

Wonder

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Community Presbyterian Church - Rochester, Minnesota

Transfiguration Sunday - February 19, 2023

Texts: 2 Peter 1:16-21, Matthew 17:1-9

2 Peter 1:16-21

We did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we had been eyewitnesses of his majesty. For he received honor and glory from God the Father when that voice was conveyed to him by the Majestic Glory, saying, 'This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.' We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven, while we were with him on the holy mountain.

So we have the prophetic message more fully confirmed. You will do well to be attentive to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts. First of all you must understand this, that no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, because no prophecy ever came by human will, but men and women moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.

GOSPEL READING Matthew 17:1-9

The plan is unfolding; the disciples recognize Jesus as more than an ordinary teacher; he tries to tell them he will not die an ordinary death. They are slow to comprehend this.

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. Then Peter said to Jesus, 'Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.' While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!' When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, 'Get up and do not be afraid.' And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone. As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, 'Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.' Word of God, Word of Life. TBTG.

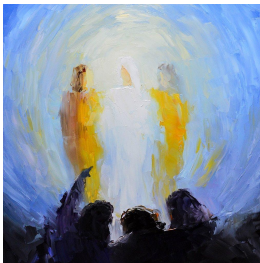
In 1857, an explorer named Lt. Joseph C. Ives led a steamboat up the Colorado River in quest of the Big Cañon. Ives traveled to the inner gorge, briefly touched at the South Rim, and in 1861 concluded: *“The region is, of course, altogether valueless ... after entering it there is nothing to do but leave. Ours has been the first, and will doubtless be the last, party of whites to visit this profitless locality.”*¹



Clearly, this early visitor to the Grand Canyon missed something. I call it the “wow” factor. When Bob and I visited the same “profitless locality” on our way home from Arizona, we were just cresting the last rise when we were approached by a friendly Great Dane and a golden lab. We paused to exchange greetings. When we looked up, there it was. WOW. WOW. The Grand Canyon, in all its ancient splendor. What else could we say?

How many of you have been there? How many of you said, “Wow”? Uh-huh. You got it. The “wow” factor. But what do you do when you run out of wows?

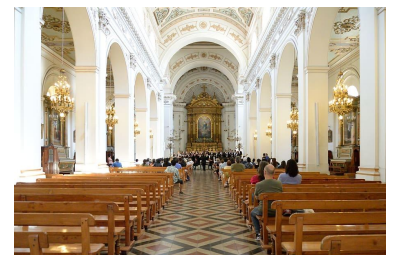
You harness the wonder. Which is exactly what human beings have done. No less than 15 dams along the Colorado River provide drinking water for millions of people, irrigate millions of acres of land, and electrify millions of homes.² Great, right? Of course, this has altered the river, too.



When Jesus, Peter, James and John climbed the mountain, Jesus changed in a way that the gospel writers struggled to describe. The word “wow” hadn’t been invented yet, but we know that’s what they meant. But how long does it take Peter to begin to harness the wonder? Not very long. He wants to build booths for the luminaries, Jesus, Moses, and Elijah, maybe livestream the event. Hey, this could go viral.

But brightness seizes them. A voice speaks. “This is my Son, the Beloved, the one who pleases me. So pay attention. Listen.” They are knocked clean off their feet, gently but firmly. Apparently there’s more to learn. And one thing to learn is, you can harness river power but you can’t harness divine power. You can dam up the Colorado River, but you can’t dam up the power of God and control it. It doesn’t work that way.

In past times, people built churches and cathedrals for the “wow” factor. Huge. Ornate. Filled with light. Expensive. For a long time it worked, too. People flocked there to experience wonder, awe, mystery. Relief from the



¹ <https://theconversation.com/grand-canyon-national-park-how-a-place-once-called-valueless-became-grand-111144>

² <https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/observations/john-wesley-powell-great-explorer-of-the-american-west/#:~:text=Just%20over%20150%20years%20ago,Canyon%20on%20August%2030%2C%201869%2C>

drudgery of their lives. Connection with something bigger, something they knew as God, Savior, light in darkness, comfort in sorrow, joy of living, life unending. The problem is, a lot of those pews are empty now. Has Christianity lost its “wow” factor? Has faith become valueless— or is it just that people fail to recognize its value? Or maybe we’ve tried too hard to harness it for our own purposes. Listen. God is not the means to the end, God *is* the end. In the end, God is all there is, and God’s love, loving us into life.

Maybe we need to stop and listen. Pay attention. We are not the influencers here. God works the miracles. God always did and God always will.



At the Grand Canyon, even in this slow season, we saw and heard people from all around the world, speaking German, Spanish, Italian, Chinese, Japanese, and a couple of languages I didn’t recognize. The pews are not empty there! The vast, multi-layered space still has a million stories to tell of earth’s history and human development. But Bob and I learned something that surprised us: The Colorado River is smaller than it was in the past, due to drought and overuse by people.

But it was never a lot bigger or wider. What looks like the merest trickle at the bottom is the same river that cut through all those layers of rock to form the vista that amazes us now. That river is still carving its way through rock, at a rate of a foot every 200 years. Slow but sure.

And the Spirit that filled Jesus, the Spirit that drew people to him, the healing Spirit in his hands, the winsome Spirit in his words, the loving flow of Spirit from his heart, is the same Spirit that carves its way into the dark places of the world today. Lifestyles change; human culture evolves, but God’s nature never changes. We are the ones who lose touch with it, who forget to value it. Who lose our sense of wonder. When we forget and fail, God loves us more. Grace abounds.

Today, again, we call our leaders by name, we pledge to support them in their work among us, we commit ourselves to a set of doctrines and beliefs and practices that we hope will somehow do some good in the world. All pretty cut and dried, right? Wrong. All these words we Presbyterians are so fond of using are a feeble attempt to say the unsayable. To voice the “wow” factor. The same Spirit that led Jesus leads us. The same power at work in Jesus is working in you now. Are there tasks ahead, decisions to be made? Yes, we are facing challenges, for sure. But don’t jump into them right away. Believe and you will see it happen.

Stop. Savor the moment. Feel the radiance on your skin, the fire in your bones. Pay attention. You are God’s beloved. God’s beloved Son is here with you. Listen.

Amen. Thanks be to God.

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Prayers

God of wonder, open our eyes, ears, hearts and minds to see the way you work your will in the world. Electrify us with the good news that we are still transfigured by your love.

With the rest of the world we mourn the tragic loss of life in Turkey and Syria following the earthquake there. Arouse our compassion to assist them as a nation and as brothers and sisters to the people there.

And with our nation, our thoughts turn to Jimmy Carter, who has entered hospice care: president, statesman, humanitarian, and leader in the public practice of the faith. Raise up others to follow his example.

We lament the deaths of all those who have perished before their time due to violence of one form or another: war, starvation, misuse of firearms. May we become peacemakers and prophets for righteousness.

In the midst of all this sorrow, Beloved, we remember that your love to us and your presence among us never falters or fails. Let us look to you for strength and purpose as we go forward. Remember us in your realm and teach us to pray: Our Father and Mother in heaven....