**Praying the Psalms**

**Sunday July 1, 2018**

**“Wow” (Psalm 8)**

**1. Introduction: *Help, Thanks, Wow***

Writer Anne Lamott begins her book on prayer with these words, “I do not know much about God and prayer, but I have come to believe, over the past twenty-five-years, that there’s something to be said about keeping prayer simple. *Help. Thanks. Wow*.” (*Help, Thanks, Wow: The Three Essential Prayers*, p. 9). Lamott’s journey to God was not an easy one. She’s been an atheist, an alcoholic and an addict. But God never gave up on her and when she hit rock bottom that she became a Christian and discovered the warm embrace of a local church. Her book on prayer is called “Help, Thanks, Wow: The Three Essential Prayers” and, as the title suggests, it is a book that suggests that our prayers come in three forms – “Help” or petition, “Thanks” or thanksgiving, and “Wow” or praise.

Through the month of July, we’re going to reflect on some of the Psalms from the perspective of the prayer. We’re going to consider Lamott’s three essential prayers, to which I’ve added *two* more, “Sorry” and “Amen.” I hope and I pray that as we journey through these Psalms and think about prayer that we’ll end up having a greater appreciation of the Psalms and their connection to a deeper life of prayer. Prayer is an open and honest conversation with God. “It’s not,” as Lamott writes, “for display purposes, like plastic sushi or neon. Prayer is private, even when we pray with others. It is communication form the heart to that which surpasses understanding. Let’s say it is *communication from one’s heart to God*” (p. 9). So whatever situation you’re in, wherever you are in your walk with God, you can be completely real with the One who loves, listens and cares.

This morning we start with the “Wow” prayer. In an interview with National Public Radio, Anne Lamott was asked about “Wow” and this was her response, “Wow is the *praise prayer*, the prayer where we're finally speechless - and which, in my case, is saying something. Wow is often - when I don't know what else to do, I go outside. And I see the sky, and I see the trees; and a bird flies by, and my mouth drops open - again, with wonder at the just sheer beauty of creation. And I say, wow! You could also say, holy toledo! Or you say it when you see the fjords for the first time at dawn, Or you say it when you first see the new baby, and you say, wow, this is great! *Wow is the prayer of wonder.* (<https://www.npr.org/2012/11/19/164814269/anne-lamott-distills-prayer-into-help-thanks-wow>).

Our journey of praying the Psalms begins with the *Wow* prayer of Psalm 8. It is a prayer of praise to God whose glory fills heaven and earth. It is also a prayer of praise to God whose love for humanity and his creation is unmistakeable. Its words should prompt us to say a huge WOW to God for his creation and our place within it.

**2. Wow: *How majestic in your name in all the earth***

 Most psalms of praise begin by calling the God’s people and all creation to give praise to God. For instance, Psalm 33, our call to worship this morning, begins with, “Rejoice in the Lord, you righteous; it is fitting for the upright to praise him” (Ps 33:1). But Psalm 8 does not call the community to praise God; rather it begins with *a sudden exclamation of praise to God*.

 “*Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth*!” (Ps 8:1).

The Psalmist’s exuberance is like a great, big *wow*. His prayer is enthusiastic, reverent, heart-felt and intimate. It’s an *intimate* prayer because the Lord (יהוה) whose glory fills the earth is described *our Lord;* a tiny phrase that conveys the depth of his relationship with his people. This is the foundation of all prayer because “Prayer means that, in some unique way, we believe that we’re invited into a relationship with someone who hears us when we speak in silence” (Lamott, *Help, Thanks, Wow,* p. 10). The Psalmist’s prayer quickly turns from this reverent, yet intimate address to a grand declaration that the Lord himself is the majesty or glory of creation. In ancient culture a person’s *name* was not just a label, but it also spoke of one’s character. So, God’s character, his great, majestic and glorious character, can be seen in *all* *the earth*. The invitation then is to open our eyes and stand in awe and wonder at creation and to offer praise to the Creator of it all. We may even feel like saying “Wow.”

 A few years ago I had a rather unexpected *Wow* experience. As many of you folks know I have hearing loss and I wear hearing aids to compensate for this. Yet I was concerned about the deterioration of my hearing, so I booked an appointment at Sunnybrook Hospital to look into the possibility of cochlear implants. At the initial screening it was determined that my hearing loss was not severe enough to warrant cochlear implants, which was good news. The audiologist who worked with me was extremely helpful and carefully explained the nature of hearing loss. But the *wow* moment came when she explained in great detail how the cochlea works. I won’t take time for an in-depth science lesson (if you do want to learn how the cochlea works, you can watch this YouTube video <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WeQluId1hnQ>), but I will say that it’s a very complex process. While I was listening to her explanation, I was quietly thinking “wow.” Hearing, an activity that we all take for granted, comes down to tiny hairs in our cochlea that absorb sound vibrations and send the information to our brain. I was in awe of the Creator who made my ears, which enable me to hear the lovely sounds all around me. When I think of the ear, I say “Wow” to God.

 There are *Wow* experiences all around us. It’s just a matter of having our ears, eyes and hearts open to the world all around and praising the One who made it all. As we think about our country on this Canada Day, we can’t help but say *Wow* to Godfor its beauty. Whether we’re standing on a majestic mountain, listening to the ocean waves crash against the shore, hiking the Bruce Trail or canoeing on a quiet northern lake, the beauty of our country is unmistakeable. Our natural response should be to praise God. The words of the hymn, “Joyful, Joyful We Adore Thee” express this well.

