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## Praying With the Stars VIII. Wow!

Psalm 8 O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens. Out of the mouths of babes and infants you have founded a bulwark because of your foes, to silence the enemy and the avenger. When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them? Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor. You have given them dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet, all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, whatever passes along the paths of the seas. O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!

My parents fondly tell the story of a long-ago vacation, when I was about two years old, and they were making that long, pre-interstate, trek from our home in Texas to visit their parents in Maine. As you might imagine – and as some of you will remember – before the days of interstates such long car trips meant rising before the dawn and driving until well after sunset. And on this trip, they had just crested the bluffs on the eastern New Jersey shore, with me asleep on the back seat in those pre-carseat days, and spread before them was the splendored sight of nighttime Manhattan. It was then, for some reason, that I rose up, peered over the front seat and looked out the windshield and said “My Wooord [i.e., “Lord”], wook at all the wights!” I like to think now that that was the two-year-old’s version of “O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens.”

Now, I know that each of you has your own catalog of “My Wooord” moments – a

stunning sunset over mountain or ocean, or coming out of church after Christmas Eve service to the quiet delicate beauty of gentle snow, or a moment in which you felt a sense of peace that defied all accounting. Writer Ann Lamott, whose book Help, Thanks, Wow: The Three Essential Prayers is our guide for these last three sermons in our series “Praying With the Stars,” says these are those “Wow” moments of life and that they are really prayers; she describes such moments in this way: “When we are stunned to the place beyond words... when all we can say in response is ‘Wow,’ that’s a prayer.”<sup>1</sup> And then she insightfully says that this

...third great prayer, 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.

“Wow” means we are not dulled to wonder.... “Wow” is about having one’s mind blown by the mesmerizing or the miraculous....<sup>2</sup>

But there’s something that’s required for us to have such “Wow” moments, such “My Woord” moments. And it’s very simple but it’s oh-so-hard to do, sometimes. It’s to pay attention. Pay attention. How many of us are guilty of getting run over roughshod by our routine, tyrannized by our to-do list, so that we simply aren’t noticing the miraculous, the “wow,” in front of our eyes? I know that that happens to me more than I would wish. When Barbara and I lived in Hawaii, we used to have to travel regularly the 13 miles between our little town and the city of Hilo where all the shopping was and

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<sup>1</sup>Lamott, Anne (2012-11-13). Help, Thanks, Wow: The Three Essential Prayers (p. 73). Riverhead Hardcover. Kindle Edition.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., pp. 70-71.

where the church that Barbara served was. It was an incredible 13 miles, filled with breathtaking ocean views on one side, and, in the winter, vistas of the snow-capped Mauna Kea volcano on the other. But I can distinctly remember more than once driving that drive and realizing upon getting back to our little town that I had no memory of going through the other two little towns, no memory of looking out at the play of water and sky and cloud. Has such happened to you? Lamott says “Gorgeous, amazing things come into our lives when we are paying attention....”<sup>3</sup> but, conversely, it is also true that when we are not, too often the wonder and wow-filled world before us recedes and we do not see and our souls shrink a little.

But when we DO pay attention, we indeed can find that the world is suffused with many more “Wow” moments that we ever expected, and that discipline of paying attention will in fact lead us to expecting such moments. And then it is in those moments that we can be led to say, with the Psalmist, “*O Lord, O Sovereign, how majestic is your name indeed in all the earth!*” Which is really a more elegant way of saying and praying “Wow!”, isn’t it? But I’m curious about something. Why does the Psalmist write “how majestic is your NAME.” Why didn’t he simply write “O Lord, O Sovereign, how majestic are you.” What’s this “name” business about? What does it signify? What does it add to this affirmation that we need to notice?

Well, perhaps you remember at the beginning of the book of Exodus, when God is calling the reluctant Moses to go to Pharaoh to persuade him to let the Hebrew people go from Egypt, that Moses asks God, “What **name** shall I tell them has sent

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<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 85.

me?” Or, more plainly put, “What’s your name, God?” Names are important, aren’t they? I suspect all of us have a store or restaurant that we like going to because the folks there know us by name. Our names can make our lives more difficult, like the early 20<sup>th</sup> century governor of Texas, James Hogg, who named his daughter “Ima.” When I was a child, and my mother would, in “that” tone of voice, use my full name – Charles Richard Blaisdell!!! – I knew I was in trouble. But what is it about **God’s** name that is so very important, important enough that Moses wanted to know it and that the Psalmist in our scripture for today describes his “Wow” moment with an ascription of praise to God’s **name**?

