

Wow (Third in Series based on Anne Lamott's "Help, Thanks, Wow: Three Essential Prayers.")
September 24, 2017

Psalm 65

¹*Praise is due to you, O God, in Zion; and to you shall vows be performed,*

²*O you who answer prayer! To you all flesh shall come.*

³*When deeds of iniquity overwhelm us, you forgive our transgressions.*

⁴*Happy 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.*

⁵*By 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.*

⁶*By your strength you established the mountains; you are girded with might.*

⁷*You silence the roaring of the seas, the roaring of their waves, the tumult of the peoples.*

⁸*Those 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.*

⁹*You 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.*

¹⁰*You water its furrows abundantly, settling its ridges, softening it with showers, and blessing its growth.*

¹¹*You crown the year with your bounty; your wagon tracks overflow with richness.*

¹²*The pastures of the wilderness overflow, the hills gird themselves with joy,*

¹³*the meadows clothe themselves with flocks, the valleys deck themselves with grain, they shout and sing together for joy.*

"Wow!" When was the last time you said, "Wow!" When was the last time your jaw dropped open and no words came out? When was the last time something took your breath away? When was the last time you were dumbstruck with awe? When was the last time you were amazed?

I was watched the movie *Hidden Figures* for the second time on Friday. As John Glenn rocketed into space, people gathered around televisions, holding their breath, as he became the first American to orbit the earth. He was one of the first to see planet earth from the vantage point of space. That was 55 years ago. That image of our blue marble is so familiar to us now it hardly causes us pause. It takes quite a bit to amaze us these days.

For example, the Cassini orbiter crashed into Saturn on September 15 with little or no fanfare. The Cassini was launched on October 15, 1997 and it took seven years to get to Saturn. For the next thirteen years it orbited Saturn and captured images of its rings and moons. As it neared the end of its fuel and life, the orbiter made twenty-two spectacular dives inside the rings of Saturn. Its grand finale was its final plummet to Saturn's surface. The orbiter used its last bits of energy to keep its antennae pointed back to earth for as long as possible before its demise. Over a billion miles away, the final images arrived to earth an hour after Cassini's destruction. It was barely mentioned on the news.

Garrison Keillor once finished a story saying, "When you look at the stars you don't think small." When I look at the images from Cassini I am dumbstruck by my smallness. Cratered surfaces and plumes of gas decorate these mystical scenes that have been beaming back to earth for 13 years. I just never stopped enough to look. Images of our galaxy are at our fingertips.

The sad truth is that we can become dull to wonder, usually because we don't take time or discipline ourselves to pay attention. "Wow!" for Anne Lamott is to be smitten by wonder and left without

words. We are in such a hurry to get to the next thing or next place we miss the “wow!” We miss that thing that would help us think bigger than our problems and obligations.

Dave and I once took a vacation that included time at the Grand Canyon. The days leading up to our departure were particularly stressful. I had to deliver a keynote address to a large group of women. Between sermons, funerals, and the keynote I was a wreck by the time I got on the plane to fly to Phoenix. We rented a car and headed north. We got to the park entrance an hour before sunset and paid whatever it cost just to catch our first glimpse of the canyon. We parked and walked quickly to the nearest lookout. The setting sun was just starting to paint the walls and skies in pinks and blues and I burst into tears. It was so beautiful and so vast, emotion overtook me.

I had a similar experience the first time I saw humpback whales off the coast of Massachusetts. Our small boat was surrounded with these mammoth creatures that feed on the tiniest of creatures. I was, as Simon Cowell likes to say, gob smacked. With awe came this profound reverence for the ocean and her companions. Tears welled up in my eyes as a smile broadened across my face. “Wow!”

