

February 11, 2024 St. Andrew Lutheran, Beaverton

“. . .once, years ago, in some kind of rapturous mistake, the deer did not run away, but walked toward me and touched my hands—and I have been, ever since, separated from my old, comfortable life of experience and deduction, I have been, ever since—exalted. . .” Mary Oliver, in *Pinewoods*, White Pine, 1994.

This poem, by Mary Oliver, captures the experience and impact of WONDER! When have you been touched by wonder? Inspired by the view from a mountaintop? Holding a newborn baby? Or been surprised by the sudden appearance of a rainbow, or the glow of a super moon on the horizon? Maybe you were filled with music as you played in an orchestra or sang in a choir?

The experience of wonder might help illuminate our scripture today. Transfiguration, that experience of Peter, James and John—seeing Jesus in a dazzling light, and then Moses, and Elijah—is mysterious! Maybe regarding transfiguration, that we shouldn’t ask “What does it mean?” but “How does it mean?” The concern is not to arrive at the definition, but to receive an experience. Perhaps this story of the transfiguration of Jesus needs simply to dazzle us.

I’m sure I’m not alone in sometimes feeling oppressed by concerns about democracy, the climate, the most economically vulnerable. . . We can become overwhelmed in our lives by fear, disappointments, and grief. We can be so overwhelmed that we move through the hours and days, through our work and homes and relationships, without noticing the wonder all around us.

As we grow from childhood into adulthood, we often lose a sense of wonder. I remember a man who went into his child’s kindergarten class and saw a bulletin board listing what the students wanted to learn in school that year. Most of the statements were things like: “behave,” “learn to sit still,” “follow the rules,” and “listen to the teacher better.” One child said, “I want to know why the ocean shines like fire.” Wow!

Now there’s a kid who has the gift of experiencing wonder! We can say a lot about the Transfiguration, and try to define what happened. But if there’s ever a “WOW” moment in Jesus’ ministry, this is it. A favorite theme in the Gospel of Mark is following Jesus in “the way.” Today’s passage sends that message as a voice from the clouds: “This is my son, the Beloved. Listen to him!” And isn’t that part of why we show up here in worship, together? To listen? To get back on track? In a noisy world that sometimes overwhelms with frustration, fear, anger, and sadness, these moments of glory can call us back to the way.

Do we have any divers, or snorkelers among us? It is a stunning thing to put on a snorkel mask and to peer into the water. Just below the surface, there is another brilliant world busily, beautifully swimming around. Several years ago, I was in Hawaii with six others who went by boat to drop anchor off a quiet beach. We pulled on wet suits. (Sort of the reverse of peeling a banana!) We stepped off the boat, with finned feet, holding onto our masks. One by one we

plunged into the turquoise water. The salt water made us buoyant, so it was easy to simply float and watch the passing fish. All of the sudden, floating toward me was a blue creature that appeared to be flying under the water, with a “wing”-spread of about eight feet. It was a manta ray, gliding through the water and feeding on small fish and plankton. Sunlight pierced with water in patches as the ray gracefully moved in and out of the shadows. (At that point, I did not know the difference between a sting ray and a manta ray. Sting rays do have stingers. But mantas do not have stingers.

Fascinated and afraid of the wildness, I kept my distance. It began to swim toward me, quickly. Startled, I immediately turned around to swim away, and nearly bumped into a sea turtle, right behind me! In this close encounter with other-worldly creatures, I felt a oneness. We are not alone. The wonder of it made me profoundly glad, and the only response is: Praise!

What brings a sense of wonder to you? How do we wade through the fear, the grief, the static of the news to open ourselves to wonder this Transfiguration Sunday?!

This story is in all three synoptic gospels: Matthew, Mark, and Luke. It recalls the Old Testament story of Moses’ encounter with God, which so filled him with wonder that his face shone with glory. It is also similar to the story of Elijah, who was taken into the heavens by chariot. These stories defy explanation. Transfiguration Sunday marks a thin place, an in-between space—between the shining of the Epiphany star that guides us, and Lent, which begins a walk through the worst of what humanity can dish out: the crucifixion of the innocent. In transfiguration, it is as if the gospel is saying: We’re now making the turn toward the cross, and descending into the valley of the shadow of death. But fear not! Keep this astonishing, mysterious mountaintop story in mind as we go. Carry it like a torch. It can help show the way—because it gives us a glimpse of where all this is headed.

So, take heart! And “listen to him”—that is, continue to trust and follow Jesus. Follow in his footsteps, even though the path ahead now seems filled with danger and disgrace. Shimmering beauty awaits on the other side of the cross.

We are not alone in this journey. We showed up today, strangers, friends, and family, and now, we have the potential for experiencing wonder, together. My friends, here is what I believe to be the wonder of gathering as a congregation for worship. We are gathered, the very young, and the very old. We are gathered, lesbian and gay, trans, straight, single, married, rich, poor; filled with hope, and filled with sorrow. . . We are a rainbow of people created by and loved by God in God’s very image. What a wonder!!

Transfiguration reminds us to live like this: look for those moments where God knocks our socks off! Soak in the “wow” of the moment. See God’s glory. Maybe we will even fall to our knees with wonder. Give thanks and praise. And in doing so, we find our way through.

I am going to close with a poem I wrote. Following the poem will be a period of collective silence. I invite you as I read, to look around, breathe in the beauty of this sanctuary. Then, after

the reading to close your eyes and to feel the presence of love that we have opened ourselves to in this room. Let one another, and these moments, be a thin place.

How to Watch a Rainbow
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If you move too fast
or if your eyes are trained
to a screen or if you fail to walk out
you might miss
the way sunlight sifts golden
through the gray mist
and the magic

of brilliance
brushing her
water-color wand
in strokes of
purple, blue, green,
yellow, orange and red.
It takes a few seconds
for your mind
to recognize what
your heart knows;
the watery bow fades in
and out like a radio playing
the song you long to hear.
That is when you most
need to give your attention.
Look closely. See the vibrancy.
Let that colors tune you to stillness.
Listen as the full arc appears.
Weep with hope.
Keep your eyes trained on it
through thin and thick.
Breathe it in and let the wild, fresh scent
of it feed you joy.
Let your imagination slide over
the arc and into your urgent longing.
Believe it: You were made to
see the rainbow, to take in the promise,
to be fully who you are.
This rainbow is for you.
This rainbow is for us.

