

## Wow

November 22, 2020

Bendersville & Wenksville United Methodist Churches

### Psalm 89:1-18

So today, we are finishing up our little, 3-week mini-series on prayer titled “Help, Thanks, Wow,” based on the book by Anne Lamott. And we have been exploring some of the most fundamental, foundational prayers that we pray. The prayers that are so short, so basic that they are almost instinctual. And therefore, they are the most real, the most authentic prayers that we can pray.

Two weeks ago we prayed the prayer, “Help,” that prayer that recognizes that we are not God, but that somebody else is; that prayer of invitation – inviting God to come and get involved in our “stuff.” Last week we prayed the prayer “Thanks” – a prayer of recognition, of those places where God *is* involved in our lives, and offering our gratitude for those gentle reminders, both big and small, that we are not going this life alone.

And today, we move into our third great prayer – the prayer “Wow.” Wow is similar to “Thanks,” and also similar to “Help,” but it goes deeper. It is a prayer of sheer delight. Or sometimes, sheer terror. But always, it’s a prayer of surprise. It’s what we pray when we are unexpectedly shaken out of where we are and startled into something bigger than us.

Here’s what Anne Lamott has to say about Wow:

*Wow is the child seeing the ocean for the first time. Wow is the teenager’s Christmas car (secondhand, but still). Wow is John Muir, Walt Whitman, Mary Oliver saying that the sun was the “Best preacher that ever was.”*

*[...] I remember hearing “Wow” for the first time from the mouth of our most beloved family friend, a German nature-lover named Gurtrud. She said “Vow!” a lot when she and her husband took my family out onto San Francisco Bay on their small sailboat, and when we went on a wildflower hike in Yosemite. “Vow, look at this,” looking straight up from beneath the Golden Gate Bridge. “Vow! Look at zis!” Alpine blue spider lupine, monkeyflowers, paintbrush. Wow, because you are almost speechless, but not quite.*

*You can manage, barely, this one syllable.*

*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.*

It's the prayer that the Psalmist prays in today's reading. We only read the first part of Psalm 89 today – the "pretty" part. The part that just seems to exude "wow."

*You own the cosmos—you made everything in it,  
everything from atom to archangel.  
You positioned the North and South Poles;  
the mountains Tabor and Hermon sing duets to you.  
With your well-muscled arm and your grip of steel—  
nobody trifles with you!*

For God's strength and power. For God's creative work, from the smallest, most microscopic building block of everything that exists – the tiniest atom – to the highest of all angels – from the miniscule to the transcendent, God is God of all. And all creation sings out this collective song of praise – this collective "wow." This collective, audible gasp at how unspeakably, unutterably, magnificent God's creation, God's dominion, God's very existence is.

And in my mind, the Psalm could stop here. It would be lovely if the Psalm stopped here. A beautiful Psalm of praise. All creation singing in a delightful chorus of "wow." What more needs to be said?

But even though we stopped our reading here, the *Psalmist* doesn't stop here. The Psalmist has more to say. A lot more. We are not going to read the whole Psalm this morning because it is long – it goes on for 52 verses, making it the 3<sup>rd</sup> longest of all of the Psalms, but I'll give you the gist of it.

So after the Psalmist finishes offering his beautiful words of high praise and thanksgiving for the beauties and the wonders and the mysteries and the intricacies of God, he turns his attention to King David, remembering how God chose King David as the smallest, unlikeliest person to be king, and yet God loved him and anointed him and promised that his line would last forever. Promised that even if David or his descendants turned horribly against God (which they did), God would punish them but would never forsake them. Wow. What grace.

And then we get this strong feeling that everything has gone wrong. We think that probably this Psalm was written sometime during or soon following the Babylonian exile – like so much of the rest of the Old Testament – and the Psalmist has basically lost everything. His home. His family. His livelihood. His sense of stability and security. He has fallen into a horrible pit of depression and confusion and despair. And we hear him calling out to God: What about that promise that you made to David? I know we messed

things up, God, but didn't you promise David that you'd never leave us? Then why have you left us now? You who are so great, and so awe-inspiring, where are you?

And that's where the Psalm ends. Not with words of praise, or words like "nevertheless, in spite of everything, I will trust you." None of that. Just real, dark, painful words of a desperate man crying out desperately to God, with no real hope that anything would ever get better.

"God, why are you allowing this?"

"God, why is this happening?"

"God, when will this end?"

Sound maybe a little bit like the prayers we have been offering this year?

How long, O God?

It seemed like things were starting to get better, but now they are bad again. Will this ever end, God?

I'm trying to have faith, God. I'm trying not to let my "stuff" get in the way, but God, I'm just so tired of all of this.

Will things ever go back to normal, God? Everything that I have lost this year, missed out on this year, had to let go of this year, will it ever come back?

