

“Wonder”  
Psalm 139:1-14  
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If you are into one word summaries, and you are trying to find one word to capture what the psalmist is saying as he expresses his utter amazement, wonder, and awe at the God who is our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer, if you are looking for one word to capture the magnitude and depth of the emotions coursing through the veins of the psalmist, you might find yourself saying something like, “Wow!” I mean, just wow! God knows me inside and out. God goes before and behind me. God is the light that shines in the darkness. God knit me together in my mother’s womb. Overcome with awe and wonder, the psalmist proclaims, “I am fearfully and wonderfully made.” All this is too much to absorb, to comprehend, to understand. I am fearfully and wonderfully made. We are fearfully and wonderfully made. Wow! God causes the psalmist to say, “Wow!” Has God ever done that for you? Have you ever had a “Wow” moment?

I had never heard the phrase “A wow moment” until our daughter Carlee was dancing on the drill team at her high school. Each year the drill team would take a trip to somewhere fun. We were living in Houston, Texas at the time. The drill team had developed a safe and successful pattern for these trips. One year they would go to San Antonio where there is the Alamo, the Riverwalk, and an amusement park. The next year they would go to Florida, and that was the big trip, Disneyworld and all the rest. Well, when our daughter was a senior, when she was an officer for the dance team, they asked my wife Julie to be in charge of the big trip. In planning it, Julie used a phrase I had never heard, but it is a phrase I obviously have not forgotten. She said, “I want to give the girls a wow moment.” So when it came time to announce where the trip would be that year, the girls slowly filed in. There was some discussion about whether this would be a San Antonio or a Disneyworld year. There was a murmur of excitement, but the girls were not prepared to be wowed.

A PowerPoint presentation began. As I remember it there were photos of some fancy fashion stores...and a few buildings that the girls thought they recognized but they couldn’t say for sure...there were some

people all bundled up and ice skating on an open-air rink...there was a lady...a really large lady holding a torch up high for all to see...and there were marquees from theaters that were unmistakably Broadway Theaters. With each new picture, the level of excitement grew...and when a voice was added to the PowerPoint with “Old Blue Eyes” singing, “Start spreading the news...”, well, the only way to describe how those hundred young women were feeling was “Wow!” New York City. The Empire State Building. Subways. Central Park. Broadway. And the Statue of Liberty. Wow! For girls from Texas, the Big Apple was exactly the wow moment my wife was hoping for. Mission accomplished.

Now being here in Westerly, my guess is New York City might not be as much of a wow moment for you as it was for those young girls. But if you are well acquainted with the Northeast Corridor, if visits to Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore and DC are sort of old hat, maybe your wow moment would be somewhere more steeped in the wonders of nature.

Growing up in California we spent a lot of time in the Sierra Nevada mountains. It was only a one-mile hike to the General Grant Tree, one of those literally giant Sequoias. The General Grant Tree is the second-largest tree in the world. It stands 267 feet tall and is 29 feet wide at the base. I already felt small as a kid, surrounded by adults who stood five or six feet tall. How did I feel the first time I stood and looked up, and up, and up, a vertical height nearly the size of a football field? Talk about a wow moment. Funny thing happened as I grew up. So many things that seemed huge when I was little now have shrunk down in size. But not the General Grant Tree. Not the giant Sequoias. I have not, and never will outgrow the wow moment when I stand and stare in wonder and awe. There is no other word to express how I feel than to say, “Wow!” Maybe your wow moment was the Grand Canyon, or Yellowstone, or another national treasure. I bet we have all had the experience on a dark night of looking toward the sky. It might be any night, but if you happen to be out during a meteor shower, and the tails of those shooting stars blaze a path that stretches from one end of the night sky to the other, and if you happen to be with some other people, you will find you all are speaking the same language. Everyone who

sees that kind of wonder whisking across the sky, well, it's quite simply a wow moment.

If I still have not connected, maybe you should have been with me Thursday morning. The remnants of Hurricane Ida had passed through, but the effects of that long-lasting storm lingered. We ran down to Spray Rock Road in Weekapaug. Right as we arrived a huge wave crashed into the aptly named Spray Rock and it sprayed, a huge plume of water that reached some 20 feet into the air. We love that view in Weekapaug. Preaching about Wonder this morning, I have often thought of preaching a sermon entitled, "The Wonders of Weekapaug." That title itself captures a WOW moment...Wonders Of Weekapaug. WOW!

I love everything about the wow moments God brings our way...I love being swept up in wonder and awe...I love the great appreciation that rises within my heart...I love everything about the wow moments God brings our way, except for this one thing. You might have already noticed what I am going to tell you, and it is not something I am particularly fond of in myself. You see, when I get excited about something, my voice rises. Some say, "It rises higher than usual," implying my voice is always high. What can I do? I cannot begin to count the number of times I have been in the drive-thru of a fast food restaurant and after I place my order the attendant says these painful words, "Is that all ma'am?" Even worse is their shocked look when I show up and they realize I am not a ma'am.