God’s response to Moses – and what the Psalmist is in fact hearkening back to – was this: “I am who I am.” That’s what gets transliterated in our English translations as “Yahweh.” And yet, the name that God told Moses, the name that the Psalmist is recalling as he describes this “Wow” moment he is caught up in, can also be translated as “I will be who I will be” or “I have been who I have been.” But what does that mean? Well, just this: God is the source of every good thing that is. It is God’s love that is at the heart of creation and always has been and always will be. In its own way, it is a “prequel” to the Easter message that the love of God is more powerful than anything else in all creation, and not even death can defeat it. But even more importantly, that love that is at the heart of creation, that love that describes the very name of God, is a personal love, it is name calling to name, it is God calling your name. As my wife Barbara so compellingly and wonderfully puts it, it is part of the very essence of God, part of God’s nature, part of God’s very constitution to reach out and say to you not only

“I am love,” but also “YOU are loved and you are **worthy** of love!”<sup>4</sup> Because, of course, that is exactly what you and I at those 3 a.m. moments so often wonder about, so often fear: that we are not worthy, that we’ve done things that forever must mar us, that we have said things that we are ashamed of that we can never overcome – and that we are not, therefore, worthy of the love that has been shown to us. Do you know that feeling? I do.

But here is the good news, the very good news. The Psalmist put it like this: “What are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?” And the answer is that it is human beings – you and me and all the rest of that motley crew that God has made – who are the ones whom God is indeed “mindful of,” who indeed God cares for passionately and persistently and patiently, who God loves with a love that will not, does not, cannot let us go! In her poetic way, Lamott puts it like this: “Love falls to earth, rises from the ground, pools around the afflicted. Love pulls people back to their feet. Bodies and souls are fed. Bones and lives heal. New blades of grass grow from charred soil. The sun rises.”<sup>5</sup> At such persistently powerful good news, how can we not say, how can we not pray, “Wow, wow!”

But we’re not quite done: Do you know where the word “Wow” itself comes from? Well, some etymologists believe that is a contraction for an old Scottish sentence: “I vow.”<sup>6</sup> **I vow.** My friends, what will YOU vow this morning in response to the good news, the very good news, the wow-y news that God calls you by name and tells you

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<sup>4</sup>Conversation with the Rev. Barbara Blaisdell, March 14, 2013.

<sup>5</sup>Lamott., p. 81.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., pp. 72-73

that you are loved and that you are worthy of love? Well, may I suggest that your vow and mine consist of two things: First, vow to pay more attention to the world around you, to the delight of nature, to the mountains' vistas, to the enchanting songs of the birds, to the new life tentatively poking its way through winter's sleeping soil, to the giggles of children, to the strains of music that can touch you in places that words cannot go, to the never-to-be-taken-for-granted touch of the ones we love, to the power of those words "I love you." Lamott puts it this way: "Amazing things appear in our lives, almost out of nowhere— landscapes, seascapes, forgiveness— and they keep happening; so many vistas and so much healing to give thanks for."<sup>7</sup> Indeed, indeed. But they you and I need to daily make that "Wow Vow" – that we will be better at noticing, better at paying attention.

And second, our vow should also be this: that WE will be the ones who tell people that they are worthy, that they are loved, that nothing that they can say, or to, can ever separate them from God's unconditional love; that God loves them as they are but God loves them too much to ever leave them where they are! After all, when Moses wanted God to go to Pharoah directly, God in essence said, "No, that's your job – it's your job to speak that saving word." And it's our job too, it's our blessed opportunity. All around us are folks who do not know that they are worthy of love, and that God is not a bully or a tyrant. Your job and mine is to "Wow" them – wow them with the good news that they are loved, that they are indeed worthy of love, that they can indeed be and do more than they ever thought possible. Wow. Wow.

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<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 99.