

**A Wonder-Full Life**  
**Sermon 187 | Greystone Baptist Church | June 18, 2023**  
**Genesis 18:1-15**

Google defines wonder as “a feeling of surprise mingled with admiration, caused by something beautiful, unexpected, unfamiliar, or inexplicable.”<sup>1</sup>

Brene Brown and other emotion researchers say that wonder is an “expansive emotion [that] grows inside of us and fills us up. [they say that] The surprise of wonder is an emotional elevator.”<sup>2</sup>

Spiritual writers and thinkers say that “Wonder begins in the senses, comes alive in the imagination, and flourishes in adoration of the Divine. It arises from our natural curiosity about the grand adventure of life.”<sup>3</sup> Additionally and perhaps more importantly, “Wonder delights, wonder invites, wonder leads to worship, wonder invokes gratitude, wonder reminds [us] that there is always, More.”<sup>4</sup>

Is this what David had in mind when he wrote those famous words from the 139th Psalm? I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made...(v.14). And what exactly is the relationship between fear and wonder? ... and how do they relate to praise? The story of Abraham and Sarah is full of fear, full of wonder, and full of praise. You all are familiar with the plot so I'll offer a very quick summary. If you want a more in-depth look, just read Genesis 15, 16, 17, and 18 later on today while everyone else is taking their Sunday afternoon nap.

In short, God promises Abraham (then Abram) that he would be the father of many nations, and that his descendants would equal the number of stars in the sky. Though Abram knows that he is now far beyond the natural age for child-rearing, he believes God. But Sarai - his wife - who had aged beyond the child-bearing years, knew that the laws of nature prevented her from participating in this divine promise. So she offered her Egyptian slave, Hagar, as a substitute bearer of God's promise.

I need to interrupt the story here to acknowledge the problematic nature of this situation. To trade women's bodies (as Sarai traded Hagar's) as a commodity, without allowing any agency of their own, for the purpose of our own satisfaction, our own perception of morality, our own ends - even if it seems like the religious thing to do - is wrong.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.google.com/search?q=definition+of+wonder&oq=definition+of+wonder&aqs=chrome..69i57j0i512l2j0i433i512l3j0i512l3j0i433i512.2020j1j7&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8> Retrieved 6.14.2023

<sup>2</sup> <https://heidigoehmann.com/articles/wonder-a-spiritual-emotion#:~:text=Wonder%20is%20an%20expansive%20emotion,surprise%20and%20mystery%20of%20it.> Retrieved 6.14.2023

<sup>3</sup> Healthy Spirituality, [The Spiritual Practice of Wonder](#). Retrieved 6.14.2023

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

[And we have to remember that Sarah is human... a creature of her own context...]  
Which makes me wonder if Sarai came up with this solution because she suffered from the very human imbalance of fear and wonder. Too much fear, not nearly enough wonder.

There is this amazing story that's a thousand years old and comes from India. It is about a man who was condemned to spend a night in a cell with a poisonous snake. If he made the slightest little stir, the snake was on top of him and he was dead. So he stood in the corner of the cell, opposite the snake, and he was petrified. He barely dared to breathe for fear of alerting the snake, and he stood stiff and petrified all night long. As the first bars of light began to come into the cell at dawn, he began to make out the shape of the snake, and he was saying to himself, wasn't I lucky that I never stirred? But when the full force of light came in with the full dawn, he noticed that it wasn't a snake at all. It was just an old rope.<sup>5</sup>

Here's the moral of the story: In our hearts, minds, and lives, there are corners where old ropes have been tossed and laid idle. But when our fear is activated and begins to work on them, we make them in to monsters that keep us as prisoners in these impoverished rooms.

Outside these rooms, God's wonders are waiting for us, but we remain transfixed by our own fears and doomed to come up with our own wonder-less (if not downright harmful) solutions.<sup>6</sup>

Can you imagine... standing still all night long... only to discover it was all for a tossed-aside rope?! Too much fear, not enough wonder.

Back to Abram and Sarai... as things play out, Abram and Sarai discover that their actions regarding Hagar were not at all how God envisioned this particular promise to unfold. So God tried again, reiterating the promise, this time with more specificity about who the mother would be, and then God changed their names to Abraham and Sarah as a sign and reminder of this covenant.

Knowing that they were both well in their 90s, again far beyond the natural order of things, Abraham laughed and asked himself: Can a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Can Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child? (Gen.17:17)  
Sarah also laughs when she has her own experience with the divine - (that's the part we read today). She listens from inside the tent and overhears the angelic visitors who spoke with Abraham. Here, in today's reading, they re-iterate God's promise that this geriatric pair will have a child, and Sarah laughs to herself, saying, "After I have grown old, and my husband has grown old..." (Gen. 18:12).

Laughter is in many ways a sister of wonder. And there are other sisters too, like joy, like gratitude, like curiosity and imagination...

In many ways, the story of Abraham and Sarah and their numerous descendants is a story of God's continued promise and humanity's perpetual waiting. It is a memorable story

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<sup>5</sup> John O'Donohue, *Walking in Wonder: Eternal Wisdom for A Modern World*. New York: NY, 2015. 16-17

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

indeed but it is oh so common as we consider the promises of God taking shape in our own lives. The trouble is, we are so easily and frequently transfixed by fear. We are frightened by the mystery and wonder of our own presence, of the ways we do not fit into the systems, the roles, the images, and the predetermined identities that others would place on our lives.

These expectations provide an ever-steady stream of “should haves” and “ought to's,” comparisons and limitations. They keep us afraid that we will never be good enough and prevent us from seeing the wonder of all that God is calling us to become (together as a church and as individuals).

Maybe this is what David was getting at when he praised God for being “fearfully and wonderfully made.” Maybe he was beginning to see the necessary balance of the two (fear and wonder) as God used him in some pretty wonder-full ways. How could he have known, when he was just a youngest son, small in stature, shepherding sheep on family land?

How could Abraham and Sarah have known, when they were up in years, figuring whatever God was going to do with them had long ago been done?

And for that matter, how could we ever know what the future holds, and who God might be using to shape God’s ever-unfolding revelation of love in this world, how could we know the fullness of God’s promise... unless we open ourselves to wonder and in so doing leave fear far behind?

We have heard it said that the phrase “Do not fear” is mentioned 366 times in scripture. One for every day of the year and one extra for leap day or just in case we need to hear it twice.

Fear is a powerful thing and it takes on many different shapes, faces, and expressions. It closes our minds to possibility. It keeps us standing in the same old corners. It narrows the wideness of our understanding. It isolates us from all whom God has called beloved and it prevents us from seeing new creation even when it is staring us right in the face.

So perhaps if we want to move out of those rooms, those corners where fear has its grip on us, and move into the wonderful places where God’s mystery is always beginning to take shape - we have to open ourselves to possibility beyond probability, to laughter in the midst of despair, to delight in what once seemed ordinary, and to life beyond the grip of death. You see if we want to live the wonder-full lives that God is offering to us, we have to build up our wonder muscles by noticing the things that God is already doing in us and through us, by trusting that God brought us to where we are and hasn’t led us here in vain, and by actively seeking out the smaller mysteries with open minds and open hearts.

For in those spiritually open places, God’s promise is being born.