I am the volunteer chaplain here in town with the Dunn's Corners Fire Department. The Fire Department is right down the street from our church. I know all the firefighters. On the Sunday of Memorial Day weekend, I was alone at church early on Sunday morning, getting ready for worship. All of a sudden the fire alarm went off. I smelled something suspicious. I got out of the building in a hurry. I dialed 911 and reported the alarm has gone off. The 911 operator said, "Where are you calling from ma'am?" Ouch. Understandably, I was excited and worked up with the alarm going off. In its own way a fire alarm is a wow moment. It gets your attention. The operator ended the call by saying, "Remain calm ma'am. The fire trucks will be there soon." When the trucks arrived a few minutes later, with all the firefighters I know personally, they asked,

“We received a call about a fire alarm. Where is the woman who placed the call?” I raised my hand and said, “That would be me.”

A few years ago, I was with my brother Barry. We were at Moss Landing, a spot on the California coast about halfway between Carmel and Santa Cruz. We were having lunch, a feast of cioppino and halibut and artichokes and shrimp, but no matter how wonderful the food on the table was, there was no way it could compare with what was happening out in the Pacific Ocean. The whales had come out to play, and it was awesome. Barry and I were glued to the fence looking out. We weren't alone. Close to a hundred people were on the shore and up on the patio of the restaurant, and when a whale would rise from the water you could hear a roar. Someone would point, someone would shout, and ooh and ahh would be heard up and down the coast. I was right there with the crowd, shouting and cheering and oohing and aahing.

There I am next to my brother Barry as the whales are just blowing us away with surges and splashes and flips and turns. Barry has this really nice little camera. He was taking pictures. I had a set of binoculars. I was the spotter. When I spotted activity, I would get Barry's attention and he would capture it on his camera. We were a mess, me screaming in a high voice and pointing at the water and shouting for Barry to take a picture and then me anxiously asking, “Did you get it, did you get it.” Later in the day, we were looking at the pictures and he got some spectacular ones. He said, “It was a perfect day, except for this little girl screaming next to me the whole day.” I just smiled. What can I say? That's what a wow moment does to me.

And then there are wow moments that are not marked by high pitched voices and loud shouts. Some wow moments lead us to quiet and reflective places. I told you about our daughter Carlee and her drill team's trip to New York City. That year she was a senior in high school, an officer on the drill team. As a senior, as an officer, she was a role model to the younger girls. We had some real questions about her being involved on the drill team. Sometimes when you get into leadership, it can be a status symbol, and a chance to set yourself apart. We hoped that instead of that kind of an attitude, Carlee would look out for the younger girls on her drill team. Well, we had some friends we had known quite a while. We all had kids around the same age, and we often visited at our

neighborhood swimming pool. The dad, Peter, had been sick for a long time. He was battling cancer. That year Peter finally died. Peter's daughter was on the drill team with Carlee. Paighton was just a sophomore. We tried to call Carlee and tell her that Paighton's dad had died, but we could not get a hold of her. I tried to call her all day. She never picked up her phone. I was frustrated. I really wanted her to reach out and see how Paighton was doing. Finally late at night Carlee came home. We asked where she had been and why she had not answered her phone. She said that when she heard that Paighton's dad had died she bought some Chinese takeout and went and sat with Paighton. She said to us, "I didn't think she would want to be alone." Our hearts melted when we realized our daughter understood the power of being with someone in a time of loss. That night I didn't say it in a high-pitched squeal. That night, in a quiet and reverent voice I said, "Wow."

Many years ago, we had a friend who was dying of cancer. She was a beautiful woman with a very special family. She and her husband were living in Houston. The morning she died a friend of the family who lived in Oklahoma was out early walking his dog. He and his dog had a little route they took each morning. That morning the dog wanted to go a different way. The man let the dog lead. The dog headed over to a tree, sort of out of the way. The dog was barking as he led the way to the tree. When the man got to the tree the dog stopped barking. Everything else was strangely quiet. Sitting on a branch in the tree was our dear friend who had just died. Sitting in the tree she said to the man, "Call David." David was her husband. It was very early in the morning, maybe 4:30 am. But sitting in the tree, she said, "Call David." The man got out his phone and called her husband David. It was 4:30 in the morning, but he called David. When David answered the phone, he broke down and said, "My wife just died. Your phone call came at just the right moment." The husband told me this story as we were planning the funeral for his wife. Hearing this amazing story, I could hardly utter a sound at all. I just whispered softly to myself, "Wow."

Within the tradition of the Christian faith, music has a tendency to create a wow effect. We probably all have our own favorite hymns and anthems. One that has touched my heart over and over again is, "How Great Thou Art." The chorus is memorable, a chorus fitting for wow moments. "Then sings my soul, my Savior God to thee: How great thou

art! How great thou art!” The opening verse is worthy of a wow. “O Lord my God, when I in awesome wonder consider all the worlds thy hands have made, I see the stars, I hear the rolling thunder, thy power throughout the universe displayed.” Wow.

