

Wonder: Stewards of God's Mysteries

2 Kings 6:8-23; 1 Corinthians 3:16-4:2

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We have been wondering about wonder these two days of Colloquium 2012, and for good reason. Throughout this week, I've felt inspired by that famous hymn composed by Charles Wesley in 1747, "Love Divine, All Loves Excelling." Maybe you have too: the final stanza begins, "Finish, then, thy new creation," and it concludes with "lost in wonder, love, and praise." What a haunting phrase that is!

I don't know about you, but I don't like to be lost, and true to my gender, I don't like to ask for directions. I need to know where I'm going; I can't stand to be aimless. I need directions and destinations. Give me tasks and goals. Now I fully admit that it's my way of maintaining control over my life (and perhaps the lives of others) and making some semblance of progress each day. To me, getting lost is akin to giving up.

"Lost in wonder"; I wish wonder were something I could work toward. Just tell me how, and I'll roll up my sleeves and get to work. But the thing with wonder is that it usually comes unbidden: wonder is the beckoning unbidden. And it always requires surrender. It *is*, in fact, a matter of giving up. To be lost in wonder, love, and praise is to surrender to something much bigger than I. And when it comes to the wonder of God, the glory of God, such surrender involves trust in the God who calls us forward not toward absorption into nothingness, not toward impotence and groveling, but toward flourishing and new life. "The glory of God is the human being fully alive." Wow, I wish I had originated that! But even better, it comes from the pen of Irenaeus of Lyons, that second-century church father famous for his anti-Gnostic writings.

But there's more to wonder than just getting lost. Paul calls us to be "stewards" of wonder. Paul encourages his Corinthian audience to think of him and his cohorts as "stewards of God's mysteries" or as "stewards of God's wonders." Frankly, I can't think of a more succinct way of capturing the heart of ministry. As ministers, we are to discern and proclaim, preserve and share, celebrate and embody the wonders, the mysteries of God's love and work in the world. If Paul had listed a few of God's mysteries, they would have no doubt included these:

The exodus: the splitting of the waters of chaos through which a band of slaves found passage into glorious and painful freedom.

The burning bush, in which the heat of God's inflamed passion for a people drew a reluctant refugee into leadership.

Mount Sinai: that pyrotechnic display on the mountain that set the stage for the giving of God's instructions. It's been said that it took the 10 plagues to get Israel out of Egypt and the 10 commandments to get Egypt out of Israel, for Israel to constitute itself as a beloved community.

Incarnation: that event in which the Creator of all becomes the creature for all. God's eternal Logos reaching deep into our material and messy existence. In Christ, God has become flesh and, as certain Christmas cards put it, has moved into the neighborhood. God embracing not only the uniqueness of our humanity, but also the continuity of humanity with all of life, with all creation.

And, of course, there is the Resurrection: death conquered once and for all, what Paul calls the first fruit of the new creation.

From a burning bush to an empty tomb, the center of God's mysteries is summed up in the church's bold proclamation around the table, the mystery of our faith: "Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again!" Now that is something to get lost in.

Lost in, as some would say, the "mighty acts of God." Or if you want a fancy Latin turn of phrase, *Magnalia Dei*. Whenever I type that into my word processor, the spellchecker always wants to change it to "Magnolia Dei." Maybe that occurs only in Georgia.

What about the minor acts of God, the small wonders that bless us day by day? The grace of a good night's sleep, the unexpected smile, sprouting seeds, a word of forgiveness. They, too, are pivot points, game changers even, as we "quiver" our way through another day of ministry. They, too, help us see our world, our lives, in new and sustaining ways. They, too, are part of God's ubiquitous glory, the glory to which the seraphim in the temple declare "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of God's glory." There is no myth of scarcity when it comes to God's glory, to the mighty and minor mysteries of God, and Ireneaus needs to be updated: "the glory of God is all creation fully alive." What is the chief end of all creation? "To glorify God and enjoy God's presence forever." Such is the ecology of wonder, love, and praise.

