

Ordinary Things

November 27, 2022 at First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC

Rev. Lexi Boudreaux

Texts: Psalm 139: 1-18, Luke Ch 3: 1-6 (NIV)

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing to you Oh God, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

At lunchtime I bought a huge orange—

The size of it made us all laugh.

I peeled it and shared it with Robert and Dave—

They got quarters and I had a half.

And that orange, it made me so happy,

As ordinary things often do

Just lately. The shopping. A walk in the park.

This is peace and contentment. It's new.

The rest of the day was quite easy.

I did all the jobs on my list

And enjoyed them and had some time over.

I love you. I'm glad I exist.

- The Orange by Wendy Cope

If it's been a while since someone has told you this, especially as we approach the holiday season, we are glad that each and every one of you exists. I didn't deliciously split an orange like the poet Wendy Cope, but this past weekend I made my grandmother's famous peanut butter blossom cookie recipe. I love rolling the cookie dough balls in the crispy and sweet sugar, the smell of warm peanut butter in the air as they bake, and the satisfying dent I make as I press the Hershey's kiss into their centers not long after being pulled from the oven. I love the consistency of them. These little morsels have been passed down and baked with care no matter what else is going on in the world, including during lockdown in 2020. As I package them up to be shared as gifts during the season of Advent, and perhaps at our cookie swap on December 18th too, I'm preparing my heart and spirit for this season that invites us into contemplation and sparks glimpses of hope in darker and shorter days.

Can you believe today, Sunday November 27th is already the first Sunday of Advent? The time in the year when we watch and wait for Jesus, the son of God, Emmanuel or God-With-Us, to come into the world and into our worlds. This is the time for slowing down, for paying attention to the ways in which God is with us in our lives, and for attending to wonder and awe in ordinary things. Perhaps this is the first year you are coming back to traditions long held sacred in your family or at First Church or you are looking forward to engaging in them in a new way. As we open our hearts to what this Advent season might bring, ask yourself what your soul is craving, what places and experiences kindle treasured memories, belonging, and good tidings in your life. Is it the smell of a freshly decorated evergreen tree? The sight and ritual of lighting candles as the days get shorter and the nights grow longer? The taste of that favorite recipe from a loved one? The warmth of spending time with chosen and given family? Perhaps over Thanksgiving some of us have already gathered with family or friends, trimmed our trees, or listened to a carol or two over hot cocoa or something a bit stronger.

Our theme for Advent this year is Behold, Opening to Wonder. As we return to our Advent traditions in a hybrid way, how might we all attend to the feelings of wonder and awe present in the everyday? When I think of wonder it conjures up this memory of being a young child and lying under our Christmas tree decorated with big multicolored bulbs. Do you know the kind? As the warmth from the bulbs activated the evergreen scent of the branches and the ornaments joyfully clinked together time slowed and for a moment the magic of the season made me feel safe and free. I bet most of us can remember a time from our childhoods when wonder and awe captivated our attention even in the most mundane of places. We know the joy and energy that wonder provides, and yet sometimes, letting wonder into our hearts seems impractical or frivolous. As headlines tell us there are shootings every day,

as a culture of hatred seems to overwhelm, when all oppression has not ceased, and personal struggles remain present for so many of us, we might look around and think to ourselves where is that Christmas magic from long ago? Where is the joy in anticipation? Or, the practical part of us asks what's the point of looking for wonder when we should be looking for solutions to very real, urgent problems? Maybe we even think to ourselves that in all that has happened and keeps happening, where even is the presence of God? The prophet Isaiah exclaims in our reading from the gospel of Luke for today, "prepare the way of the Lord and all flesh shall see the salvation of God." And when we have a moment to think we ask, what does having hope in that kind of healing and wholeness look like in a world like ours?

As my Advent practice I am reading a book called *This Here Flesh: Spirituality, Liberation and the Stories that Make Us*. It has sparked wonder and awe in me and I highly recommend it if you are looking to learn more about contemplative spirituality from a unique voice and perspective. The author Cole Arthur Riley is the creator of Black Liturgies, a space that integrates spiritual practice with Black emotion, Black literature, and the Black body. It's a project of The Center for Dignity and Contemplation where she serves as Curator. In her book of storytelling and memoir Arthur Riley wrestles with questions of how to see God in our human experience and story, of how to discover the sacred in her own skin. She describes contemplative spirituality as "a fidelity to beholding the divine in all things, a sacred attention." Throughout the book she takes the reader through categories: dignity, place, body, belonging, memory, liberation, and yes wonder.

As I journeyed through her pages on wonder's connection with the human experience of the divine, the poetry of her words resonated deeply with my experience of wonder. She says, "awe is not a lens through which to see the world but our sole path to seeing. Any other lens is not a lens but a veil. And I've come to believe that our beholding—seeing the veils of this world peeled back again and again, if only for a moment—is no small form of salvation."

You see, wonder is not something that is nice to include into our spiritual lives or something that we attend to when we have the time to do so or is something that should be relegated to our childhood memory, it is essential to remaining rooted in the presence of God among us now. These roots sustain us for the long term, to be bearers of hope in seasons of wilderness. To view our lives and the world around us with awe, to behold even something as simple as a candle flame and be mesmerized by the physics that make the flickering light possible is to see the precious and sacred nature of all that is. When we pay attention to what is around us and see the beauty in being a part of this fragile and intricate creation sometimes our only response is to give way to awe. That kind of wonder fuels our hope for a better world and a better life for all of God's people. It is the spiritual practice from which hope and love for

this world emerges. When we approach our experiences with awe we see the beauty of existence and the meaning of our place in it. We connect to an understanding of what it means to be fully alive.

Our capacity for wonder resides in our human bodies. As our confirmation class learned last week, Jesus had one too. As we will celebrate in a few weeks God came to live among us as a tender, soft child who dared to wonder and dream and embrace all aspects of our human experience. When God feels just too far away, when grief takes hold, when the horrors of being human tell us the lies that we are destined for disconnection and despair, the words of Psalm 139 call out to us adorned with tentative wonder. The psalmist sings to God,

*Where can I go from your Spirit?
Where can I flee from your presence?
If I go up to the heavens, you are there;
if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.
If I rise on the wings of the dawn,
if I settle on the far side of the sea,
even there your hand will guide me,
your right hand will hold me fast.*

Wherever our journey takes us God comes alongside us. God is not only somewhere out there amongst the stars that we see so clearly in the James Webb Space Telescope photos on our bulletin for today. God is in the unveiling of moments of wonder and glimpses of wholeness in our bodies and in our world right here, and in nebulas too.

Our opening hymn for worship this morning is O Come O Come Emmanuel or God with us. The original verses are paraphrases of the “O Antiphons” that have been chanted at Vespers in the Western Church at the end of Advent since at least the eighth century, making it one of the oldest carols we sing today. The letter O indicates great emotion and intimacy in the invitation for God to dwell among the people. Our ancestors in faith knew the feelings that come with lonely exile and the delight and connection with the divine that comes with a sudden rush of awe. And with each O Come, they called God into the midst of them even as God was already there. As we walk into these days of holy watch, may we continue to practice asking God into the ordinary and prepare our hearts to behold with wonder the moment when God does just that. Amen.