That particular hymn has wowed me many times, including one of the most memorable wow moments I have ever experienced. I was organizing a trip to the Holy Land in the fall of 2013. A dear friend named Becky was helping organize the trip. She and her husband Pete were signed up to go and the days were drawing near for our departure. We were looking forward to countless wow moments as we walked where Jesus had walked. A few days before the trip Becky gave me a phone call. That was not unusual. We talked all the time in preparation for Israel. But this call came at 6:30 am. Her voice was shaking as she asked me to come to her house. She said it was urgent. She said that during the night Pete had died. Becky’s husband had died. I rushed over to her house. We were devastated. We were heartbroken. And whatever I felt, Becky felt it a hundred times more.

We buried Pete. And then two days later this friend of ours named Becky boarded the plane and flew to the Holy Land with our group. She had planned on going with her husband. Now her daughter traveled with her. It was tough on her. Everywhere she went she was reminded of her loss and her sadness and her sorrow. On the third day of our trip, we stayed in a town called Tiberias. Tiberias is on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. That morning our entire group got into a boat and put out onto the Sea of Galilee. We put out into the deep water. About 30 minutes into our journey the captain of the boat cut the engine. There we were, out in the deep, the same lake Jesus had been on with his disciples 2,000 years ago. It was a calm day. The water was lapping against the boat. There was a gentle breeze.

While we drifted along, the captain played a song for us. The captain played, *How Great Thou Art*. Our group knew the song well. Without me saying a word everyone stood up and began to sing. It was beautiful. It was powerful. It was spiritual. It was joyful. I was the leader of the group and my heart melted as I saw my people, every one of them who had been through some difficult times in their life, and here they were singing words of adoration and praise to God. We came to the

verse that says, “And when I think that God, his Son not sparing, sent him to die, I scarce can take it in...” Right about then I looked at our friend Becky, the one whose husband had just died. She was singing. She was singing as tears streamed down her face. In that moment it was so obvious she knew that Jesus was with her. Jesus was her Good Shepherd. Jesus was walking with her through the valley of the shadow of death. Jesus was holding her close, whispering in her ear, drying her tears, and promising that he would never leave her and never forsake her. On the heels of losing a husband she loved so much, Becky discovered an amazing truth that day. She was not alone. Becky knew in that moment, out in the deep, out on the Sea of Galilee, that Jesus Christ was with her, and that nothing in all creation could separate her from the love of God. Wow. Wow.

God gives us the most amazing wow moments, and yet none are more amazing than when God sent his Son to save this world. The very God who created the heavens and the earth...

- Wrapped himself in human flesh and was born in a manger.
- He jumped in the Jordan River and swam in the same waters we all swim in.
- He became one of us. He touched, he tasted, and he was tempted. He wept. Jesus wept.
- Jesus walked on water and fed the multitudes, but when his disciples argued about who was the greatest, he wrapped a towel around his waist and washed their feet.
- He showed them the greatest love is the love that would lay down its own life for others.
- Jesus Christ, God’s Beloved Son, suffered and died. His life was a series of wow moments. And when he died, and when he was buried, when all hope was gone, when every dream was dashed, God had one more wow moment. On the third day Jesus rose again from the dead. Wow. God did all this for you and for me. Wow.

Our granddaughter is now almost two and a half years old. I’m teaching her how to say, “Wow.” I’m not there yet, but we have a pretty good beginning. Back in July we were visiting her, and one day we played a little whispering game. She would whisper in my ear, and I would get the biggest look of surprise and make an exaggerated face, opening my mouth as wide as it could be. Then I would whisper in her

ear. That little girl knows how to make the best surprise face. My next step is to teach her some rudimentary sign language. I am going to teach her how to make the letter W with her fingers. She's a quick learner. I'm going to teach her to make a W with each hand. Then I'm going to whisper in her ear, and when she opens her mouth big and wide, I'm going to have her make a W on either side...and she will know how to say WOW.

I want her to learn how to say WOW.

- I want her to stand with me on Spray Rock Road and as we watch the waves crash and splash together we will say WOW
- I hope to take her to see the General Grant Tree. I want to hear her say, WOW
- Some night I would love to lay on the grass and watch the night sky, full of those bright and beautiful stars...and when a shooting star flashes its tail, you will hear a big WOW from Clara and her Grandpa Bubba
- I want her to love God's creation. Even more than that, I want her to know God's personal love. I want her to say one day, with the psalmist, "I am fearfully and wonderfully made."
- And some day I hope she will look at a cross, like the cross that is right here before us. I hope she will look at the cross and understand all that the cross means, the sacrifice, the suffering, the forgiveness, the grace, the hope, the joy, the promise, and the love, the wonderful, amazing, unconditional and eternal love that God has shown us by giving up his life for us on that very cross.

I guess I hope someday she will join in the singing of that sacred song. "And when I think that God, his Son not sparing, sent him to die, I scarce can take it in..." I hope that all of us will learn to look at God's wondrous cross and say WOW. Amazing love, how can it be, that Thou my God should die for me." Wow! Wow! Wow! Hallelujah! What a Savior.