, sinking into the cold sea of despair like some torpedoed freighter. At moments you thought you would sit there until you died.

"After we dried you off, I and a nice older couple from Chicago who were also swept away in the tide of your tears, offered to take you to lunch and to talk to the powers that be at the airlines about some remedy. You stood up to go with us, turned around to pick up your belongings. And SCREAMED. I thought you had been shot. But no...it was your *ticket*. You found your ticket. You had been *sitting* on it. For three hours."¹

She was sitting on her own ticket and didn't know it. How frequently have we found ourselves in the same position, desiring something else, longing for more, when all the time what we really needed and wanted was right in front of us.

The late Jewish rabbi Abraham Heschel once said, "I did not ask for success, I asked for wonder. And you gave it to me." He did not pray to be successful; he prayed to experience wonder, and his prayer was answered. I must admit that I have often had it backwards. I have desired to be successful, so that then I would have time to wonder, ponder, read, consider all the beauty of the universe, but I have not asked for wonder. Oh, I have had moments when I have paused from doing all the things that are supposed to make me successful, paused long enough to experience wonder. And to my surprise, it has been those simple moments of awe that have provided the meaning and fulfillment I was seeking in all the striving for success. I don't have to earn it; I simply have to be present to life and to the world, which are already rich in meaning and satisfaction.

In our fast-paced world we rush through life on the pathway to success and fail to see the beauty that inspires awe. We think our phone calls, our paperwork, ourselves far too important, and we take too much in life for granted. But when we do occasionally slow down, we catch a glimpse of the mystery that surrounds us. I never cease to be amazed at the delicate hummingbird hovering at a flower, the agility of squirrels dancing through tree branches, the graceful movements of the deer in our backyard, the vitality of a redwood tree that has lived for generations, the growth of a child, the compassion of a friend. These simple gifts cause me to wonder at the marvelous works of God.

If our problem is not rushing through life too fast that we don't stop to consider all the works God's hands have made, our problem may be an attitude. We've seen it all before; there's nothing new under the sun. Been there, done that. Can't show me anything I haven't seen before.

That perspective is quite contrary to that of God, as witnessed by the prophet Isaiah, who says, "Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert." The Israelites whom God is addressing have spent years in exile in a foreign land. God is preparing to free them and bring them home. The image and story that speaks most powerfully to the Hebrews is that of the exodus of their ancestors from slavery in Egypt. They too were led out of bondage through the sea and wilderness to their homeland. However, their ancestors complained for there was no food or water in the wilderness, and

they were hungry and thirsty. Moses quenched their thirst by striking a rock with his rod so that water sprang from it. But God says, "I'm going to do it differently, so don't expect the same old stuff to happen. Keep alert and watch, because I am going to amaze you with wonders. Instead of making a drinking fountain out of a rock, I'm going to provide flowing rivers of water in the desert to quench your aching thirst. Just as you humans become more inventive, so I, too continue to use my creative power among you." God is out to do something new, so there is always something that we've never witnessed before.

That was the experience of Jesus' friends and followers. Mark's story is set early in Jesus' ministry. People are growing accustomed to his healing ministry, so much so that they crowd his house, inside and outside, so that there is no way of getting to the front door. Four friends desperately want their friend to meet Jesus. When they find the access to the door blocked, they climb the stairs next to the house, go up to the mud roof, dig a hole in it, and lower their friend down into the house so he can meet Jesus. In response to the faith of the man's friends, Jesus says, "Son, your sins are forgiven." The astonishing thing is not the man's healing, but Jesus' claim to forgive sins. The scribes consider this blasphemy, for only God has the authority to forgive sins. Even more startling, Jesus reads their minds and unmask their inner thoughts. The ability to know what is in the human heart is an attribute reserved only for God. The people are astonished to detect the presence of God in this man Jesus. "We've never seen anything like this." God is doing a new thing, coming in human flesh and blood, as one of us, to be with us, to suffer with us, to show us how to live and grow. The God who has sometimes felt hidden and distant is drawing near and being disclosed in Jesus. God is out to do something new that arouses the amazement, wonder, and awe of the people.

