

The Essential Prayers sermon series
Wow! – Mark 8:22-26
September 21, 2025
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“Do you want to see a magic trick?” That phrase awakens the six-year-old in all of us, doesn’t it? I happened to say it to Olive, a six-year-old, the target audience of both my magic abilities and my humor. “Sure!” she said. So, I took a quarter and laid it flat in the palm of my hand, then pretended to grab it with my other hand. I had Olive blow on my hand, and when I opened it, the quarter had disappeared. Magic. Olive gave me a skeptical look. “Where did it go?” she asked. I said incredulously, “I don’t know!” then “Wait a second...” as I reached behind her ear with my other hand and produced the missing quarter. I was expecting shock, awe, amazement. What did I get? “Big deal,” she said, and walked away. She didn’t even want to keep the quarter.

“Big deal.” I feel like that has become the default response to so much of the magic and mystery we see around us. In a world where so much information is at our fingertips, where worlds can be created through the strokes of a computer keyboard or a movie green-screen, we’ve become dulled to our sense of wonder. “Big deal.” In this sermon series on “The Essential Prayers” from Anne LaMott, we’ve moved from the prayer of “Help” to the prayer of “Thanks” and now conclude with the prayer of “Wow.”

I remember when I first realized I had lost my sense of wonder. It was while I was on my sabbatical in 2016. I had been doing ministry for about 15 years, and during that time my relationship with God changed. It’s not that I gave up on God or stopped believing; in fact, it’s just the opposite. God didn’t grow distant from me; instead, God grew too familiar. God lost that other-worldly quality, that mystery and majesty that makes God...God. At some point, I stopped worshipping God and started working with God. God got demoted from Creator to co-worker. My version of the Lord’s Prayer became, “My buddy, who’s just hanging around, what’s up?”

In some ways, I blame my job for this. I study God, I teach about God, I help others try and understand God. At some point, I began to believe I must know God pretty well. “God? Big deal.” I believe God expands or contracts to fit our level of reverence. The lower our reverence, the smaller our God. After 15 years doing this work, my God had gotten pretty small. I had respect for God, but not reverence. I had lost the “Wow.”

How big is your God? Does God still have the ability to take your breath away? Does God still command your attention, compel your response? Do you look forward to worship, to prayer, to time with God? Or is God just...there? “Big deal.” I wonder if our God is too small.

I remember the moment I recaptured the “wowness” of God. It was when I didn’t know where the plane was going to land. I was in a small prop plane in Alaska, flying around the mountain range that included Denali, the tallest mountain in North America. The pilot announced we were going to land at basecamp, where hikers set up their headquarters before attempting to summit the mountain. I loved the idea, but I didn’t see a runway or a tower or a terminal with a Starbucks in it. Where we going to land?

On the snow, it turns out. The pilot guided the plane to a small stretch marked by orange flags, and when we had landed, we got out and looked around. As my feet hit the crunch of the snow and I looked up, I was dwarfed by Mt. Hunter, Mt. Foraker, and standing just over 20,000 feet tall, and the great one itself, Denali. I was speechless, which for anyone who knows me, is quite a thing. Well, not quite speechless. I could utter one syllable. “Wow.”

During that sabbatical, I stood at the basecamp of Denali, I looked out over the Pacific Ocean, I took in the view from the top of the Empire State Building, I walked among the ruins of sixth century monastic settlement in Ireland and the monoliths of Stonehenge in England. And I hit the reset button on what I thought I knew about God. I realized that the source of all this majesty and awesomeness is God, pure and simple. Only God. God did this and so much more. I think I know God, I think I understand God, I think I can explain God to others. Then I see the mountains, the oceans, the diversity of my brothers and sisters, the wondrousness of the Cliffs of Moher and the Eiffel Tower. It was as if God was saying to me what God said to Moses. "I AM." And my only response was, "You sure are!" I had forgotten that.

I wore glasses or contact lenses from seventh grade until 2001, when I was lucky enough to have Lasik eye surgery. I got a discount because my aunt worked for the doctor, but I don't like to tell people that, because it sounds a bit sketchy. Discount muffler service? Yes. Discount eye surgery? Not so good. My vision before the surgery was horrible. After the surgery, as I laid in the recovery room, I opened my eyes and could already tell a difference. The trees I saw walking around had facial features. By the next day, there was a noticeable improvement. Within weeks I had perfect vision.

