

Homily – The Wonder of It All

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Awe, wonder, and amazement. These are all emotions that envelop us when a new baby is born. We have awe at the miracle of biology. How could a sperm and an egg combine to create a baby? We may understand the science, but we are still in awe at the everyday miracle that any of this could happen in the first place. And with the birth of a baby, we are in a state of wonder. We wonder what the future holds for this baby boy or girl. We wonder what zigzags of life are in store for this baby and how they will overcome and grow into adulthood. We wonder how their lives will reflect God back into the world. And, we are amazed. We are amazed that the folks at the hospital are going to let us take this tiny thing home. We are amazed that we are going to have to care for this child, day and night. And, it is not just awe, and wonder, and amazement that fill us. We may also have some confusion, some curiosity, and even a bit of surprise. All of these emotions well up within us at the birth of a baby. And tonight (today) we celebrate the birth of the baby Jesus which fill us even more so with awe, wonder, and amazement.

Brené Brown is an academic down in Texas who has written several books on the topics of courage, vulnerability, shame and empathy, and she has written a new book called “Atlas of the Heart.” In this book she lays out the claim that most of us can only name three emotions – mad, sad, and happy. Brené Brown has written this book to help us understand eight-eight emotions including the emotions of awe, wonder, and amazement.

According to another academic and psychologist, Susan David, “Our ability to accurately recognize and label emotions with a more nuanced vocabulary can be absolutely transformative.” David explains that if we don’t have a sufficient emotional vocabulary it is difficult to communicate our needs and to get the support that we need from others. Those who are able to distinguish between a range of various emotions do much, much better at managing the ups and downs of ordinary life. In fact research shows that the process of labeling emotional experience is related to greater well-being. With a deeper understanding, we control our emotions, and they don’t control us. Is this something you want?

Here is an example from my own life of the benefit from greater emotional awareness. Jeff and I see a marriage counselor about every eight weeks. We don’t have anything in particular going on but, we meet just to do some preventative work. A few months ago, I made the comment that there were mornings that I didn’t want to get out of bed, and our counselor asked me an important question about my emotions. He asked, “is there a sense that you don’t want to get out of bed because

you dread your day, or are you just comfortable being in bed?" I had never thought about these two different emotional sources, but I decided, I was just snug and comfortable being in bed. I've had mornings in the past when I have dreaded the day, but currently we have a really good mattress and I was just content lying there. I am grateful to our counselor for helping me understand which emotions were really driving my desire to stay in bed. This is just a silly example of how powerful it can be to understand the emotions that drive our behavior. We all have mornings when we want to stay in bed. So the next time you don't want to get out of bed, is it the rain, is it that you feel snug, or is there something else going on? All of us, let me repeat, all of us have times in our lives in which the negative emotions of cynicism, denial, fear, and despair seem to rule us. And, I want to make the bold claim that the birth of Jesus and the awe, wonder, and amazement that accompany that birth are an antidote that is sorely needed in our world.

In the Gospel reading that I read a few minutes ago we have Mary and Joseph's awe at the birth of their baby. We have the awe and wonder of the shepherds as they encounter that angel and then the dozens or hundreds of heavenly beings who join them. And, we have awe, wonder, and amazement as the shepherds come to Mary, Joseph, and the child and share what they learned from the angel. And finally, we have the awe and wonder of the heavenly host. Now, I am not just saying that the heavenly host inspired awe in the shepherds, but I think these otherworldly beings were experiencing awe, wonder, and amazement themselves. For you see, the birth of Christ into the world had never happened before. From before the beginning of time the birth of Jesus had been planned, and now it was actually happening. The birth of Jesus changed the universe forever, and it didn't change the universe for just a few, but it changed it for all.

The spiritual writer, Richard Rohr, has a daily blog, and this morning's message was very timely. In that message, Rohr reminds us that the birth of Christ into the world as a baby boy eliminates any separation between us and God. We live much of our lives feeling disconnected, but we were created for union – union with God, union with others, and union with the rest of Creation. Union and the love that is part of that union are your birthright. You were born to be connected and that is what the awesome event of Jesus' birth means for us. This is a simple, yet profound message and our natural response should be awe, wonder, and amazement.

In her book "The Sense of Wonder" Rachel Carlson writes "if I had influence with the good fairy who presides over the christening of all children, I should ask that her gift to each child in the world be a sense of wonder so indestructible that it would last throughout life, as an unfailing antidote against the sterile preoccupation with things that are artificial, and the alienation from the source of our strength."

Awe, wonder, and amazement are often experienced in response to nature, art, music, spiritual experiences, or ideas. In the midst of these moments of awe and wonder, we can feel overwhelmed by the vastness of something that is almost incomprehensible. At these times it almost feels like what we are witnessing can't be true. It is as if we're seeing something that doesn't fit with how we move through and understand our everyday lives.

Awe and wonder make us curious rather than judgmental. They make us collaborative. They make us humble, sharing and altruistic. Awe and wonder quiet the ego so that we are not thinking about ourselves as much. And, if that weren't enough, some researchers believe that awe-inducing events may be one of the fastest and most profound methods of personal change and growth.

Which begs the question, how do we find awe and wonder? And, the answer is to allow unstructured time. You wander. You drift through. You take a walk with no aim. You slow things down. You allow for mystery and open questions. And, you don't have to take your kids to the Grand Canyon or stand in the Sistine Chapel to experience awe and wonder. As I said a moment ago, people commonly feel awe when they spend time in nature, listen to or make music, view or create art, contemplate big ideas, engage in meaningful rituals or enjoy community experiences that make them feel as if they're a part of something larger than themselves. Awe and wonder happen when we take the time to notice the blessings that God has already given us. So, often we focus on our unmet desires, but we have already been blessed by God in so many ways including the eternal and unchanging love of God. There is nothing you can do to increase God's love and there is nothing you can do to decrease God's love. God just loves, and loves, and loves.

That is what we celebrate today, God's love for us in our creation. God's love for us in the birth of the baby Jesus and the union that birth creates between us and God. And, God's love for us in our many blessings. So, this Christmas give yourself the gifts of awe and wonder and amazement, and see what happens.