

Wonder December 9, 2018, The Second Sunday of Advent
Bill Chadwick, Oak Grove Presbyterian Church
Psalm 98; Luke 1:5-20

Years ago I heard a physician on MPR talking about the wonders of the human body. He said words to this effect: “Every second of every day amazing things are going on inside of your body. The digestive system is a marvel, with enzymes and gastric acid breaking down the foods in your stomach to make them usable to your body. Blood is carrying oxygen through major arteries and down into microscopic capillaries. Your five senses are all gathering information. Your brain is firing with unimaginable complexity. And on and on. And all this is going on and we are pretty much unaware of it...” And then he concluded with this, which is what made it stick in my memory for nearly 40 years: “And it’s a good thing we are unaware of it. Because if we were aware, we would spend all our days in awe and wonder, and never get anything done.”

Awe.

And today’s Advent theme: Wonder. Say it with me: “*Wonder!*”

One of the most fascinating, and important, books I’ve ever read is Bill Bryson’s *A Short History of Nearly Everything*. It’s a layperson’s explanation of the formation of the universe and of life on earth. Like many of you, when I read non-fiction I underline and stick Post-it notes on passages I want to be able to return to. This is one of those books with a Post-it on every page. Sometime next year I’m going to preach a whole sermon—or maybe series—based on this book. But for now, just a few fun facts.

On the creation of the universe. “If the universe had formed just a tiny bit differently—if gravity were fractionally stronger or weaker

...then there might never have been stable elements to make you and me and the ground we stand on. (p. 15)

Martin Rees, Britain's astronomer royal, "maintains that six numbers in particular govern our universe, and that if any of these values were changed even very slightly things could not be as they are. For example, for the universe to exist as it does requires that hydrogen be converted to helium in a precise but comparatively stately manner—specifically, in a way that converts seven one-thousandths of its mass to energy. Lower that value very slightly—from 0.007 percent to 0.006 percent, say—and no transformation could take place: the universe would consist of hydrogen and nothing else. Raise the value very slightly—to 0.008 per cent—and bonding would be so wildly prolific that the hydrogen would long since have been exhausted. In either case, with the slightest tweaking of the numbers the universe as we know and need would not be here." (p. 16) And again, there are six of those numbers.

Don't tell me that Creation happened by chance. The math and science forbid that conclusion... *Wonder!*

There is one astronomical statistic that I have been able to keep in my memory. It is this: it is estimated that there are approximately 100 billion stars in our galaxy... And approximately 100 to 200 billion galaxies in the universe.

Wonder!

Do you remember the posters on the wall from elementary school that showed the planets in the universe? You've got Earth this big and this far from the sun and then farther away is big ol' Jupiter and then at the edge of the poster was tiny Pluto (which has, of course, since been demoted to a dwarf planet.) We were told that the sizes and distances depicted on the poster were not to scale. Understatement of the century.

“Such are the distances, in fact, that it isn’t possible, in any practical terms, to draw the solar system to scale. Even if you added lots of fold-out pages to your textbooks or used a really long sheet of poster paper, you wouldn’t come close. On a diagram of the solar system to scale, with the Earth reduced to about the diameter of a pea, Jupiter would be over (1000 feet) away (up by St. Luke’s Church) and Pluto would be (a mile and a half distant, almost to Kennedy HS,) (and about the size of a bacterium, so you wouldn’t be able to see it anyway). On the same scale, Proxima Centauri, our nearest star, would be 10,000 miles away, (past Johannesburg, South Africa.)”

Wonder.

Later Bryson talks about atoms, the building blocks of all matter, and how small they are. “We are each so atomically numerous and so vigorously recycled at death that a significant number of our atoms – up to a billion for each of us, it has been suggested – probably once belonged to Shakespeare. (A billion atoms that once were in Shakespeare are now in each of us.) A billion more each came from Buddha and Genghis Khan and Beethoven, and any other historical figure you care to name.”

He doesn’t name Jesus. But I will. You share 100 billion atoms that were once part of the body of Jesus of Nazareth. There’s a sermon or three right there.