*“All Thy works with joy surround Thee,
Earth and heaven reflect Thy rays,
Stars and angels sing around Thee,
Center of unbroken praise:
Field and forest, vale and mountain,
Blooming meadow, flashing sea,
Chanting bird and flowing fountain
Call us to rejoice in Thee.”*

 All things, great and small, give praise to God. God’s “praise is chanted on high, yet acceptably echoed from the cradle and the nursery” (Kidner, *Psalms 1-72,* p. 66). While God’s splendour is sung by the heavens above (Ps 8:1), his praise also comes “from the mouths of babes and infants” (Ps 8:2). I really like Eugene Peterson’s translation of this verse, “*Nursing infants gurgle choruses about you; toddlers shout the songs that drown out enemy talk and silence atheist babble*” (Ps 8:2, *The Message*). The cry of an infant displays the creative power of God. So, babies should be allowed to cry in church because they are offering their praises to God.

 These words about infants and children make me think about my own kids and their journeys from infancy to adulthood. This past Thursday my youngest child, Ethan graduated from high school and on Friday we celebrated his 18th birthday. It seems like yesterday that I held little Ethan in my arms for the first time, marvelling at his tiny hands and feet. And now he’s a man, finished high school and getting ready for university in the fall. Where did the time go? At times like these, it seems appropriate to give a big *Wow* prayer to God, praising him for wonder of life.

**3. Wow: *What are human beings that you are mindful of them?***

It didn’t seem all that long ago when I was around Ethan’s age and living on my family’s dairy farm. Summer was the busiest time of year. During haying season our day would begin early with the morning milking and end with the evening milking, with lots of hay unloaded into the barn throughout the day. By 9:30 at night the evening chores were done and I was exhausted. So, my favourite part of the day was sitting on a lawn chair in the yard in the cool of the evening. I’d take my boots and socks off and run my feet through the dewy grass. I would lean back and gaze at the night sky. That was heaven to me! Sometimes the simplest of things in life are the most wonderful. Nothing compares with dewy grass and starry skies!

The Psalmist also gazed at the stars. The vastness of the night sky caused him to ponder the place of humans in the grand scheme of things. His stargazing led to these meditations:

“I look up at your macro-skies, dark and enormous,
    your handmade sky-jewelry,
Moon and stars mounted in their settings.
    Then I look at my micro-self and wonder,
Why do you bother with us?
    Why take a second look our way?” (Ps 8:3-4).

Given the magnitude of creation, the Psalmist wonders why God would even bother to pay attention to human beings, who are but tiny threads in the grand tapestry of the universe. Yet his words also express an astonishment that the God of the universe is indeed mindful of and caring toward these *frail children of dust.* Not only is God mindful of and cares for humans, he has given them a wonderful dignity. The Psalmist declares, “Yet you made them only a little lower than God and crowned themwith glory and honor” (Ps 8:5). These words echo the creation account in Genesis 1:26-27 - “God spoke: ‘Let us make human beings in our image, make them reflecting our nature so they can be responsible for the fish in the sea, the birds in the air, the cattle, and, yes, Earth itself, and every animal that moves on the face of Earth.’ God created human beings; he created them godlike, reflecting God’s nature. He created them male and female.” *Wow.* God has made us in his image; all of us are marked with the divine stamp in our being. We have a profound connection to our Creator.

 As bearers of the image of God, we are God’s representatives in the world, having rule and responsibility over the words of the divine fingers. The Creator has *crowned* humanity with glory and honour and has given them an important task in the world. The Psalmist writes,

“You put us in charge of your handcrafted world,
    repeated to us your Genesis-charge,
Made us lords of sheep and cattle,
    even animals out in the wild,
Birds flying and fish swimming,
    whales singing in the ocean deeps” (Ps 8:6-8, *The Message*).

Humanity’s dominion over creation should never be misconstrued as a divine permission slip to do as we please. We are not free to exploit the earth’s resources, mistreat animals, pollute the air and water or radically damage the environment. God created the world and called it good and we are endowed with the task of caring for it. If creation reveals the glory of God and then we need to make sure that it continues to do so. This means that in the big and the little things we need to reflect on the environmental impact of our behaviour and lifestyle.

 Reflection on this Psalm, J.C. McCann writes, “It is not naïve to say that the first step in addressing the environmental crisis is to praise God, for praising God is that act of worship and mode of existence that reminds us that we human beings are not free to do whatever our science and technology enable us to do. Praise flies in the face of our culture’s tendency to unrestrained exploitation” (*Theological Introduction to the Book of Psalms,* p. 59). So, the Psalm ends, as it began, with an exuberant burst of praise to God.

 “*Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!*” (Ps 8:9).

These exuberant bursts of praise to the Creator are the framework for the Psalmist’s meditations on the role of humans within creation. Theology, anthropology and ecology are held together in this wonderful psalm that celebrates God’s amazing creation and marvels at the important task that he has given humans within creation. *Wow, wow, wow!*

 As my reflections draw to a close, I’d like to read the lyrics of the song, *Lord of the Starfields,* written by Canadian songwriter Bruce Cockburn.

*Lord of the starfields
Ancient of Days
Universe Maker
Here's a song in your praise

Wings of the storm cloud
Beginning and end
You make my heart leap
Like a banner in the wind

O love that fires the sun
Keep me burning.
Lord of the starfields
Sower of life,
Heaven and earth are
Full of your light

Voice of the nova
Smile of the dew
All of our yearning
Only comes home to you

O love that fires the sun
keep me burning*

([http://cockburnproject.net/songs&music/lots.html](http://cockburnproject.net/songs%26music/lots.html))