An ecology of wonder suggests that "the greatest wonder is not that there is a God, but that there is a world." And I have some backing from Karl Barth on that. In his own words, "The existence of the creature alongside God is the great puzzle and miracle.... That there is a world is the most unheard-of thing, the miracle of the grace of God."¹

To be sure, God could have easily chosen not to create a world, and I sometimes wonder if God would have been better off not having created a world such as ours, messy as it is. Nowhere does the Bible say that God was ever in need of a world or that God created a world to assuage an acute case of divine loneliness. So why God created a world at all is itself a mystery. It is the mystery of grace. Or call it wondrous love.

To fail to see the world as God's mystery, as a source of wonder, may well prove disastrous in the end. Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury, is correct in attributing "our present ecological crisis" to "our failure to think of the world as existing in relation to the mystery of God, not just as a huge warehouse of stuff to be used for our convenience." Or as Rachel Carson has taught us, wonder is "a virtue necessary for the long-term survival of our species," if not the planet.² We lose our

sense of wonder, we lose the world. Period.

So if creation is the greatest mystery, I wonder what could qualify as the second greatest mystery? Let me venture to say it is the church, the visible, corporate body of Christ, the extension of the incarnation.

You probably have heard the apocryphal story when Jesus ascended to heaven to be received by God the Father, and he was greeted by the angels and archangels of heaven, Gabriel, Michael. There they all were, giving him hugs and pats on the back, and they wanted to hear all about how things were on earth. Jesus said, "I have entrusted my mission, the mission of God's kingdom, to my followers." They gasped: "You mean you entrusted your entire mission to mere mortals? What if they fail?" And Jesus looked at them and said, "I have no other plan."³

By any standard, the church is an unhealthy institution with its checkered history, with all its schisms and abuse, its corruption and complacency, betrayal, deception, grumbling, envy, exclusion. And there is so much the church needs to learn, that we need to learn, about life together, about living in beloved community. And yet it remains the body of Christ on earth. In the eyes of the world, a mystery of this magnitude is nothing but absurd or utter foolishness, as Paul would say. But that's what God in Christ has chosen, to entrust God's kingdom to mere mortals, to you and me. God intends the church to be the sign of the new creation. Such is our responsibility, as enormous as that is. And such is our gift, as wondrous as that is.

As stewards of wonder, we are also practitioners of wonder. And practicing wonder begins with perception, with *seeing* the world and each other in a new way. It's what Andrew Park, a Korean-American theologian, says about the categorical difference between "seeing" and "watching":

Whereas seeing implies a warm intention, yielding constructive transformation, watching involves a biased look, engendering harmful consequences. Seeing stands for visual dialogue and understanding, arousing sympathy; watching [stands] for a visual monologue, yielding an unpleasant staring, cold look....In racial or ethnic (or gender) relationships (he goes on to say) seeing other groups constructively engenders a warm society....[The] courage to have constructive images of others constitutes the strength of seeing.⁴

Or to put it simply, watching renders the other either invisible or as a target. Ralph Ellison famously said, "I am invisible simply because people refuse to see me." Trayvon Martin would have agreed. So also Shaima Alawadi, an Iraqi mother of five in California. Both were watched and killed.

Being a "steward of God's mysteries" begins with seeing each other fully, compassionately, dialogically, as "fearfully and wonderfully made" in the words of the psalmist! Or as Paul says in another letter to the Corinthians, "From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view" (2 Corinthians 5:16). And in our passage, Paul tells us that we are nothing less than a temple for God's indwelling presence. Our lives, our very bodies and souls, are not our own. We are claimed by God, the creator of all, and not just claimed, but indwelt and filled by God's spirit, sealed and sanctified. Now I ask, how wondrous is that?

Any experience of wonder is an awakening, an opening of our eyes, to see the

world anew. Elisha prays for his prophetic apprentice that “God open his eyes that he may see.” And what his apprentice comes to see is the mountain filled with the assurance of God’s victory, “horses and chariots of fire all around,” but it is not the kind of victory that is expected. For it is not the battlefield that portends great slaughter, but a table filled with great feasting. How wondrous is that! To be a practitioner of wonder is to practice the art of surprise.

Wangari Maathai, the Kenyan Nobel Peace Prize winner and leader of the Green Belt movement in Africa, recounts in her memoir the time the police had put her home under siege. Through her kitchen window, she called out to them, “I know you’re here to do a job and that you have to arrest me, but I’m not opening this door. I know you’re cold. I will make you a nice cup of tea... but I don’t have any milk. If I give you some money, would you go and get some?” The police were dumbfounded, looking at each other. The officer consulted his colleagues, and they agreed to the offer. “One got milk from a nearby kiosk and I made tea, handing them the cups through the window. I had a cup myself, inside the house,” she says.⁵ On the third day, her door was bashed in, and she was arrested, jailed, and put on trial. You can read the rest in her memoir.

