

TITLE: *Mystery and Beauty in the Unknown*

Prepared by Mary Fox for 8/9/20

Good morning! I have an important question to ask you this morning ... it's a curiosity I've been contemplating for a while now. I'd appreciate your full and undivided attention when I ask you this, and I'm going to assume many of you have had this shared experience. Have you ever felt certain beyond doubt that you put your socks into the laundry in pairs, yet discovered that when they come out of the dryer, random individual socks were nowhere to be found? Where do they end up? It seems as though socks disappear into an abyss known only to the Lord of Lost Socks – it's a total and complete mystery.

This is but one of many mysteries of the universe for which I lack answers. But it turns out that the point is not actually in discerning the answer – it's in awakening our curiosity. In today's sermon, we're going to talk more about curiosity, wonder and awe as these gifts guide us to a deeper relationship with God.

As you may recall, for the past several weeks we have been concentrating on a theme entitled "Beguiled by Beauty" based on a book by Dr. Wendy Farley due to be published this Fall. The book focuses on creating a life of contemplation and compassion. Dr. Farley's premise is that leading a contemplative life – a life filled with reflection, with meditation and introspection – leads us deeper in our relationship with God, and in turn enables us to live in community with greater compassion. Ancient mystics maintain that God was so enchanted by beauty that she created beauty. And in my experience, I find that my spiritual life is certainly deepened when I set aside time for wonder and awe, time to marvel at God's creation.

This marks the fourth week in our series, and our specific topic for today is “Abyss, Mystery and Wonder”.

I recently came across a quote by artist Ansel Adams who said “I believe the world is incomprehensibly beautiful – an endless prospect of magic and wonder.” If you’re familiar with Ansel Adams’ work, you know that he was an American photographer and environmentalist particularly known for his black-and-white images of the Western U.S. His quote seems especially appropriate, since the first example that came to my mind in terms of incomprehensible beauty, magic and wonder, is that of the Grand Canyon in Arizona.

I have only visited the Grand Canyon on one occasion, but it left me with an indelible feeling of grandeur and awe. The Grand Canyon itself is six million years old. As you stand at the rim and overlook this geologic wonder, taking in the layers upon layers of rock sediment, it’s hard to imagine six million years. I recall an exhibit I saw during my visit that provided a meaningful perspective. Imagine standing in front of giant clock the size of an entire wall {motion round clock} bigger than my human arm span. Imagine the clock with only a second-hand, where one full rotation of the hand – that is a circle of 60 seconds – represents 6 million years. Each individual tick of the clock – one single second – is equivalent to 100,000 years. Tick, 100,000; tick, 200,000; tick, 300,000. As I stood there absorbed in this experience, I was awestruck. If I lived to be 100 years old, a single tick of the second hand would represent 1,000 lifetimes. And standing at the rim of the Grand Canyon, one overlooks six million years of sediment layers. It felt beyond comprehensible to imagine the insignificance of my life in view of the awesomeness of the Grand Canyon.

If the Grand Canyon represents one example of mystery and wonder, the cosmos might represent another.

Have you ever heard of Dark Sky Park near Mackinaw City? Its official name is “Headlands International Dark Sky Park” and it’s a 550 acre area designated to protect nighttime views of the stars and galaxies that surround us. Headlands – and forty other such parks worldwide – assure that there will always be places where we can bask in awe of the universe, the beauty of the stars, and the magnificence of outer space.

You might be familiar with the public radio program called “Star Date” which has aired daily since the late 1970’s. It’s produced by the McDonald Observatory in Austin, Texas, and provides a brief peak into the world of astronomy, examining topics as varied as newly discovered quasars and the best place to watch a meteor shower. To me the topics of stars, planets, galaxies, and matters of all sorts beyond the earth’s atmosphere represent the epitome of abyss, mystery and wonder. The vastness of the cosmos is mesmerizing, with my own life representing a mere speck by comparison.

In many ways, perhaps our God is like the Grand Canyon or the Galaxies beyond – too vast to fathom or comprehend – far beyond anything we can truly understand.

The paradox about today’s sermon is that I’m left to use words to describe that which cannot be reduced to words. It is when we exist in this place – the place where language cannot express the fullness, the wonder, the awe – it is in this place that author Wendy Farley describes as a spiritual abyss.

In Dr. Farley’s world view, leading a contemplative life guides us to this spiritual abyss. It requires us to extend our curiosity, to be open to new things, and to appreciate the mystery in all that we do not and cannot know. The path involves savoring what the senses can take in, yet at the same time wondering at the mystery of

unfathomable depths of even a single atom. In the words of Dr. Farley, God is not something to be seen or heard or grasped by reason. We manufacture images of God all the time. But Divine Reality created us in such a way that we can move outside seeing, hearing, reasoning, feeling. She describes our spiritual nature as a divine abyss – a dimension not touched by words, thoughts, or ideas. A dimension similar to that we might experience while standing before the Grand Canyon or contemplating the cosmos.

Words and metaphors are important in our efforts to understand God, but they're completely inadequate. Dr. Farley suggests that as soon as we define or name something, as soon as we attach words, we violate the essence of unknowingness, and that which we have defined becomes an idol. Anytime we take some thing or some idea and make it solid and immovable, we create an idol. As humans, we're so adept at this we can take something as malleable and fleeting as a feeling or experience and turn it into something to grasp onto and hold tight. The contemplative life invites us into a different kind of engagement with God and creation.

As we heard earlier this morning from Psalm 135, "The idols of the nations are ... the work of human hands. ...Those who make them and all who trust them shall become like them."

According to Wendy Farley, "we can tell whether we are worshiping the Divine Goodness or an idol of our imagination by the fruits of our worship. Love, compassion, social justice are the fruits of a loving God. Cruelty, hubris, selfishness, hostility to creation suggest that, whatever names we are using, we are worshiping an idol."

So the challenge before us is to cultivate our curiosity and to recognize it for the gifts that it represents. When we experience the awe, beauty, and wordlessness that

accompany the unknown, we grow closer and deeper in our relationship with God. I recently discovered a wonderful book written by author Parker Palmer entitled “On the Brink of Everything: Grace, Gravity, and Getting Old. In his reflection on spirituality from the perspective of old age, Palmer describes the way that embracing everything invites the grace of wholeness. He encourages us to be in awe – with no need to understand, only to remain curious.

That leads me to an assignment for all of us in the week ahead. Our assignment is to explore something you don’t know. Not for the sake of knowing, but for the sake of cultivating curiosity, staying open to that which we don’t know, becoming lost in wonder, astonishment and mystery. It might be further research into what the Hubble space telescope has taught us about the universe, or maybe something about the behavior of an animal species, or the complexities of an electrical distribution grid. Whatever you might choose, allow yourself to revel in the mystery. Take in the information slowly, and open your heart to wonder. You might place a note of this nature nearby: *The more we know, the more we know we don’t know. Wonder and awe that leads us to our Creator is good ... for the beauty of the earth.*

I’d like to close with a quote from writer Diane Ackerman who implores us in this way... she says “*groom one’s curiosity like a high-spirited thoroughbred, climb aboard, and gallop over the thick, sun-struck hills every day. It began in mystery, and it will end in mystery, but what [beguiling beauty] lies between.*”

Practice being open to new things, and in so doing recognize the mystery in all that we do not and cannot know. Appreciate the beauty that lies within wonder and awe beyond our comprehension – and give thanks to God. Amen.