

It is Whole, It is a Great Wonder

Psalm 136:1-9; Psalm 139:1-18

A Sermon by David Goff

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One of the first books I ever read of the Bible was the Book of Revelation, when I was in about eighth grade. Whether or not they take it at face value, people love the Book of Revelation, and by the age of fourteen I had watched enough horror movies and primetime television to know that there were some strange things in that book, things that sowed a great many seeds in people's hearts and imaginations. So I read it, and left it much bewildered, but one thing that impressed upon me most was not the apocalyptic imagery but rather the description of heaven, and the heavenly host. "And the four living creatures," it reads, "each of them with six wings, are full of eyes all around and inside. Day and night without ceasing they sing, 'Holy, holy, holy, the Lord God the Almighty, who was and is and is to come'...and the twenty-four elders fall before the one who lives forever and ever; they cast their crowns before the throne, singing, 'You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created'" (Revelation 4:8-11). Now I admit that when I read this, this representation conflicted with the idea I had harbored of heaven. My heaven involved a much higher percentage of jet skis and talking dolphins. To me, singing praise day and night without ceasing seemed like kind of a drag. The idea of worship—exactly what it embodies and what it accomplishes—was always one with which I struggled. I liked it okay, but I wasn't sure if I was doing it right, or whether my time could be better spent with other activities.

Growing up in my house we always had a moment of silence at dinner before eating. Often what this meant for me was that I would sing a song in my head or rehearse the Calvin & Hobbes anecdote that I was about to tell over supper. But over time the thought came to my attention, *Wait a minute; there's something going on here. There's more to this dinner than my eating of it. There's more to this casserole than a fifteen minute respite between Full House and The Golden Girls. There's a lot of stuff going on right*

now. Thank you mom, for your trip to the store; thank you grocer, for your commerce; thank you farmer man and farmer lady for your toil; thank you bean sprout for your life, thank you earth for your fertility. Thank you taste buds for the enjoyment, thank you Giselle for cleaning my teeth twice a year, thank you colon for not failing me when I need you.

It has been a growing realization for me these past years that this life is much stranger than I had imagined. I used to wonder what it would be like to be blind; now I wonder what it would be like if sight itself did not exist, if there were no space to separate the object perceived from the object perceiving, no light to bear these images in transit. I used to think, *Am I good person? Am I a useful member of society?* Now I think: *What are these things I call thoughts anyway? This thing I call a self? How could I begin to describe this thing I call experience, and if I cannot describe it, do I even understand it?* The laws and circumstances of our existence, though largely fixed, are by no means a given, to be taken for granted. There is indeed a lot of stuff going on, strange stuff, stuff that might just as well be something different, or might as well be nothing at all.

As such sentient creatures, creatures who perceive, who ponder, creatures with a sophisticated awareness of ourselves and our surroundings, we humans have a great gift. And that gift is gratitude. That gift is reverence. I do not know if the moon can offer thanks for having settled into its orbit, for I do not speak its language; but we, we know that we have a place, when the voice of possibility whispers to us that such a place might not have been. Each time we eat we know that we might well be going hungry. Each time we have heartburn, we know we might not even have a heart to catch fire. And we can give thanks, thanks that it is so, when it might not be so.

There is a ground to uphold us, whereupon our own cycles, like the moon's, may run their course, daily and yearly and generational cycles. I do not know why they occur, beyond a very superficial understanding, but I know that I would be very sorry to see them vanish. I do not know why I am programmed to guard this body at all costs from harm and destruction, but I do, for I see that it is good. In the beginning God let

things be, and He saw that they were good. The light became, and it was good; the land became, and it was good; the sun became, and it was good. Not because it won't get in your eyes while you're driving, or give you skin cancer, because it will. But it is good. It is strange, and good. And it is no small privilege to behold it.

I had a pet salamander until two weeks ago. He was aquatic, he lived in a tank full of water, and kept mostly to himself. But when I put my face to the glass and waited, his head would turn, and his body followed, and he would stare at me until I moved away. Exactly what image of myself he entertained in his mind I cannot know, nor what concept of water, or of food, or hunger. But he responded, he recognized in me something to respond to, and for that I knew that he too knew, he knew something; he too participated in experience. And when I walked into my room and he responded neither to my taps nor my splashes nor my desperate prodding, it was a source of great fear to me that he no longer knew, with the knowledge of the living; that he might no longer bear witness, as he once bore witness, to the great unfolding.

