

The Last Sunday after Epiphany
February 26, 2017
The Rev. Jedediah D. Holdorph
Trinity Episcopal Church, Bend

Exodus 24:12-18
Psalm 99
2 Peter 1:16-21
Matthew 17:1-9

“Wow!” Wow is not a biblical word. But maybe it should be. It is, at the very least, so apt.

Our readings today are filled with awe and wonder, with reasons to be amazed and full of joy. Consider, for example, our first reading, from the Book of Exodus:

Moses went up on the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain. The glory of the LORD settled on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days; on the seventh day he called to Moses out of the cloud. Now the appearance of the glory of the LORD was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel. Moses entered the cloud, and went up on the mountain.

Now that’s a “wow” moment.

The Psalmist seems to have glimpsed such moments:

*The LORD is King; let the people tremble; *
... enthroned upon the cherubim; let the earth shake.*

And then there’s the gospel, Matthew’s account of the Transfiguration. Eugene Peterson tells it this way:

Jesus took Peter and the brothers, James and John, and led them up a high mountain. His appearance changed from the inside out, right before their eyes. Sunlight poured from his face. His clothes were filled with light. Then they realized that Moses and Elijah were also there in deep conversation with him.

Peter broke in, “Master, this is a great moment! What would you think if I built three memorials here on the mountain—one for you, one for Moses, one for Elijah?”

While he was going on like this, babbling, a light-radiant cloud enveloped them, and sounding from deep in the cloud a voice: “This is my Son, marked by my love, focus of my delight. Listen to him.”

What else could a person say after all of that except ... “WOW!!”?

Well, actually there’s quite a lot I could say about all of this ... and quite a lot I have said about all of this in previous years. We could, after all, undertake an historical and/or scientific investigation, asking, “What really happened?” I could unpack the theological and biblical background, offering an exegesis on the significance of the cloud and of light and of the voice that speaks from the cloud.

I've spoken about such topics before, and I probably will again in the future. But I'm not particularly interested in trying to explain what it all means to you this morning. At least this time around, I'm especially struck by the realization that these moments are, by their nature, experiences that defy explanation or analysis. So maybe the point is less to understand them than it is to stand – with Moses, with Peter and James and John ... to stand with them in awe.

The 20th century Jewish theologian, rabbi, and writer, Abraham Heschel, once wrote:

Our goal should be to live life in radical amazement ... get up in the morning and look at the world in a way that takes nothing for granted. Everything is phenomenal; everything is incredible; never treat life casually. To be spiritual is to be amazed.

He went on to lament that our religious lives too easily fall far short of that goal, when:

... faith is completely replaced by creed, worship by discipline, love by habit; when the crisis of today is ignored because of the splendor of the past; when faith becomes an heirloom rather than a living fountain; when religion speaks only in the name of authority rather than with the voice of compassion. ⁱ

In our church's baptism service, we say a short prayer near the end of the baptismal rite. It's one of my favorites in the whole of the Prayer Book. We give thanks for the water and for the Holy Spirit. We give thanks for being raised to new life. And then the prayer ends with our heartfelt hope for the person, or persons, just baptized:

... Sustain them, O Lord, in your Holy Spirit. Give them an inquiring and discerning heart, the courage to will and to persevere, a spirit to know and to love you, and the gift of joy and wonder in all your works. Amen. [BCP, p. 308]

That is, for me, a lovely and poignant prayer: "Give them ... the gift of joy and wonder in all your works." That's our prayer for every baptized person at the time of their baptism. And that's our job, too, I think. It's our calling to help nurture that gift in one another.

Rick Morley is an Episcopal priest and writer. And he's also the father of two young daughters. He says this about his job as a parent:

As a parent, one of the parental goals I have for myself is to raise two girls with a sense of wonder. So, I take them to museums and cathedrals, and point out the intricacies and nuances of what they're seeing. When I speak of God to them, I not only tell them that Jesus is their friend and with them all the time (which is good), but [I also tell them who] made the sun, the moon and the stars. And manatee. And flamingos. ⁱⁱ

I'm impressed and inspired by the example he gives us. It may seem that joy and wonder come naturally to children. And maybe they do. But joy and wonder are also easily lost to them – as they are to all of us – as they, as we, grow older.

As some of you know, Barb and I made a presentation about the Camino de Santiago a few days ago down at FootZone. Barb mentioned that I first walked a portion of the ancient pilgrimage route with a youth group back in 2007. She told the group that I cajoled her into going when I got back because I had such an amazing experience and because I just knew she would too.

That much was true, but she didn't tell them that part of the reason I wanted to go back was that I felt that the whole experience was, at least somewhat, lost on the youth. I remember one afternoon when we had the chance to visit a monastery, a beautiful interlude along the way, grand and glorious ... and they were – at least some of them, anyhow – bored, and disgruntled about being dragged off to this old building. It was one of those moments that, as one writer has phrased it, "hurt my heart."

So, yes, it seems to me that if we are going to pray the prayer for God to give the "gift of joy and wonder," then it follows that part of our responsibility to our children – and our grandchildren and our godchildren and one another within the community of faith – is to nurture that gift of joy and wonder. It's a precious opportunity for us, whenever the opportunity presents itself, to do so for one another. And maybe it's also our obligation to ourselves at every opportunity.

In this morning's gospel, Jesus took Peter and James and John with him up the mountain and there they had that amazing experience. And to their credit, the disciples allow themselves to be blown away by it all. They aren't blasé about it. They don't play it cool. They don't pretend not to see what was happening. Whatever shortcomings they have, and however paltry Peter's words are, they at least do the appropriate thing and fall on their faces.

But then Jesus comes over and "touches them, saying, 'Get up and do not be afraid.' And when they look up, they see no one except Jesus himself alone." Eugene Peterson puts it this way: "When they opened their eyes and looked around all they saw was Jesus, only Jesus."

And then they went back down the mountain, back to the ordinary, hum-drum world from which they had come. I wonder if they were profoundly disappointed. Or did they get the point that with Jesus as their companion, there was nothing ordinary and hum-drum about the world down there? For surely one of the central teachings of Jesus, from the first words he proclaimed, when he returned from the wilderness, was that the "kingdom of heaven," the "kingdom of God," was near, here, in our midst, right here, right now. If they didn't believe it then, could they doubt it now that they had seen it for themselves?

As we consider what comes next for us – a discipline for Lent, a change of heart – consider the words of Abraham Heschel: "Our goal should be to live life in radical amazement ... get up in the morning and look at the world in a way that takes nothing for granted." Or maybe we could – and we could do far worse – just resolve to pray that baptismal prayer for ourselves each day:

Sustain *US*, O Lord, in your Holy Spirit. Give *US* an inquiring and discerning heart, the courage to will and to persevere, a spirit to know and to love you, and the gift of joy and wonder in all your works. Amen. [BCP, p. 308, alt.]

ⁱ Abraham Heschel quoted by David Brooks, in "Alone, Yet Not Alone @ http://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/28/opinion/brooks-alone-yet-not-alone.html?_r=0. (Brooks did not include the full quote, so I've found a somewhat more complete version to use here.)

ⁱⁱ Rick Morley @ <http://www.rickmorley.com/archives/173>.