

Wow! (We Allow Ourselves to be Amazed)
Sermon 207 | Greystone Baptist Church | Dec. 17, 2023
Luke 1:57-66

When was the last time that you were amazed? Like, truly amazed to the point where you had no words, or if you did, maybe just one word: *wow!* Sometimes I catch myself saying *wow* all the time. And I worry about it because I'm afraid people around me will question my intelligence, or at least my vocabulary. *Is wow the only word she knows?*

This week there were so many moments of amazement. Moments of awe and wonder. Moments of... *wow*.

There was one last Sunday when I watched some of you move around the sanctuary during the invitation. It was an embodied response to the joy you find in connection with one another. The joy you find in your friendships here.

And there have been other times, recently, when there is a different kind of spirit in this place. When things happen that are not really planned, but we all feel it. Those moments when the Holy Spirit is undeniably here, with us.

There was a moment last Sunday night, when everyone gathered in Meymandi Concert Hall sang together *O Come, All Ye Faithful*. There was just something transcendent about that experience of being one small part of a large choir of voices singing out with the joy and hope of Christmas.

And then there are other moments that happen in smaller settings... when you tell a story about your life, about the holy moments when something happened and you just knew God was near. Sometimes I get *chills* listening to you - and all I can say is - *wow!*

When was the last time *you* were amazed?

If I were to make a list of amazing moments, many of them would involve either art or nature.

- The indescribable beauty of the actors' voices singing the *Circle of Life* on Broadway as the parade of animals enters from every direction,
- the way a Maya Angelou poem captures an otherwise inarticulable reality,
- the sheer magnitude of an elephant or a giraffe, or a hippopotamus that Mia and I spotted at the NC Zoo;
- the way a cloud hovers just below the peak of a mountain, or
- the way the steam rises off a lake when the first cool air arrives one early fall morning.

Each of these encounters and experiences reduces any contribution I might have to one, short little word: *Wow*.

Though this short list of experiences comes from life's more extraordinary moments: vacations, camping trips, family outings... the truth is, wow moments are happening all around us, all the time.

Anne Lamott says that:

"Wows come in all shapes and sizes, like people.

There are lowercase wows.

There are times when we sink into something modest
that delivers above and beyond.

When you crawl between clean sheets
after a hard day, you are saved.

You feel like the best sandwich ever.

You're being taken care of from the top

and the bottom, with not a crumb or a lump or a wrinkle. Wow: you can't
believe you felt so low and lonely till you thought to change the sheets...

A lowercase wow might be seeing a kid execute a dive at the town pool, or coming
upon a blanket of poppies in a field that was destroyed by grass fire last summer.

And then there are uppercase Wows.

Yosemite. Fireworks. Watching puppies being born ...

Remember first semi-sort-of being able to imagine the sheer size of dinosaurs, at
five or six, trying to comprehend how a brontosaurus could be seventy-five feet
long? And what those feet must have looked like?

As you studied dinosaurs in school or in a book you took out from the library
because you *had* to know more about them, you learned that they were doomed
and that they died out. ...

[They were here,]then they were gone... These huge creatures once roamed the
earth, and now they are fossils... everything [it seems], from stegosaurus to your
granddad, appears,

roams the earth for a little while,

and then vanishes. Wow."¹

Sometimes these moments of both lowercase and uppercase wows are deeply personal.
And sometimes they are shared in community. But one thing they all have in common is
that these moments of amazement, moments of awe and wonder, moments of wow,
remind us just how small we are - in the scope and scale of God's Creation... God's
imagination.

¹ Anne Lamott. Help, Thanks, Wow: The Three Essential Prayers. 73-74.

We have spent the last three weeks in the first chapter of Luke's Gospel and as we have been moving through these passages, I am beginning to feel like we plunged right into the deep end where *Wow* is concerned.

A litany of both uppercase and lowercase wows proceeds as a priestly couple is expecting their first child despite their old age. This priest and (now) expectant father, comes down with a strange case of laryngitis, one that would linger for 9 long months. A miraculous conception is announced and carried in the body of an unwed, teenage girl. Divine information comes via dreams and angels as God (who is behind the scenes somewhere) directs the drama from one scene to the next.

This story is filled with awe and wonder and... *Wow* (of the uppercase variety)! Today's reading (still in the first chapter!!) does not disappoint.

The time has come for the birth of John the Baptist. Of course nobody knows him by that name yet - his parents would name him John and the "the Baptist" part would come many, many years later.

It was customary for children, especially male children, to have family names. This was not just a trend that important or established families participated in - like it can be today. No, this family name thing was pretty much expected.

In a world where lineage meant everything from vocational destiny to one's place in society, imagine how important the name might be.

We already know how significant this child was to Elizabeth and Zechariah. His birth removed their disgrace and shame - not to mention the personal grief - that they bore for so long as they tried and tried and prayed for and hoped for a child all those years. Now their dignity was restored with the birth of this child.

The logical and assumed next step would be to honor him with a family name. If not the name of his own father, then at least a name that belonged to someone in the not-so-distant family history. Someone special, someone virtuous and memorable. Someone's favorite grandfather or uncle. A name that would honor the tradition of the family and cement the memory of the family within the collective memory of Israel. This name, the name of the (presumed) only child of Elizabeth and Zechariah, really mattered. Which is why it should have been a family name.

But that is not what happens.

The child is born and Elizabeth names him John. Now, some might be a little startled by the fact that Elizabeth is the one who names him. Shouldn't that be the father's job? Well, strictly speaking, yes, but she wouldn't be the first to do something like this. In the Old Testament, the Hebrew Bible, Eve named her son, Seth; and Rachel and Leah named their children. What is unusual here is not that Elizabeth named the babe, but that the name she chose was John.

