

One

ON TIPTOE WITH AWE

I wonder as I wander out under the sky,
How Jesus the Savior did come for to die,
For poor lowly people like you and like I,
I wonder as I wander, . . . out under the sky.

—JOHN JACOB NILES, TRADITIONAL APPALACHIAN
CHRISTMAS CAROL

One of the main components in joy is wonder.

When I think of wonder I think of my Cherokee Indian grandfather, Pop. A baptized Christian, he held on to the values of his Native culture and the Bible Granny used to read to him. He lived in a small cottage on a high bluff overlooking the stunningly beautiful Chattahoochee River. Pop would often take long walks along the bluff and through the woods, sometimes shaking his gourd shaker. He would sit or stand along the river, then slowly take in all he saw.

Once I asked him, “What are you doing, Pop?”

“I’m looking at what is in front of me.”

“Why?” I probed. “Why are you looking at what’s in front of you?”

“Because,” he said, “when you look long enough, it shimmers, and you see the glory.” Pop experienced wonder and awe in all of nature. He taught me, by his example, to do the same.

The Joy of Wonder

Wonder is a beautiful, mysterious thing. God wants us to marvel and find joy in him and what he has created. Such moments overtake us at times—we can neither pick nor control these moments. They simply awe us into a fullness of joy.

Think of a time you were outside, spending a moment in nature. You looked out over a huge seascape that was too vast to take in, and your heart beat with joy at the thought that God is infinitely vaster. Or perhaps you stood under the canopy of a night sky peppered with stars and remembered that the One who stretched them out over the universe also made and cares for you.

Maybe you can recall holding your infant and looking into big round eyes as he or she marveled at the world. Maybe you are thinking of a scripture verse, a painting, or a poem. Or perhaps you remember a time when you were with a group of longtime friends and the conversation ceased because no more needed to be said.

What are you thinking of? What is it that overtakes you with a wordless joy as you marvel at an enduring human love that is so like God’s love?

When we pause to wonder and stand in awe, finding joy in the seemingly inexplicable, we are bathed in what many Native cultures call the “Great Mysterious,” God who is untamed and too large to fit inside our neat and tidy boxes.

Rediscover Amazement

Nothing makes a roomful of people come alive like the presence of an infant. It is as though the baby gives them permission to be silly again, to rediscover for themselves what it is to be childlike again, to be amazed at the world as an infant is amazed. It is as though we can enter into that time that was once ours, when each moment was fresh and new. We can be ourselves, we can let the light and happy side of us come forth, and we are able to be energized afresh by God.

As the sensitive, God-filled poet Gerard Manley Hopkins tells us:

The world is charged with grandeur of God.
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil

.....

Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
World broods with warm breast and with ah!
bright wings.¹

We too can see the glory by taking time to see what is in front of us, taking time to yearn and wait for Christ to come into the stuff of our everyday living.

I experienced one such encounter with wonder when I was in college; it shined out from the “shook foil” and sent me on an entirely new trajectory.

As a young boy, my encounters with God were rooted in the Baptist churches and my Native heritage, which I received from my “unisi,” my beloved grandfather, Pop. Then, as a teen, I started attending a Presbyterian church, and I went on to study to become a Presbyterian minister at Belhaven University in Jackson, Mississippi.

Finding God in New Places

I had felt God's love both as a child and as a young man. Now I was trying to find God in books and study. I was living in my head, not in my heart. Day after day, I pored over dense philosophical books and scholarly scripture-study tomes. I read far more than was required, searching hard for something to touch my soul. I read daily about the love of God from masterful theologians like Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. My head was crammed full of knowledge but, at least at that time, my heart felt empty. I journeyed for a while through a wasteland. My inner landscape was as dry as the desert. I yearned for something more.

Then something happened that was to change my life forever. After spending spring break with my parents in Georgia, I passed through Selma, Alabama, where one of my high school teachers, who had remained a friend and mentor, had grown up. She invited me to visit a beautiful Catholic church there, and as I passed through town, I decided I would stop and do just that. I was curious, for I had never before set foot in a Catholic church, and I wondered what it would be like.

To my surprise, when I stepped inside the empty church, it looked very much like a Presbyterian church. The difference, however, is what mattered: up front was a gold box. I didn't know what it was, but I felt drawn toward it. It was as though God whispered in my ear saying, "Come closer."

I sat down in a pew directly in front of that box. At that moment, love flooded my heart; tenderness, melting compassion, and comfort rose up within me. Warmth coursed through my body. A quiet came over me that was nothing less than the peace of God. Time ceased to exist. This love was no theological abstraction. Rather, it was a great stream pouring

through me from God's inmost being—a love that knows no pause. A memory was born that I would relish and draw upon for the rest of my life.

That moment sent me on a five-year journey that would end with my becoming Catholic. Even though I did not know what a tabernacle was, much less the Blessed Sacrament, Christ reached out of the tabernacle and kissed my heart with his love. Later I learned that the gold box was a tabernacle that contained the mystery and miracle of the Blessed Sacrament. Without knowing it, I was caught up in a powerful experience of Eucharistic Adoration; though I did not know with my head that the Blessed Sacrament was present—or what it was—I still felt the presence of Jesus there.

