



“FEAR AND WONDER”

SCRIPTURE: PSALM 139: 1-6, 13-18

GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC

September 4, 2022

The Rev. Dr. Marcia W. Mount Shoop, Pastor

Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18

139:1 O LORD, you have searched me and known me. 139:2 You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away. 139:3 You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways. 139:4 Even before a word is on my tongue, O LORD, you know it completely. 139:5 You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me. 139:6 Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it. 139:13 For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb. 139:14 I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; that I know very well. 139:15 My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. 139:16 Your eyes beheld my unformed substance. In your book were written all the days that were formed for me, when none of them as yet existed. 139:17 How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them! 139:18 I try to count them -- they are more than the sand; I come to the end -- I am still with you.

The Word of the LORD.

Thanks be to God.

You are fearfully and wonderfully made.

You and me.

Fear is awareness of danger.

Fear is awe.

Fear is reverent humility
and the gift of awareness
when something could do harm.

Wonder is astonishment,

Marveling, admiring

A wash of amazement,

An infusion of the miracle
of infinite unknowns.

This is how we are made
Fearfully, wonderfully.
Full of wonder, and full of fear.

You and I are made for amazement.
We are equipped with the capacity
to smell danger, to know in our bodies
when something is not good for us,
when we are on a razor's edge.

Wonder and fear, sisters in
our sensate souls.
They tell us to look up, to dig deep,
to flee, to hang on for dear life,
to be still, to be very, very still.

And quiet sometimes from
the unknowing, from the
startling confrontation that there
is so much we can never know.

When is the last time
You embraced your
cellular wonder?
What are the contours, the subtleties
of the fear that lives in your anatomy?

What do fear and wonder feel like for you?

For me, they are life blood
And they are edges of growth,
Seeds of moments pregnant
with beautiful and daunting
truths—authentic and frank
in their devotion to luring me,
inviting me to savor sorrow,
cryptic mystery, and the

fleeting flight of ephemeral
delight.

The psalmist who wrote Psalm 139 sounds like she may have been writing during her sabbatical.

Her psalm has all the tell tale signs of deep sabbath rest—clarity of mind, strength of spirit, reveling in Divine Love and its mysterious proximity to the unfolding of our very existence. The gratitude and the awe, the confession and the surrender.

Psalm 139 is potent poetic proclamation.

Sabbath is the womb of faith finding its voice and its vitality.

We were made for sabbath. Creator built sabbath into our spirits, into our circadian rhythms.

Sleep is sabbath, sitting is sabbath, stretching and deep breaths can be sabbath.

But, Creator had even bigger plans for sabbath—a whole 24 hour cycle of gearing down and immersing ourselves in the Divine Love all around us is supposed to be a part of the way we mark time on a regular basis.

When we neglect the rhythm of sabbath over time we become out of sync with our own created nature and with our Creator.

Sabbath takes us into the sweetness of divine darkness where you are engulfed in unknowns, heightened senses, and human limitations.

It takes just enough shadow and just enough light to be able to see distinctions, colors. Light and dark play together with our anatomy to teach us things about where we are and what we need.

Reflection is the gift of sabbath—slowing down enough to be once removed from thoughts, experiences—a chance to let things settle, metabolize, and transform.

Without rest our muscles never repair from exertion. Rest is when our muscles not only repair, but it is when they become stronger.

You, Grace Covenant, gifted me with a nervous system reset. When I started my sabbatical I quickly realized that my body was on overload. I could not be around people any more. I was starved for solitude, for doing one thing at a time, for space to feel what I am feeling instead of being constantly engulfed by what others are feeling and adapting to that.

So I withdrew. I was a hermit. I slowed way down. And my body had a lot to tell me about what I needed to listen to, what I needed to be present to.

(put up picture of the view from my front porch)

Birds and clouds, trees, cicadas, crickets, dogs, coyotes, foxes, owls, cats, horses, snakes, lizards, flowers, grass, rocks, rain, stars, vibrations, sounds, wind—they became my community. And poetry was the way my soul spoke into and out of this Holy time.

(take down picture of the view from my front porch)

I am willing to share some of my poetry—over time—not everything at once, but slowly with time for me to recover from the vulnerability of being honest with you, being truthful in front of the human family. Today I will share three poems—poems about fear and wonder.

And then I need to walk and rest. I need to take care of the way it feels to take risks in a community in order for us—our collective to strengthen our muscles—the muscles we need to make the world a less brutal place.

Cicadas At Night

The cicadas at night
 blanket me in
 home.

Their song is my song
 the memory, the now
 the being here.