Wonder!

(Slide of tardigrade)

Remember this scary-lookin’ guy? I talked about him in a sermon five years ago. Fortunately, he’s small. You can only see these beauties with a microscope. They are amazingly hardy, including possessing the ability to be completely desiccated, dried out, for periods of up to eight years and then being rehydrated.

If you were to go into outer space without protection, you would die. The lack of pressure would force the air in your lungs to rush out. (Your skin) would inflate like a balloon. Your eardrums and capillaries would rupture, and your blood would start to bubble and boil...Mercifully, you would be unconscious in 15 seconds.

But there is one animal, and only one, that can survive this: tiny creatures called tardigrades about 1mm long. In 2007, thousands of dried-out tardigrades were blasted into space without tiny little space suits, in a European Space Agency satellite, subjecting them to incredible pressure and huge amounts of radiation. After the satellite had returned to Earth, scientists rehydrated them and within thirty minutes many of them came back to life... Some of the females then laid eggs, and the newly-hatched young were healthy.

Tardigrades can withstand huge amounts of radiation, being heated to (300 degrees), and being frozen almost to absolute zero. (By Jasmin Fox-Skelly, BBC Earth, 13 March 2015)

(<http://www.bbc.com/earth/story/20150313-the-toughest-animals-on-earth> and New Scientist September 8, 2008)

Wonder!

If we have eyes to see, the miracle-infused gift of creation, will keep us in breathless wonder all of our days.

Advent. A time of wonder.

(Photo of “Wondershop”) No, not Target’s idea of Wonder.

While looking for something else, I stumbled across this imaginative commentary by Barbara Brown Taylor on Luke’s description of Zechariah’s encounter with the angel, fifteen months before the birth of Jesus. To refresh your memories from Sunday

School, Zechariah was a priest. He and his wife, Elizabeth, the cousin of Mary, had been wed a long time, but they were childless. Which was a tragedy in biblical times. Your son carried on your family heritage. Children were your only pension plan in your old age. It was shameful to be childless.

No doubt Elizabeth and Zechariah had prayed and prayed for children, but it didn't happen. Now they are old. One day Zechariah's name had been chosen by lot for him to offer the sacrifice in the Holy of Holies, in the center of the Temple. While there, an angel appeared to him, terrifying him, and announced that he and Elizabeth will have a son, who will play an important role in bringing people back to God. (This will be John, known as the Baptist.)

When he could speak, Zechariah asked the angel, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is no spring chicken."

¹⁹ The angel said to him, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. ²⁰ And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their appointed time."

And indeed, when Zechariah finally emerged from the Temple, he was unable to speak.

Taylor muses about Zechariah's response: "How will I know that this is so?" The commentaries call Zechariah's question the sin of disbelief, but I wonder about that. You might also call it a failure of imagination, a fear of disappointment, a habit of hopelessness. He had waited a long time for something that was systematically denied him. He had gotten used to not being heard. How was he supposed to know that this time would be different? . . .

Wherever this story is told, Zechariah's muteness is treated as his punishment for doubt . . . [But] it seems entirely possible to me that his silence was the angel's gift to him—an enforced sabbatical, a gestation period of his own during which the seeds of hope were sown again in his hushed soul.

(Bread of Angels, pp. 93-94)

I submit to you that Advent is a gift of the Church to us, intended for us to take time, to wait, to wonder, to sow our own seeds of hope.

Wonder!

For a long time my very favorite verse of scripture has been John 10:10, in which Jesus promises, "I have come that (my followers) might have life, and have it abundantly."

I still love that passage, but I think there is one I cherish even more now with the wisdom of advanced years. It is Mary's reaction to the visit of the shepherds, the shepherds who came to worship her newborn son. They tell her why they are there. It's because the angels told them, "Unto you is born this day in the City of David, a Savior, who is the anointed one of God..." Whew.

Remember, Mary is maybe fifteen years old. She has had her own encounter with an angel. And now this: Luke concludes his account of the nativity story with these words "...Mary treasured all these things and pondered them in her heart (2:19)."

Wonder.