I wonder if that's what it is like to open ourselves to God's awesomeness around us, to let ourselves experience the "wow" that is right in front of us. Sometimes we live with blinders on, our heads down and our headphones on, focusing on the next thing on the to-do list, the next urgent thing demanding our attention, and we miss the wonders of God that have the power awaken us from our complacency. Or we see the "wow" and respond like Lamott, who wrote, "As a tiny little control freak, I want to understand the power of wow, so I can organize it and control it, and up its rate and frequency." For me, I took that to the extreme, getting a tattoo of Denali to try and capture the "wow" I felt at basecamp.

Have you ever felt that way? You take a trip or attend an event or have a mountain-top experience, and you just want to stay there, to linger in God's presence, to be reminded over and over again of God's bigness. But you can't stay there, so you reluctantly return to the carpool and the drop-off lane and the grocery store line and the stoplights. And you grow nostalgic and melancholy, because when you were at that other place, you really felt like God was present with you. God was SO big!

My tattoo didn't quite accomplish what I was hoping for, and I think I know why. I was trying to pin down the "wow," capture it in permanent ink, assign it to a specific place and time. But God's wonders refuse to be contained. When I returned from sabbatical, I realized that the wonder of God was not only in Alaska or LA or New York or England or France. It was right here in Kentucky. God not only reveals Godself in the grandest of places, the loftiest plateaus, the most expansive terrains, but also in the most mundane of places, the lowest plateaus, the most paved-over terrains. If God can be experienced in the grandeur of the Palace of Versailles, can God also be found in Versailles? If God is tangibly present in the mountains of Alaska, is God also present in Mount Sterling? If God hovers over the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, does God also hover over Tate's Creek? If my experience of God's wow only happens in awe-inspiring places, if I can only experience God by getting away, then the issue may not be with God's presence; the issue may be my lack of vision to see God right where I am. Maybe my God is too small.

Our prayer of "Wow" is not only for when we are overcome by God's majesty; it can also be in response to the depths of humanity's brokenness. As our former minister Robyn Bles said, "Wow shifts our space. The literal space that was created in the New York City skyline when the

Twin Towers fell was a collective wow uttered around the world.” When I visited the Civil Rights Museum this summer and stood in the Lorraine Motel, just a few feet from where Dr. Martin Luther King was assassinated, all I could say was, “Wow.” And many of us are saying “Wow” as we witness senseless gun violence, increased division, hateful rhetoric, and attacks on free speech. Our eyes are being opened to the devastation that can be caused by human beings.

But if our eyes are opened to that, then they can also be opened to God’s presence in the midst of those moments, not just the beauty of God’s creation, but the persistent and stubborn presence of God’s life-giving spirit that exists in each one of us. There is so much wonder to see in each other, a reminder that we each contain within us the capacity to witness to the “wow” of God, even in the midst of the evil that we perpetrate. Mr. Rogers is quoted as saying, “When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, ‘Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping’.” I think that was his public television way of saying, “Look for God.” When things are scary, look for God presence. And if you can’t find it, be God’s presence for someone else.

Barb Schreifer was a spitfire of a woman, a tour de force packed into a tiny frame. Barb valiantly fought cancer for many years, her body finally giving out a little over a month ago. As she was nearing the end, she was not able to communicate, her body shutting down as her soul prepared to join her Creator God. And yet, her family said, several times as her death approached, Barb opened her eyes and said, “Oh wow. Oh wow.” I wonder what she was seeing. In that moment, her “wow” was the most profound prayer ever said.

And, according to Lamott, “Wow” is indeed a prayer. Just saying it opens our mouths. Say it with me. “Wow.” Lamott writes, “Wow is often offered with a gasp, a sharp intake of breath, when we can’t think of another way to capture the sight of shocking beauty or destruction, of a sudden unbidden insight or an unexpected flash of grace.” My prayer for us today is that, in the midst of the information overload and the “big deal” default response, we allow ourselves to be wowed, not just on vacation but right here where we live. The awesomeness of God is all around us, even within us, at work in the mundane and the majestic, in the fantastic and the frustrating, in the delight and the despair. If we have eyes to see it. “Wow.”