Windows open in
 summer time
 Mississippi
Cots made for
 my sister and
 me

The lullaby
of the cicadas
brought me to sleep
in a place
full of
things I should
know but never would

June, July nights in Kentucky
Tired, feet clean,
welcoming sheets
at ease in
belonging

Summers at Sunset
Babies washed
tucked in.
Ethereal Big Sky
beckoning me to
look up, wonder
feel questions,
soak in discoveries

This farm in Fletcher
slowly becoming home.
Growing, settling, being
here—They sing of
summer, of night time,
of heaven's mysteries,
and my sweet familiar.

They fill my world
with a comfort that
tells me you are
here and we are
with you. And the
world loves to
cherish you and for
you to cherish her.

There were times in my sabbatical when I wondered if I was burned out—so burned out that I couldn't come back to life in proximity to human beings. Pastors all over the world are burning out in droves—COVID just amplified the way church work can be traumatizing—and I am not using that word lightly.

For me the hardest part about being a pastor is the cruelty, the way trust is broken, the way people say they love you, but only when you do things exactly the way they want it done. It hurts when people sow seeds of discontent or leave community, it hurts when people are passive aggressive, nice to your face but cruel behind your back, when people don't see you because they are so caught up in their own stuff that they see you as the problem, because you did something they don't like—or maybe you didn't even actually do something, but they projected something onto you that made them think you did something. The hardest layers of life in church for me to live with are all the broken promises.

The adapting and calibrating that pastors have to constantly do can come too fast and too often. And pastors can carry around what is called “chronic post traumatic stress.” Many humans are walking around in this chronically activated state because we are just so tired of not knowing who we really can trust.

Chronic PTSD can feel like chronic homesickness.

Will the human family ever be at home with each other? The psalmist sinks into the threshold of believing we can trust anyone or anything in this world by starting with who made us—that God is trustworthy—and that God knows us with radical intimacy.

(Put up picture of cloud arc)

I saw this amazing cloud the other day—never seen anything like it, but it spoke to me about trusting a world that I don't understand.

The universe holds us first and foremost in that tender attention to our uniqueness and our place in the family of things.

The natural world tells us about the beautiful ways we belong here; about fear, wonder, and home.

(Take picture of cloud arc down)

Fear is a gift built into the way we are made, but we can struggle to know how to be in relationship with it. We spend a lot of time in churches saying “don’t be afraid.” I wonder if we could try something like, “tell me more about your fear” instead of telling us we should override a feeling that has some important things to tell us about what we need to feel like we can trust our surroundings.

Fear is not just terror, it is also awe, it is also reverence, it is also needing to know what safety feels like so that we can know when danger is near.

Fear is not the enemy—it is an important part of finding our way home. Because we are not forever. And time is actually a sort of delusional way for us to make our way in life. The universe shows us how time is collapsing all the time. We are surrounded by yesterdays and tomorrows—we are surrounded by infinity and timelessness.

The sounds of black holes.¹

Just listen to the sound of black holes—where there is no time, no distinction, no matter. Black holes sing about what timelessness sounds like.

(play audio until :33 seconds)

Let that settle over us.

And this is the sound of bursts of energy coming from black holes—53 million light years away from us.

(play audio until from :33-1:03)

If we think time should be the only way we can or should structure our existence, we need to listen to the song of black holes more.

When the psalmist says, “How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them! 139:18 I try to count them -- they are more than the sand; I come to the end -- I am still with you.” I hear the music of black holes—the music of eternity.

¹ Nasa audio of black hole sounds sonified. Article in NYT explains:
<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/07/science/space/astronomy-black-hole-sound.html?smid=url-share>

That vibration loosens the grip time has on me. I am slowing down. I am not captive to time. Our lives together are unfolding in the same world where black holes sing. Our vulnerability is infinite.

Coyote

Step into the
dawning world
to the shrieks
of coyotes on the hunt.
Evolutionary cacophony
Inflating our dread
by design.

Take cover
or wait
quiet, watchful
in thick dark.
The children
mocking, cackling
circling, attacking.
Two or three coyote
sound legion.

One last rueful
successful call
ushers in the
hush of
it is finished.
Death or fatal wound
shrouds the tumult.

The coyote can feed.
And the quiet
casts a spell
on me to
forget the
sound until.

How to find home in a world of black holes and coyotes, how to be at home in this world and embrace our fearfully and wonderfully made selves and communities? I learned a lot from a hummingbird that shared space with me everyday this summer.