In Nicaragua, my Doctor of Ministry class toured the church of Santa Maria de los Angeles in Managua. This small church with heavy iron gates was not much to look at on the outside. Because of a miscommunication we missed the person who was supposed to give us a tour and ended up begging the caretaker inside to allow us in to see the murals on the walls of the sanctuary. This church housed a church that embraced liberation theology during the contra war. They understood God’s good news to mean liberation from oppression. They believed that God champions the cause of the poor and oppressed. Our chatty group was stunned to silence when we entered the sanctuary. The walls were covered by murals which were covered by canvas sheets. Our reluctant tour guide became more engaged when he realized we were genuinely interested in the stories the murals tell. He began to lift the tarps and tell the stories. It wasn’t just the beauty – it was the stories and witness of faith that left me speechless. The murals depicted the pain and anguish of trying liberate their people from the hands of a brutal dictator. They also told the stories of those who stood up for their neighbor, many giving their lives. These murals are so powerful several priests wanted them painted over. The murals were eventually declared a national treasure to preserve them from destruction by unsympathetic priests. Yet, canvas tarps silence the stories they tell. They hit my heart with the thud and left me stunned. Sometimes “Wow!” is not accompanied by joy – sometimes it hits with a thud followed by a hefty dose of humility.

It can be nature, it can be a work of art, or something mind boggling that evokes wonder and “Wow!” It can also be something small and ordinary; something you’ve seen a hundred times but suddenly see in a new way, that evokes wonder and “wow!” Anne Lamott says there is upper case WOWs and lower case wows.

Years ago, when I was just beginning as a preacher, I happened upon a book by Frederik Buechner called, *Whistling in the Dark: A Theologized ABC*. The first entry of the book was “Art” for the letter “A.”¹ I was desperate for something to say about the passage where Jesus says, “Consider the lilies...look at the birds (Matthew 6). What I found for the letter “A” became the basis for my

¹ <http://www.frederickbuechner.com/quote-of-the-day/2016/12/18/art>

preaching style and something I never forgot. If you have a good memory you might recall that I mentioned this in my very first sermon at FCCO.

Buechner said that art frames a moment. "...the frame sets it off from everything else that distracts us. That is the nature and purpose of frames. The frame does not change the moment, but it changes our way of perceiving the moment. It makes us *notice* the moment..."

This idea of framing the moment captivated me. By framing a moment, we can experience "Wow!" without having to travel to the Grand Canyon or soar into space. When we begin to understand the value in framing moments we discover the wonder we too often miss – the wonder that was there all along – the wonder in the simplest of things.

Buechner used the example of the elderly woman Rembrandt painted. If this woman passed us on the street we wouldn't take a second look. She is ordinary in every way. But Rembrandt put a frame around her and we see something in her that is captivating and beautiful. It's not just the artist's talent or technique – it's more. We see the woman in a new light and she makes us wonder how many awe-inspiring people we pass by each day.

I took a quick trip to Iowa this past week to celebrate my mother's 92nd birthday. On Monday night, a few family members gathered. For a moment or two I tuned out the chatter to look around the table and frame the moment. My step-daughter, Jennifer, was smiling and talking about a Harry Potter Yoga class she is hosting next weekend. She is a fairly new instructor so she is working very hard to make the event successful. I held up my imaginary frame around her face. Six or seven years ago I could not have imagined such confidence and commitment. As I framed her face in my mind, the masterpiece amazed me. She is compassionate and kind. She is responsible, and now ambitious. The frame removed the distractions and the past and left me with "Wow!"

I used the frame with my mother. What struck me was seeing her Bible. I put a frame around her Bible. I felt a sudden depth of gratitude for her prayers. My mom prays for me. What a gift! "Wow!"

In the old days, movie directors were often characterized by holding their hands out in front of them to create a frame for a scene. We can do the same. We can frame moments and be wowed.

Whether we are wowed by the vastness of the universe or the love of a mother – it doesn't matter. Wow takes us out of ourselves and helps us to think bigger. Wow helps us to connect with the creative, powerful, benevolent force we call God. Wow triggers appreciation and awareness. Wow!

Jewish rabbi and theologian, Abraham Heschel, said, "Our goal should be to live life in radical amazement...to get up in the morning and look at the world in a way that takes nothing for granted. Everything is phenomenal; everything is incredible; never treat life casually. To be spiritual is to be amazed."

A quote wrongly attributed to George Carlin says it this way, "Life is not measured by the number of breaths we take, but by the moments that take our breath away."

Those moments seldom just happen. We have to be on the lookout – frame in hand – for Wow. It is all around us if we look.

Frame congregation with my hands. Wow!