It is God's nature to be creative. We can anticipate that God will be inventive, responding in new ways to the changing circumstances of our lives and our world. Therefore, there will always be something to astound us, to cause us to marvel at the wonderful works of the Lord. We haven't seen it all yet, because God is still at work in the world.

Our role is to slow down, pay attention, open our eyes and ears, prepare our hearts and minds to see and experience the presence of God and the wonders of the world around us.

In the 16th and 17th centuries, among the most prized pieces of furniture well-off families maintained were "wonder cabinets." These were simply knickknack shelves, but dedicated to displaying collections of natural wonders. Our ancestors used to go what they called "marveling" in the

world. They would go “marveling” and come back with unique butterflies or four-leaf clovers or shimmering seashells. They would put the triumphs of their “marvelings” in their wonder cabinets. Wonder cabinets were like momentary museums to the miraculous, giving their owners the chance for a daily dose of wonderment and marveling.²

Perhaps we need to reclaim “wonder cabinets,” as a tangible reminder of the daily miracles and acts of God all around us. At times our family has created an altar in our home, decorated with driftwood or pine cones or rocks or flowers, even photos of loved ones, as a way to remember and celebrate the marvelous works of God in our lives. Too often these days the manufactured clutter drowns out the simple wonders that offer deep nourishment to our souls.

Even 1400 years ago people were losing sight of the mysteries of God. Gregory the Great called them to rekindle the ability to see the extraordinary in the ordinary. Listen to his wisdom: "... if a dead man is raised to life, all men spring up in astonishment. Yet every day one that had no being is born, and no man wonders, though it is plain to all, without doubt, that it is a greater thing for that to be created which was without being than for that which had being to be restored. Because the dry rod of Aaron budded, all men were in astonishment; every day a tree is produced from the dry earth,... and no man wonders....Five thousand men were filled with five loaves;...every day the grains of seed that are sown are multiplied in a fullness of ears, and no man wonders. All ...wondered to see water once turned into wine. Every day the earth's moisture, being drawn into the root of the vine, is turned by the grape into wine, and no man wonders. Full of wonder then are all the things which men never think to wonder at, because...they are by habit become dull to the consideration of them."³

Indeed we need not look very far to see the wonders around us: the babies born each day, trees springing forth from the earth, the food on our tables. We simply need to open our eyes and cultivate the child-like wonder that gets buried beneath our adult worries and important tasks and serious business. But when we pause, breathe deep, and turn our attention to the present moment, we begin to see, to hear, to appreciate the beauty that indeed is ours already.

A father and daughter were flying cross-country from New York to Los Angeles. The little girl kept looking out the window and exclaiming: "Daddy, Daddy, there's a river ... Look, Daddy, there's a farm ... and a barn. Daddy, Daddy, look at that hill down there ... and there's a beautiful pond with all sorts of ducks in it." The father was busy reading a book, and kept repeating "uh, huh, uh, huh," until he became a little irritated, then

embarrassed by his daughter's excited chatter. Finally he turned to the passengers seated nearby and apologized: "Please forgive my daughter. She still thinks everything is wonderful."

I think that father was sitting next to his ticket to a wonderful life, but he didn't even recognize it! My friends, do you still think everything is wonder-full? If not, you are forgiven, but this is our chance to open our eyes, to recognize the gifts of God all around us, to rejoice in the continuing creative works of our God, and to marvel at the rich mysteries and deep meaning of life. Thanks be to God!

¹ Robert Fulghum, *It Was On Fire When I Lay Down On It* (New York: Villard Books, 1989), pp. 197-199.

² *Homiletics Online*, "Have a Wonder-full Life," August 16, 1998, retrieved February 18, 2006.

³ St. Gregory the Great, *Morals on the Book of Job* (Oxford: JH Parker, 1844), 32424, quoted in Ann and Barry Ulanov, *The Healing Imagination: The Meeting of Psyche and Soul* (New York: Paulist Press, 1991), pp. 23-24.