This video is about a minute and forty seconds—please watch for my friend while I talk. The hummingbird will become more and more visible as you watch—and you’ll want to see the very end.

(play hummingbird video with no sound while I talk; whenever the video is over take it down)

You and I can’t see everything. You and I don’t know everything. In fact, the sense world we inhabit is limited.² There is no creature in the world who senses everything. Each of us lives in a sense world proper to our created nature, but none of us sees everything. Just knowing that changes us. Animals are not deficient versions of us—but magnificent creations who navigate the world with the senses they need to be them.

Hummingbirds actually have 4 cones in their eyes, more than humans do. So they see colors that we can’t even imagine. They see colors that we don’t even know exist. They see the colors we see and they see ultraviolet and they see colors that are the colors we know + UV that scientists call “non-spectral.” These non-spectral colors account for about 1/3 of the colors in things like flowers, plants, and feathers.

In fact, humans might be able to see just 1% of the colors that birds see. This little hummingbird sees the world with such brilliance and in technicolor magnificence—beyond our capacity to imagine. There is no google goggle you can put on to mimic it—our eyes do not have this capacity.

Breathe into the fact that this tiny creature that we share this planet with sees a world magnificent beyond our imagination. Hummingbirds have a genius that can never be ours.

When the psalmist says: 139:6 Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it. 139:13 For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb... Wonderful are your works; that I know very well. 139:15 My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths

² I highly recommend two amazing books: “An Immense World: How Animals Senses Reveal the Hidden Realms Around Us,” by Ed Yong; and “A World on the Wing: The Global Odyssey of Migratory Birds,” by Scott Weidensaul.

of the earth," think of the hummingbird—intricately made in her own right. That's the world we live in—that intricacy is what we are called to trust.

There is so much more to say about birds—how they migrate, how they are not from anywhere—they are citizens of the planet earth. Listen to them, watch them, make space in your imagination for what you can never see or never know or never do. Trust becomes a visceral brush with the buzz of a tiny creature who sees a brilliant world I only see in part.

Trust and wonder go hand in hand.

Trusting human beings becomes a sacred possibility in such a magnificent world. Just think of what we could see and be if we could use our energy for something other than being on our guard.

This is a sermon about fear and wonder.
And like so many things that define how we are made,
We cannot talk about these mysteries, these curious
miracles with certainty.
We can only catch glimpses,
Only soak in impressions and sensations.

We gather today around the promises
of the poetics of our ancestors
coupling with our own poetry in motion
our own living poesis of a community
Together searching for a way of being human
That is so very honest and true that we
can trust it with our lives, that we can trust
Each other with the softest parts of ourselves
And that we can create while we believe—
our beliefs in justice, in healing and repair,
In an end to terror's reign in our culture—those beliefs
birthing a new world symbiotically—that's
together, collaboratively—with reciprocity and
connections that run deeper than our
misperceptions.

I will end with the moon.

(put picture from the uploader of the moon up-split screen)

The moon is made of the same stuff we are.³ She is our mother—she and the ocean hold this magnetic connection that cradles us, that holds our skeletons together and allows us to feel the ground under our feet.

The words of the psalmist, “139:1 O LORD, you have searched me and known me. 139:2 You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away. 139:3 You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways. 139:4 Even before a word is on my tongue, O LORD, you know it completely. 139:5 You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me,” call me to stand under the moon, fearfully and wonderfully made.

(take picture of moon down)

Me and the Moon

Two owls fill the atmosphere
haunting, undaunting
“I am here, you are there.”
Chanting, repeating, pausing,
reprising. (repreesing)

Nimbus, cumulus, stratus
dancing, traipsing
across the heavens
conceal and reveal
full moon’s glow.

I know she is there
in her splendor.
I watch helpless, hopeful
for the parade of clouds
to unveil her to me.
Longing, willing, yearning
for unfiltered gleam,
radiating, beaming,

³ The podcast “Unexplainable” has a wonderful episode on the moon.
<https://megaphone.link/VMP3037380016>

caressing me again.

I see her now
I feel her bathing me
in life force, sourcing,
coursing through me
the rush of planetary life.

Tears profess my love,
my delight, my body's
insight that this moon
is mothering, sistering,
companioning me through
my sojourn of sentience.

She is a reason to love
this world.
She is the turning of time,
the magnetic marriage of
gravity. A bond consecrated
in tides, borning cries,
flocks gliding, skimming,
swimming through air
premonitions fed by
lunar muse.

Thick nights become
Elysian enchantment
Holy gossamer
adorned, shorn,
burnished in brilliance,
communion of shadow and light.

Thanks be to God.