For many around the world, Wangari Maathai was a mentor. She was a practitioner of wonder who opened the eyes of the world to injustice and environmental damage. She opened our eyes to the life abundant, a sustainable life filled with the trees of life all around.

Cultivating wonder, I am convinced, requires mentoring, like Elisha and his apprentice, like Maathai and her students. And so I would invite you to pause and identify who in your life has been an eye-opener? Who has been a “steward of God’s mysteries” to you? Who has opened your eyes to see perhaps not “horses and chariots of fire all around,” but something new about God all around, about the world all around, about yourself, something new about faith in Christ that has changed the way you see and act? Those who unveiled a depth dimension about life and ministry? And may I be so bold to offer those who have instructed so many of you here on this campus:

Shirley Guthrie, who showed us how to always be reformed and reforming by reveling in the wonder of God’s sovereignty and grace.

Ben Kline, who taught us to how to wonder theologically and gracefully about God’s world and word, about the mysteries of creation and creator.

Lucy Rose, who in life as well as in her untimely death bore witness to God’s wondrous and holy love and made us better preachers.

Catherine Gonzalez, who has brought to life the movers and shakers of the church of past generations, reintroducing them to us as her friends and, hence, our friends.

Erskine Clarke, who in his gentle manner has retold the story of the church’s struggles in the South and of our struggles in seeking a dwelling place for all.

Walter Brueggemann, who has taught us how to pray and to think and act with, yes, prophetic imagination and abiding astonishment.

Charlie Cousar, who has helped so many of us actually understand Paul’s complex arguments, and in a way that has enlivened and sustained

the passion for ministry.

Chuck Campbell, who with intrepid resolve took us to places far beyond our comfort zones to preach the gospel, to preach with courage and naked vulnerability.

Kathleen O'Connor, who has shared in so many ways the wild, raging beauty of the world and of God for the world, a world filled with the cries for justice, shelter, and food all around.

Just to name a few.

These, along with many others, have opened our eyes to the mysteries of God. And you and I have been called to be trustworthy stewards of those mysteries passed on to us for the sake of the world, for the sake of the church. And when I think back to my mentors and colleagues in ministry, the eye-openers of my faith, I am filled with hope, once again, and the courage to face a new day, every day, in life and in ministry.

The philosopher Jerome Miller shares what he thinks is the most paradigmatic experience of wonder that we all have had in some form, and we had it as children, that of discovering a secret door. Wondering what might be lurking on the other side, the child can do one of three things: she can be gripped with fear and run away or she can stand frozen in awe. Or the child can tentatively reach up and turn the latch to open the door and pass through the threshold, filled with fear but also fascination. It takes an act of courage and trust to live into wonder.⁶

If opening a secret door is the deciding point of wonder, then as people of faith, as the church, you and I know who stands on the other side of that door. It is the one who says, "Behold! I stand at the door and knock; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me" (Rev 3:20).

How is it that we are to get lost and yet thrive in wonder, love, and praise? How is it that the church can be the sign of the new creation in Christ? How is it that we, of all people, have been called to be stewards of God's mysteries? I really don't know. It's a wonder.

All I can say is, turn the latch, open the door, and come to the table.

Notes

1 Karl Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline* (New York, Harper & Row, 1959), 54.

2 Robert Fuller, "A Life Shaped by Wonder: Rachel Carson," in *Wonder: From Emotion to Spirituality* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 108.

3 From Joanna Adams in at least two of her delivered sermons.

4 Andrew Park, "A Theology of Transmutation," in *A Dream Unfinished*, ed. by Eleazar Fernandez and Fernando Segovia (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2001), 158, 159, 160. Thanks to Marcia Riggs for this quotation.

5 Wangari Maathai, *Unbowed: A Memoir* (New York: Anchor Books 2007), 212.

6 Jerome A. Miller, *In the Throe of Wonder: Intimations of the Sacred in a Post-Modern World* (New York: SUNY Press, 1992), 34-35.