

Wow!

There was a man with a rather fierce look in his eye who challenged the minister at the church door. "Do you preach the whole Gospel?" he demanded.

"Well, not every Sunday," said the minister.

Whatever you get out of any sermon, or any group of sermons for that matter, is just a small smidgen of the whole Gospel. So just a taste, is all I have to offer this morning. And it comes out of that scripture we heard. The last verse of that Psalm. "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom."

You've seen those people in the grocery store who give out little samples of cheese or sausage, or whatever. One sermon is like that. It's a tiny sample. If you try to live on that little sample, even if you come to the grocery store every day to get another sample, you'll starve to death. You've got to go and buy the product – make a commitment – get the whole meal.

Our faith is like that. The Christian faith is so rich – so packed with wonder and beauty and grandeur and hope and promise, that no preacher, not me or anyone else, can

ever do more than offer a few highlights.

Please remember that whenever you listen to a sermon. It's a bit like a sound bite on TV. Television news reporters show a 20 second clip from a one-hour speech – and from that little snippet we often decide who to vote for.

The Christian journey is a life-long journey and we never get to the end of it. One of joys – there are many – but one of the joys along this journey is something we call "mystery."

This morning I want to talk about that one aspect of the Christian journey.

It's about that Psalm. "The fear of God is the beginning of wisdom." Does that mean that if you are scared stiff of God you will become wise?

I think the response to that scary passage is in the word "mystery." I'm not talking about a mystery as in a novel where you try to figure out who done it. And it's not a problem scientists are trying to solve, like how to send people to Mars or a cure for in-grown toenails. A spiritual mystery is not a puzzle to be solved. A

mystery is the awe, the wonder. It's like standing before a sunset or gazing at the grandeur of a rose or holding a new baby in your arms.

It is the mystery of our faith, the sense of wonder, the wide-eyed amazement of the beauty in a purple iris or a deep red rose, the soft touch of someone you love.

The only thing you can say about such experiences is "Wow!" because that beauty, that mystery, adds so much richness and joy to it all. It is the mystery in the wide eyes of a child and the mystery of a universe so vast no human mind can comprehend it all.

So do a bit of imagining with me. Imagine you are one of the first humans – a person living in the stone age, Only a few generations ago your people discovered fire – only for the last few generations have you been able to make stone cutting implements.

As a Stone Age person, you could not even conceive of such a thing as writing. In fact your language is primitive – limited to a few dozen word-like grunts.

It is night. You are looking out of the entrance of your cave, and you see a flash of lightning, followed by the roll of thunder. You shudder in fear. Who or what could be doing that? In the other direction, there is a bright glow from the top of a mountain which only days ago exploded in a huge cloud of

fire and dust. Who or what could be doing that?

A few hours ago in the evening, you saw the sky streaked with the brilliant colors of sunset – and you smiled at the beauty of it all. Who or what could be doing that?

And just this morning, one of the women of your little tribe birthed a child. How does that happen? Who makes it happen? Why is it that we are born, live for a few years, then die?

On a hunting trip last week, the most skilled hunter in your tribe tripped on a root, cracked his head on a rock and died. That couldn't have been an accident – he was so sure footed. Who or what could have caused him to do that? And what happens to you when you die?

Sometimes there is plenty of food. Animals are plentiful – there are berries on the bushes and water in the spring. Other times there is no food and the weak ones of your small group of humans die. Why is that? Who or what makes food plentiful sometimes and scarce at other times?

It is mysteries such as that which are the foundation of all religion – all faith. Only humans are made in the image and likeness of God – we are enough like God that we can ask those kinds of questions. Only the human mind has the kind of intelligence that can wonder at mystery life – life that is sometimes good and kind, and sometimes cruel and devastating.

And over the centuries, as humans grew in wisdom and understanding – as the human tongue began to find ways to put words around intangible concepts – gradually there evolved stories of super-human powers – gods if you like – who somehow caused all the terror sometimes, and brought joy and plenty the next. You never knew what these gods were going to do but you struggled hard to keep them happy.

We humans wandered far and wide around the world, looking for new places to hunt and harvest. As the eons rolled on, and as our cultures and our languages diverged and developed, our legends and our traditions evolved into wonderful and diverse ways of understanding who we are, and how we relate to that great mystery that seems to own our lives.

Every culture in every part of the world has evolved a rich and varied sense of the holy – of mystery – of a sense that beyond ourselves there is a reality – a something that interacts with us and orders our lives. One anthropologist says the technical word for us should be *homo religiosus*.

Human beings have always been, and continue to be, incurably religious. Genuine atheists are as scarce as hen's teeth, even in our own money-driven western culture. Most atheists are people who have tried and failed to explain the mystery – who come to the conclusion that if it cannot be dissected, or counted or put into

categories, it doesn't exist. And so they simply deny that it all and stop thinking about it.

They don't understand that the tools and methods of science simply don't work in responding to the mystery. It's like using a sledgehammer to play the violin.

Sometimes the gods that we humans have worshiped were seen to be cruel and vindictive – ready to rain down fire, brimstone, starvation, pain, death. And sometimes the gods we humans have worshipped have been gods of love, of gentleness, of justice and caring.

Most often, the gods we human have worshipped have been a bit of both.