The Psalmist's prayers of lament sound so similar to my prayers right about now. And prayers that I have heard from so many of you. They are prayers that are prayed in the heat of the moment, *during* the exile. *During* the pandemic. *During* the episode of depression or the panic attack or the financial crisis or the medical scare. Not after it, once we have the benefit of hindsight and can look back and see the fingerprints of God's grace helping us through it, but while we are in the middle of it, trying to make sense out of the confusion and having a hard time making heads or tails of any of it.

The Psalmist's prayer is real, and it's raw. He recognizes and sees and names everything that is most amazing about God; he remembers God's promises and God's faithfulness, and then, when everything goes wrong, it's like he is sitting alone in the dark, grappling around, desperately longing for that "wow" that he knows is there – he just talked about it. "You made everything from the atom to the archangel." There is nothing *nothing* that you are not a part of. And even in this moment I know you are here even though I can't see you, so God, please, I need another Wow right now. I need you to shake me out of where I am. Even a little wow. Just something to remind me that you are still active and alive and moving and breathing and creating and redeeming and restoring. Because my hope needs to be restored.

So, this is where the Psalm ends. And it is not a satisfying ending, at all. But while the Psalmist didn't have the benefit of hindsight, we do. And we know the rest of the story.

Things stayed bad for the Israelites. For many years. But then, God returned them home again. Things were never quite the same, and they had to learn a new way of being, but they were home. Wow, home feels good.

And then more time passed. And a new king was born. A direct descendant of King David. Just when it seemed like the Psalmist was right and God had maybe let David's royal line die out altogether, God resurrects it, in the person of Jesus. The one, true, everlasting king who will renew and restore us for all time. Wow. Didn't see THAT coming! And that wasn't it. God wasn't done blowing our minds with one WOW after another.

When all hope seems lost and we're sitting alone in a pit of despair, God physically becomes one of us to come and be with us? God willingly enters into the sufferings of this world – simply to be closer to *us*? WOW. Our story is changed.

The sick are healed? Water to wine? Walking on water? Lazarus walking out of the grave? WOW!

Jesus goes to the grave? For us? WOW.

Death and pain and suffering and sin and brokenness begin to lose their grip? WOW.

The empty tomb. The resurrection. The promise of new life. WOW. WOW. WOW.

The gift of the Holy Spirit – GOD abiding *inside US*? Does it get much more WOW than that?

If only the Psalmist could've been alive to see God's answer to his prayer. God's answer to each one of our prayers when we find ourselves right where the Psalmist was – in that pit of darkness and gloom.

Yes, it's hard right now, but WOW, it's amazing what God can do.

Yes, we are all exhausted and frustrated. But WOW. On the third day when we are least expecting it and the darkness finally lifts, what joy will fill our souls when God raises our spirits and empties the tombs of our hearts?

Because this is the God we serve. The God of the atom and the archangel. The God so big that even the mountains themselves sing out in a big, beautiful chorus. The God with well-muscled arms and a grip of steel – a grip so powerful that it will never, ever, ever let us go. A God of vibrant beauty that has gotten *inside us*. WOW. Now *that* is something that we can hang our hope on.

So here is our assignment this week. Two weeks ago I asked you to create a "God box." To write down those worries and concerns as they arise, and drop them into the "God

box,” releasing our grip on the things that bind us and giving them to God to handle instead. Last week I asked you to take a minute or two around the dinner table and name the things that you are grateful for – both the big and the small. Practicing gratitude and making a habit out of noticing the places where God is at work. This week, I’d like for us each to take some time each day – whether it be 30 seconds or 30 minutes – to experience wow. Not just naming the places where God is, but reveling in them. Maybe, if you are running in a thousand different directions at once, your wow is the taste of that first sip of coffee in the morning. Take two extra seconds to *really enjoy* it. That enjoyment – that delight – is a prayer in and of itself. Maybe your wow is the colors of an evening sunset. Or the feel of the warm sun on a November afternoon. Maybe, it is looking around at loved ones on Thanksgiving – whether in person or through FaceTime – and wowing as you look at the fruit God’s grace upon their lives. Maybe our wow comes in noticing the deep commitment and profound care of a nurse or a teacher or a cashier, who just goes above and beyond even though their stress levels have to be through the roof right now.

And in that moment, breathe in that sense of awe, and breathe out a deep, lingering WOW. Wow, God, look at how you are showing up in the world, even when the world is a mess. Wow, God. Your handiwork is so amazing. It’s hard to see it when I am so stuck on me, but look at this. Look at you. Still here. Working. Acting. Restoring. Redeeming. Wow.

And in that wow, in that tiny, short, simple prayer almost too deep for words, may our hope be re-born.