

Oak Grove Presbyterian Church

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November 26, 2023

Today is our final sermon in the series inspired by the book, *Help, Thanks, Wow: The Three Essential Prayers*, by Anne Lamott.

Prayer, she writes, “is communication from the heart to that which surpasses all understanding. We pray, confident that God wants to hear our prayers, that we are invited into a relationship with the divine.” (Lamott, Ann. *Help, Thanks, Wow: Three Essential Prayers*. Penguin Group: NY, 2012, pg. 4)

Prayer as authentic communication and trust in a relationship with the divine. A gift. We have thought about help and thanks these last couple of Sundays.

Today we will think about Wow. Wow is about wonder.

The poet Maya Angelou said that life is not measured by the breaths we take, but by the moments that take our breath away. Wonder takes our breath away and leaves room for the next breath...that’s why we have moments described as breathtaking. (Lamott, pg. 81)

Lamott reflects that the words wow and awe are the same height and width, all w’s and short vowels. They could dance together. Even when, or maybe especially when, we don’t cooperate, the goodness of God given over and over. The surprising, magnificent, tender are before us. Awe, wonder, wow.

We will begin again with words from Philippians, a text from Paul’s letter that we have read for three weeks in a row. Repetition of scripture offers us a lens through which to view the world, and this passage,

specifically, contains a promise of peace that we all long for so dearly, God's peace that, by grace, reaches us despite our circumstances.

Philippians 4: 4–7

Rejoice* in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.* ⁵Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. ⁶Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Let your requests be made known to God... help... thanks...

“The third great prayer, Wow,” writes Lamott, “is often offered with a gasp, a sharp intake of breath, when we can't think of another way to capture the sight of shocking beauty or destruction, of a sudden unbidden insight or an unexpected flash of grace. “Wow” means we are not dulled to wonder. We click into being fully present when we're stunned into that gasp, by the sight of a birth, or images of the World trade Center towers falling, or the experience of being in a fjord, at dawn, for the first time. “Wow” is about having one's mind blown by the mesmerizing or the miraculous: the veins in a leaf, birdsong, volcanoes.” (Lamott, pg. 71)

Wow is the experience of being nearly speechless, but not quite, when you can barely manage one syllable. Lamott observes that life is so much more comfortable when we think we know what “it all” means. And then, when something happens that takes our breath away, and all we can say in response is “wow”, then that's a prayer. (Lamott, pg. 73)

So many things keep us from the wonder, from wow in this world. Busyness, crisis, distraction from work or family obligations, stress, sadness. But the Spirit seems to have a way of helping us pay attention

when you least expect it. Like looking out the kitchen window as I did late one afternoon this week, hands full of flour when my eyes beheld a cotton candy pink and blue sunset with the outline of bare tree branches outlined in the light, and it stopped me in my tracks.

Lamott calls poetry “the official palace language of wow.” (Lamott, pg. 79) Thus, our second scripture this morning is a psalm, a song that may have originally been sung in a service of thanksgiving at the harvest. I invite you to listen to the words and allow the richness of images to wash over you and see where your mind takes you.

Psalm 65

Praise is due to you, O God, in Zion; and to you shall vows be performed, ²O you who answer prayer! To you all flesh shall come. ³When deeds of iniquity overwhelm us, you forgive our transgressions. ⁴Happy are those whom you choose and bring near to live in your courts. We shall be satisfied with the goodness of your house, your holy temple.

⁵By awesome deeds you answer us with deliverance, O God of our salvation; you are the hope of all the ends of the earth and of the farthest seas. ⁶By your* strength you established the mountains; you are girded with might. ⁷You silence the roaring of the seas, the roaring of their waves, the tumult of the peoples. ⁸Those who live at earth’s farthest bounds are awed by your signs; you make the gateways of the morning and the evening shout for joy.

⁹You visit the earth and water it, you greatly enrich it; the river of God is full of water; you provide the people with grain, for so you have prepared it. ¹⁰You water its furrows abundantly, settling its ridges, softening it with showers, and blessing its growth. ¹¹You crown the year with your bounty; your wagon tracks overflow with

richness. ¹²The pastures of the wilderness overflow, the hills gird themselves with joy, ¹³the meadows clothe themselves with flocks, the valleys deck themselves with grain, they shout and sing together for joy.