Our own religious tradition, the Judeo Christian tradition, worships a God who is seen sometimes as fierce, angry, judgmental, who enjoys nothing more than to send us writhing into the sulphur pits of hell if we don't live up to an impossible moral code. Yes, you can find that kind of a God in our Bible and the writings of all the world's religions.

But we Christians can set those passages aside and focus on those parts of the Bible that seem to match the kind of God Jesus showed to us. A God of mystery, of beauty, and love.

Thousands of years ago, before the time of King David, the Hebrews were singing songs about that holy

mystery. We have the words, though not the music in the book of Psalms. For instance, that wonderful psalm 111 we read together this morning.

We're at a bit of a disadvantage reading those ancient songs, because they use thought forms that don't work well in modern English. For instance, that last line. "The fear of God is the beginning of wisdom."

But the word "fear" is translated from a Hebrew word that has no equivalent in English. Some translations of the Bible use "reverence," others use "respect." I'm told by folks who know Hebrew, that a sense of wonder, of awe, or best of all "Wow!" would get pretty close the idea. So here's my own little paraphrase of the last few verses.

First, here it is again, as you heard it read this morning.

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom;

all those who practice it have a good understanding.

God's praise endures forever.

Here's my paraphrase.

The awe and wonder we experience is the window to wisdom. Those who look and live, experience the holiness of God, which never leaves us.

There are no words that can begin to do justice to that well of mystery, to which we go again and again to refresh our souls – except perhaps that one word, "Wow! Wow!"

Sister Marie Terese Winter says that "Wow!" is the most profoundly theological word in English.

Most of you will have forgotten 99% of what I said in this sermon by the time you get in your car to drive home. So just try to hang on to that one word. Wow! Just that one word. Wow!

We live in mystery far beyond our understanding, yet a mystery through which we feel somehow connected to that ancient power of love which is the source of all creation.

How do you hold on to such a mystery? There are no words – no formulas, no descriptions. Just when you think you understand it all, it slips out of the corners of your consciousness, and you know you really don't understand it at all, but in the process of imagining such a mystery, we feel ourselves blessed.

There was a strange and wonderful woman who was born in England in 1342 just six years before the first great plague devastated the country. We call her Julian of Norwich, because we don't know her real name. All we really know is the dream of wholeness that she gave us. There is only one word that encapsulates what

Julian says in her book. That word is “Wow!”

Learned philosophers and theologians down through the ages have tried to explain the mystery of God. It is good that they should do that, because they have pushed us to think critically and carefully about the faith that moves us.

Julian of Norwich lived at a terrible time in English history. The plague killed half the people when she was six years old. The church and the government were unbelievably corrupt. There were big wars and little wars all over the place. A terrible disease killed most of the cattle, and another disease devastated the crops. Many of the people who survived the plague starved to death.

In that awful age, Julian had a dream or a vision. And out of that vision she offered us a way of imagining God. She had studied the scriptures carefully and prayerfully. She looked hard and long at the figure of Jesus she found in the Bible. Jesus, she said, is like a mother. Not just any mother, but the best mother we can possibly imagine.

If you can think of Jesus as having all the attributes of a loving mother or a loving father, then you can get a sense of what God is like. Julian tells us that God loves us as intensely and completely as a mother loves her child, and out of that mothering love came the mothering Jesus, the Christ who showed with his life and his

teachings that he lived within the mystery of the mothering love of God.

That, says Julian, is the only word you can use to describe God. Love. Nothing more. And nothing less. The only power that God can use is the power of love, and that power is the greatest of all powers.

God’s love created the spangled heavens and tossed the galaxies to the farthest reaches of human imagination in one great cosmic orgasm which scientists call the “big bang” – and that same, powerful love reaches out to each one of us individually and draws us to worship this morning. It is the love we find in ourselves and that we see in others, when we reach out in care and love to someone else.

It is that cosmic love, that personal love, that infinite love that moves the tiniest sub-atomic particle we cannot see. And that ancient love is still here, working tiny miracles in our lives whenever we allow it to do so.

Quite a number of years ago, when Bev was the minister at Westbank United, we had a congregational weekend at camp OAC the Anglican camp on the west side of Okanagan Lake.

It was Saturday night, and all of us were sitting around a campfire. The nine-year old boys had done their really awful skits, and we had sung a bunch of those crazy campfire songs that people suddenly remember at times like this. It was beginning to get

dark, and a little bit cold, and the smaller children began to find laps to sit on.

Young Daryl came and sat on my lap because a younger sibling was already on his mother's lap and there was no father in his life. He snuggled in to me for warmth and because he may have sensed the kind of fathering love that had been denied him.

A thunderstorm began to develop across the lake – an electrical storm began to move up the valley from the south. As the thunderbolts detonated, each stroke of lightning lit up the whole valley.

Just for an instance. Just for a moment you could see everything clearly, the whole valley, and then just as quickly it was dark again.

And I realized that my spiritual life is like that. There are moments, when, just for an instant, I feel I understand everything, and then just as quickly, that is gone.

It was Daryl who gave me a fine gift. As the lightning flashed again and lit up our world, I caught a glimpse of Daryl's six-year-old face.

I will never be able to define the word "awe" nor describe the mystery of a God who surrounds us with love. But that evening, just for an instant, I saw that mystery in the face of a child, and just for that instant, I understood.

I may well be colouring that moment with the pigments of

imagination, but I think perhaps, I feel perhaps, I sense perhaps – I know, that in that split second, I saw the face of God.

Amen.

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