After that experience I grew more tenderhearted. It was easier to love others and be sensitive to their needs and feelings. From that moment, I had a much greater reservoir of compassion; I had experienced God's loving-kindness, and it helped me to empathize with those around me. What had started as a personal experience of God became one that included relationships with others.

Where Do You Find Wonder?

We live in a society that, for the most part, is absent of wonder. This society has lost its sense of mystery and, along with that, much joy. Ours is an age of anxiety, a secular age marked by narcissism and joylessness. Even within the Church, people are too often jaded and cynical, relating to one another through sterile electronics rather than in a face-to-face, eye-to-eye, human way that can pour joy over the encounter.

In his book *Recapturing the Wonder*, Mike Cosper describes our current predicament this way: "It's not a world entirely without God or a world without religion. Rather, it's

a world where God and religion are superfluous. You can believe whatever you want so long as you don't expect it to affect your everyday experience."²

Most of us secretly yearn for a world that is not so antiseptic, a world soaked in the brightness of God. Western society once understood this intuitively; for at least a millennium and a half, the world was enchanted by God and God's creation. In the introduction to *The Book of Miracles*, Kenneth L. Woodward quotes St. Augustine, saying, "God himself has created all that is wonderful in this world, the great miracles as well as the minor marvels I have mentioned, and he has included them in all that unique wonder, the miracle of miracles, the world itself."³

Is there room for pleasure and fun in the joyful wonder Christ can bring? Christ's very first miracle in the Gospel of John was to change jugs of water into jugs of premium wine, to take what is part of human fun and infuse it with awe. In changing water into wine at the wedding banquet in Cana, Jesus showed himself to be a heightener of earthly joys and fun. He demonstrated his willingness to pour everlasting and pure joy into weary, thirsty hearts. He made the fun and pleasure of a party a wonder. That day, he made the joining of man and woman into a holy amazement.

The only true pathway into wonder is centering our whole being on God. It is as we meet God in the prayer of the silences, let him astonish us in the sacraments, and allow him to whisper into our hearts through scripture that we can see the world through the lenses of wonder. Real prayer does not so much make us otherworldly as give us the ability to see the world as enchanted by the mystery of God. The commonest joys are capable of this transformation. If we bring them to

Jesus, he will magnify them in the same way a taper plunged into a jar of oxygen blazes more brightly.

Lord of Wonder

Without Christ's presence, the brightest of earthly joys are like a stunning landscape in the evening shadow, which cannot be clearly seen. When the Lord comes to hallow them—as he always does when he is invited—the same scene bursts with new life; the sun blazes out on it, sparkling upon every bend of the undulating river, bringing beauty into shady corners and opening the flowers.

This smiling presence does not transform only our joys. It is true, the sunshine of his smile falls upon the water of human joy, transforming it into the wine of gladness. Yet he can also drop an elixir into the cups of sorrow and change them into cups of blessing and salvation. One drop of that potent influence can sweeten even bitter-tasting tears of pain. And the gifts he gives do not perish with the using. The more we take, the more we have. The largest water jugs will run dry at last; but Christ will give us a fountain within us springing unto life eternal.

In Jesus' closing words to the disciples before his passion in the Gospel of John, he claims to be in an altogether exceptional manner the object of the Father's love and—no less wonderful—to be able to love like the Father. "As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete" (Jn 15:9, 11, NRSV:CE).

This was a strange time for Jesus to speak of his joy, with Gethsemane and Calvary so near. Was the Man of Sorrows a joyful man? Yes, Jesus had joy because he absolutely surrendered himself to the Father's will. This is the same joy he will

give us if we too give up ourselves at the behest of love. Such joy will be progressive, ever full, and allow us to see the world with amazed eyes.

Pause in Wonder: A Moment with God

SCRIPTURE

As the Father loves me, so I also love you. Remain in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and your joy may be complete (Jn 15:9–11).

PRAYER

Dear Lord, you live in majesty beyond all telling. Help me to stand on tiptoe with awe and wonder at your presence in our midst. You are the very bread and breath of life itself. Rekindle my heart when I am burned out, and gradually transform my sorrows into joy. I want to drink deeply from the living waters of your Spirit. Brighten the stuff of my daily living with your presence. Amen.

REFLECTION

The greatest gladness we will ever have is God. Like the infant John the Baptist leaping with joy in the womb, God wants to pass on to each of us, regardless of our age, the delight of being a child of an all-loving Father. We wait on tiptoe for Christ's coming glory. After hostility, there will be forgiveness; after estrangement, reconciliation; after oppression and dehumanization, justice; after death, homecoming and resurrection.

Starters for Journaling or Meditation

- What are some of the “awe triggers” in your life? Perhaps hearing a stirring liturgy or a great hymn, watching the soft breathing of a newborn, or a walking in nature brings you to awe. Slow down and take time to notice these triggers, then write them down.
- Has there been a time in your life when you have seen sorrow become joy? Describe it.
- Draw a simple sketch or picture with pen or pencil to describe a time in your life you stood in awe of God’s world and were touched by joy.