The breadth of this poetry is stunning. The writer leaves nothing out, God's mercy and grace to all God's people and all nature. The wonder of rain and growth, of joy and song. If you want to find honesty, and a good bit of wow, I suggest you start your day with a psalm. Every emotion is found in the book, some comfortable, some uncomfortable, all real feelings expressed in an honest way.

Wows can be tiny or large. Lamott calls them lower-case wows and upper-case wows.

The lower-case wow happens when something small and ordinary delivers us above and beyond (Lamott, pg. 74), like that sunset I mentioned, or like stepping into a warm shower on a cold morning. Feeling the fog of sleep run off your body, the smell of lavender soap easing your stress. You may not have known just how badly you needed that moment. I'm sure you can think of your own little wow, receiving a kind and unexpected word of encouragement, sharing a tender moment with a child, or the taste of that first tomato off the vine after a cold and rainy spring.

Upper-case wows are those that boggle your mind. Your first view from the rim of the Grand Canyon, or spotting that bird you've searched for years, seeing a shooting star for the first time, or the gradual healing of a relationship you thought was lost. Wow.

The early disciples who traveled with Jesus lived with a lot of wows. The Bible says, more than once, that they were amazed at what Jesus said. Now the gospels don't say explicitly, but surely, we can imagine

the wows when Jesus calmed the sea, or walked on water, or healed the woman who bled for 12 years, not to mention when they met Jesus, alive again, after his crucifixion, on the road to Emmaus, or on the beach or behind closed and locked door. As we enter the Advent season next week, it's all about the wow of God with us, and then, resurrection, new life. Wow and wow.

God is not limited by time or space or humans paying attention to bring the wow. Each season has its wonders, the crackles amidst the vibrant reds and oranges of fall, the silence of winter, all grays and white and blue, the birdsong risings among neon greens and purple of spring and the vibrant life of summer, with heat, and sun, and green. Over, and over, and over again.

Art and music and dance and theater, too. Lamott writes, "What can we say beyond Wow, in the presence of glorious art, in music so magnificent that it can't have originated solely on this side of things?"

Think about the shapes and colors of a Picasso, the dance of Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, Alvin Ailey, the music of Bach and Beyonce. And how many times have we all needed a moment to sit after the choir offered an anthem. Just last week at the history museum I overheard the word "wow" as visitors took in the beading and lace and artistry of the Dakota people.

The role of wonder and wow in our lives cannot be underestimated, it's something you cannot orchestrate or control, it's something you have to feel. We worship a God of endless possibility, who makes a way out of no way, and we can have faith that God is always at work, even when we are not paying attention.

Consider the wows that are all around all the time, the forgiveness of sin, hope when we think all is lost, the healing of a broken heart, the peace that surpasses all understanding in the most stressful of times, Jesus, Emmanuel, God with us, and new life in the resurrection of the dead.

Help, thanks, wow. And all that's left is AMEN, a word that means Yes, truly, and so it is. For now, because prayer is not a once and done sort of thing, and that amen is what it is until the next time we go to God in prayer.

I honestly do not know how prayer works, and yet I trust, and believe that somehow, God is always at work in a transformative way.

C.S. Lewis wrote, "I pray because I can't help myself. I pray because I'm helpless. I pray because the need flows out of me all the time, waking and sleeping. It doesn't change God. It changes me." (noted by Lamott, pg. 100)

Prayer has always been a part of my life, though I've been more disciplined at some times than others. I've experimented with visualization, silence, creative writing, yoga, dance, and movement. One of my first and best memories is being a small child in bed, praying that childhood prayer maybe some of you used, now I lay me down to sleep. We can talk about the theology of that prayer at a different time! When I was done with the rhyme, I asked God to bless those closest to me, a litany that started with my mom and dad, extended to brothers, and then aunts, uncles, cousins, etc., etc., ending with my beloved dog Pepper, the best dog in the world. I struggled with sleep as a kid and always felt that I could rest after sharing my heart with God and I still do.

Lamott ends the book with these words:

Amen. Let it happen! Yes! I could not agree more. Huzzah. It is a good response to make contact with God through prayer and to praying with people who share the journey, and to most things that are good, which much of life can be. So it is, when we do the best we can, and we leave the results in God's good hands. (Lamott, pg. 102)

Amen