The priests, family, and friends who'd gathered for the naming ceremony couldn't believe it. "No," they said, "none of your relatives have that name," and they looked to Zechariah to suggest an alternative. "His name is John." He scribbled on the tablet

And immediately - Luke says - as soon as he wrote the words, solidifying the name of the long-awaited child, his mouth opened, his tongue was set free, and the new-father / priest began to speak once again. WOW!

All of a sudden, the personal experience of amazement, of upper case wow that Elizabeth and Zechariah shared all this time became a public experience of awe and wonder. *They were astonished* the text says. But then...

Fear came over all the neighbors

Within just a few moments, the community gathered around Zechariah and Elizabeth for this special, sacred moment... having witnessed a miracle.. the people moved from amazement, astonishment... from awe and wonder ... to fear.

Fear! It is the same word used other places in the Gospels to describe what happens when Jesus walks on water, when he heals the sick, or casts out demons. The kind of fear that grips us when we are shocked beyond belief, not yet certain if what we have seen is a good thing or a bad thing. This is the kind of fear that comes when everything certain, is suddenly called into question. Fear, the kind that rattles us to our core. And it just so happens (in this case and in our case) that this kind of fear is so often the echo of surprise.

It is what happens next, after the Wow.

Almost as if we are willing to walk right up to the edge of wonder, to the edge of our imagination, to the edge of amazement... but not one step further into faith. Because the truth is, wonder, amazement, and Wow... are scary! These are vulnerable feelings! Vulnerable because when we are in awe, when we witness something completely unbelievable, when we gaze with wonder upon the largeness of a dinosaur skeleton and realize just how small we are in comparison, we begin to realize how little we can control. And once we begin to realize this, we understand how quickly it can all be taken away. We begin to build up walls of protection (both physical and figurative).

Brené Brown talks about this in an interview with Oprah Winfrey. In a Super Soul Sunday conversation, Brené says that, *"The most terrifying emotion that we experience as human beings... is joy."* She says.

"Joy? Why?" Asks Oprah.

Think about it, what parent in here hasn't had the experience of standing over the bed where your child lays sleeping. Watching the child sleep you think, "I love you more than I

ever thought possible.” And then in the next split second you are imagining all of the horrible things that could happen. Brené calls this, “dress-rehearsing tragedy.”

She goes on to describe another common experience. How many times when things are going well at work, when there’s no family drama demanding our attention, and all we can do is hold our breath because we are waiting for something to go wrong. - we know how vulnerable *joy* really is. But “When we lose our tolerance for vulnerability, joy becomes foreboding.”²

When we lose our tolerance for vulnerability, fear takes over and we give into our dress-rehearsals of tragedy, we begin to operate as if those rehearsals were our actual reality. That they are not only a small, minuscule possibility but that instead they are a true probability. So quickly our joy is stolen by fear. Moving us into survival mode where group thinking defines our identity, where everything requires a fight or flight response, where the world is easily divided into us and them, where everyone and every situation is simply reduced to black and white, wrong and right.

These kinds of reactions are happening on large and small scales. In our personal lives and in our communal lives - as the world changes rapidly and we continue to be amazed to learn just how small we are, how little we know, and how little we can control.

And in the face of all of this, it seems to me that fear is running rampant. As if we have collectively walked right up to the edge of wonder... and then run away, back toward certainty, afraid of what we have seen.

Luke doesn’t spell it out as the scene transitions, so we are left wondering today, if anyone stayed around to see what happened next. After the neighbors went away, talking about all that they’d seen. The miracle with Zechariah’s voice, and the break from tradition as the new parents chose a name. *Y’all are good church people so you know what kind of talk happens when somebody messes with tradition.*

But if anyone had the courage to stick around, not to run, but to take one more step (in faith, perhaps) toward the wonder-ful new thing that was happening in the house that day, they would have heard Zechariah’s *song*, and I bet, they would have been gifted with another uppercase Wow! A word we might also void if we keep reading...if we stick with it long enough to remember that this story is just beginning... wow!

In this season our theme has been: *How does a weary world rejoice?* Each week we have been met with different answers to that very question: We acknowledge our weariness. We find joy in connection. We’ve got a joy wall outside where some of you have posted photos and words that tell *your* story of finding the courage to rejoice despite all the weariness we are feeling.

² <https://youtu.be/RKV0BWSPfOw?feature=shared>

The authors of this series were very intentional about their responses to that question, embedded in each week's theme. This week they say: *How does a weary world rejoice? ... We allow ourselves to be amazed.*

Allow means we have to find the courage to accept the unknown. we have to create space within for something *new* to take root we have to condition ourselves to move towards awe and wonder, each time suppressing the tendency to go straight towards fear.

One of those creators, Rev. Sarah Are Speed has written a poem as one of the devotional readings for this week, as we all work to allow ourselves to be amazed. I'd like to share her words with you as a closing prayer and a call to courage - courage to keep moving towards wonder. ... to allow ourselves to be amazed in *faith* that God will meet us there.

We could play hard and fast,
not let anything touch us at all,
keep composure,
have all the answers.
Or we could crack ourselves open
and let everything in.

We could feel everything,
every touch, every marvel.

We could stand gaping
at the beauty of the world,
mouths wide open (because sometimes
a mouth wide open is the very best gratitude).

We could laugh so loudly
that the whole restaurant looks,
and err on the side of goofy
whenever possible.

We could put our defenses down.
We could grow soft.
We could choose awe.
We could take her by the arm.
We could let her lead us all the way to joy.