

Psalm 19:1-6, Acts 17:22-28

Take a moment and think about the most beautiful thing you've ever seen.

Maybe a landscape or a child, a hallowed art piece or the experience of standing in the middle of a musical performance.

Did it take your breath away? Did it create more space in your chest, or more silence in your mind? Did it stun you or inspire you or broaden your heart beyond what you had ever experienced?

A few weeks ago I was with my son Moses in the planetarium in Knoxville. He was scared and wiggly and sneaking illegal snacks unable to manage keeping the theater seat from squashing him while he wiggled. And then, all of a sudden, the lights went off and the stars were projected onto the dome. "WOW" was all he could say. "Wow, mommy!"

Ann Lammott shares a similar sentiment in her book *Help, Thanks, Wow*. "What can we say beyond Wow, in the presence of glorious art, in music so magnificent that it can't have originated solely on this side of things? Wonder takes our breath away, and makes room for new breath. Wow, we say. And we breathe."

Here we are at the beginning of 2020, probably carrying lots of expectations and to-do lists, and a little bit of guilt if we've already broken some resolutions. In a time when lots of us are probably getting super practical, we've got our heads down and we're powering through—why in the world are we talking about beauty, and about how God communicates with us through awe, wonder and beauty. While it seems like God could have gotten a point across much more clearly if he sent a memo or a strongly worded email, God's way of being and doing is this:

God's glory is on tour in the skies,
 God-craft on exhibit across the horizon.
 The Day holds classes every morning,
 The Night lectures each evening.

³⁻⁴ Their words aren't heard,
 their voices aren't recorded,
 But their silence fills the earth:
 unspoken truth is spoken everywhere.

⁴⁻⁵ God makes a huge dome
 for the sun—a superdome!
 The morning sun's a bridegroom
 leaping from his bed,
 The day breaking sun an athlete
 racing to the tape.

⁶ That's how God's Word vaults across the skies
 from sunrise to sunset,
 Melting ice, scorching deserts,
 warming hearts to faith.

⁷⁻⁹ The revelation of God is whole
 and pulls our lives together.

Sure Juliet could have said, "Romeo. Our parents are dumb. Let's fall in love and forget our family drama." But there's something more communicated in:

O Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou Romeo?

Deny thy father and refuse thy name.

Or if thou wilt not, be but sworn my love

And I'll no longer be a Capulet.

The words of poetry (like our psalm today), the melody of dramatic music, the stunning observation of a canyon larger than the state of Rhode Island--- These experiences do something to us that is beyond what we can describe or imagine or convey. Beauty invites us beyond ourselves. In today's psalm reading and in Paul's words to the people in Athens at the Areopagus, beauty is the thing that compels these folks. In the Psalm attributed to King David, he finds himself almost swept up into the magic of creation. The words he can't find to convey who God is and how beautiful the creation is—he says the day, the sun, the deserts, the ice declare that feeling *in their silence*. He says these things reveal to us something about who God is and how God operates.

See the first thing beauty shows us about God is that sometimes we just have to get quiet. Like Moses suddenly becoming quiet and still in the planetarium, we are invited in the beautiful to be beyond words, if for just a moment.

It would have made more sense in our no-nonsense world for God to show up with a list of rules and some electric fences if this God was interested in just getting a message across. But I'm sure you have seen as well as I have that we humans love to nail things down, get them backed into a corner, take them apart and reassemble them in ways that make sense to us. There's nothing wrong with investigation and study, of course, but God didn't create all of this so that we could simply categorize it into a color-coded chart. God didn't create us so that we could just obey some rules and check some boxes. No, life and relationship with God, and living into who God made us to be is far more complex and far more beautiful than we could have imagined. Its beyond our comprehension, like God. And so the beauty of all God is and all God does gets us into a posture of quiet. It helps us to begin with "Wow."

"When we are stunned to the place beyond words, we're finally starting to get somewhere. It is so much more comfortable to think that we know what it all means, what to expect and how it all hangs together. When we are stunned to the place beyond words, when an aspect of life takes us away from being able to chip away at something until it's down to a manageable size and then to file it nicely away, when all we can say in response is "Wow," that's a prayer." – Ann Lamott

Beauty and awe get us quiet, and they pull us outside of ourselves.

In the psalm, King David makes it through 11 verses before he refers to himself. Did you notice that? For King David to go 11 verses without referring to himself is an unkingly thing to do, indeed. And as Paul is talking to the folks in Athens he mentions, "I see you have an altar to an unknown God. Do you see all the beautiful stuff around you? Do you see creation, by which you

get to live? Isn't that amazing? That's an invitation from the true God, who fills your lungs with breath. That's an invitation from a true God your poets have already written about.

Beauty finds a way to wiggle into our most sure and selfish selves. It grabs our hearts before our minds have a chance to reason it away. The beauty of the sunset, the breath grabbing image of new baby, the beauty in watching loved ones reunite or the way the sunlight hits the window sill first thing in the morning.... all of those moments and images pull us outside of our rational and calculated selves and invite us to see things differently. They invite us to consider that we are not God, and that we're lucky for getting to be here, to be alive, to be part of creation.

In a 2015 study, a researcher at the University of California, found that people who spent 60 seconds looking up at towering trees were more likely to report feeling awe, after which they were more likely to help a stranger. "Experiences of awe attune people to things larger than themselves," he said. "They cause individuals to feel less entitled, less selfish, and to behave in more generous and helping ways." The benefits of awe are physical too: regularly experiencing moments of awe has been linked to lower levels of inflammatory compounds in the body. One widely cited study of people recovering from abdominal surgery found that those with tree-lined views were released faster from the hospital, experienced fewer complications and required less pain medication than people whose rooms faced a brick wall.

At its best, this is what worship is—a chance to gaze at the beauty of a God who would make creation and humanity and fill it with wonderful things. At our best, we have eyes opened to the world around us, open to discovering the intricate, surprising, beautiful things around us.

Beauty gets us quiet and humble, and pulls us outside of ourselves. And lastly, beauty grounds us moments of difficulty and darkness.

When King David wrote this psalm, he and his people were not without difficulty. The story of the Israelite people is one of extraordinary heartbreak and surprising triumph. The declarations David makes about the beauty of God seen throughout creation is not whitewashing of the way things really are. And Paul in Athens is not an idiot. He has come to town preaching a story different than one others have heard, and likely to get him in trouble. Right before this, Paul shook up the religious leaders in the Jerusalem council, then he was stoned by an angry mob, and was locked up in jail. It is a risky moment for him. But beauty connects us with something outside of our present circumstances and gives us a chance to get beyond the dread or fear or pain surrounding us.

Its destroyed communities deciding to paint murals on the side of broken buildings.

Its WWI soldiers growing garden inside of their trenches.

It's the hymns and songs of nonviolent but determined apartheid protestors.

Elie Wiesel tells a story of a fellow prisoner trading their last piece of bread for a piece of fabric to create a makeshift menorah during Hanukah while they were in the evil torturous concentration camp. Wiesel asked, "Hanukkah in Auschwitz?" And the man replied, "Especially in Auschwitz."

Friends, beauty is a gift from God to us. It invites us to get quiet, to get outside of ourselves, and to be grounded in God in moments of extraordinary darkness. May we be people with eyes to see God's gifts of beauty to us, and hands to carry that beauty into all the world.