I won't lecture about death, who have seen it only in the limp jaws of a salamander. But a great satisfaction of our life is recognition, and affirmation, of and by others. *You, too, are a part of this, as I am! You, too, are in the know.* Martin Buber, in his work *I and Thou*, comments on a number of greetings that people use in different languages, one African variant being, "I see you!" I see you! Do you see me? Are we not both a part of this, together? *And isn't it strange?*

So much of our lives we spend in pursuit of that affirmation, seeking a voice from our fellows to lend credibility to our own concept of what this is. We might walk away from a book or a film and say, "See! I'm not crazy! I've been saying that for years. And I guess this guy noticed that too." We're groping. We're searching, with what few tools we've mastered, to make this make sense for one another, to share and to clarify one another's existence. "Weird weather we're having, don't you think?" "You know, you're absolutely right! I've been thinking the same thing. It's really something else."

Though grand, though marvelous, it is a weighty experience that presses upon us. It is a weighty knowledge that we shoulder. Few can live as Atlas lived. It takes the recognition, the affirmation of our fellows to know that we are not running circles, that we are getting the most, that not for nothing do we strive.

A friend of mine studied abroad in Botswana last fall, and when he returned he told me, "It's funny, if I had happened to run into someone from college while I was over there, someone I didn't really know but vaguely recognized, it would have been a cause for celebration. 'Do you go to Brown?' 'Yes! Do you?' 'Yes! Do you want to get dinner?' 'Sure!' But if I ran into them on campus, it would just be, 'There goes another person, walking by for the second or tenth or fiftieth time. And tomorrow maybe he'll walk by again.'" I was abroad at the same time he was, in Sweden. One week I spent hiking in a small village up north. It was a solitary vacation. I left the hostel on one of the mornings, spent that night in a cabin out on the trails, and hiked back the following day. In thirty hours the only living creatures I saw were a spider and a herd of reindeer; hardly even a tree, for it was a mountainous land where trees do not rise above the frost. With what joy would I have hastened to meet a fellow traveler suddenly appearing! How fondly would I have smiled at his greeting, in whatever tongue he spoke! And with what little joy do I turn down the 290 entrance ramp to find one hundred fellow travelers inching before me; with what gnawing frustration do I doze on the train to Boston, amid loud cell phone calls and obnoxious teenagers.

But people are no less marvelous, no less innocent, no less needy in the many places we find them. This is our entire life a mountain pass, where lonely paths cross. We are all strangers, and perhaps will always be strangers, but we are all kin. As Walt Whitman wrote, "Stranger, if you passing meet me and desire to speak to me, why should you not speak to me? And why should I not speak to you?" Or if not speak, then smile; or if not smile, at least know that you walk your path as I walk mine. Recognize it, and affirm it. I do not believe there is anyone on either side of these walls who has

not gone to bed at night and lain in the dark and thought, or felt, "I'm trying. I'm trying my best." Nor a single one who stands with the razor to his throat and does not think, "I've tried; I've tried real hard to get this right." We're all trying, in what ways we know. And we're not the only ones. If humans are extraordinary with respect to other of Life's creatures I do not believe that it is in the amount of pain we endure, nor in the severity of our sorrows. Rather, it is our ability to discern the origins of that sorrow, and to engineer solutions to that suffering. The fruits of our knowledge, and of our reverence, we must extend not only to our fellows but, where possible, to the rest of creation.

Creation. Should one regard it only for an instant, in a brief flash of understanding, one might ask, *Can we be anything but grateful? Can we be anything but reverent?* Of course, the answer is yes, we can be any number of things. I know that still, more often than I'd like, I complain to my friends when they beat me at Risk, I fantasize about picking fights with people who bother me, I cry on the toilet and think about how life sucks. But all it takes is a few reminders. A sign outside the Christ the King Church last month read, *Take time to remember. Remember what you are. Remember what this is. This ain't no disco. This is the great manifold, the bizarre sublime. This is the place, and the form, and the moment. The world is no less strange though we awaken to it for the thirty thousandth time. Be reverent, and worship in what ways you know.*

Some people think that through the worship of God they acquire God's power and God's objective; that their worship and sacrifice render them deserving enough to impress their will upon the lives of others. As if we thought God owed us our vengeance for the obeisance we give him. We are owed nothing. I am owed nothing. I owe it to this opportunity to find the road that best suits my feet. I owe my everything.

Lastly – and if I ramble or digress, it is because I do not know when I'll again hold this podium – for longer than I've been around there's been a great to-do about science and religion, and I've a suspicion that lots of times when people throw these words

around lose sight of exactly what they're referring to. Science has dominion over nothing. Religion has dominion over nothing. They are tools of ours. For what is science, if not an inquiry into the circumstances of our existence, that we might discover—as people have discovered which berries or mushrooms to pick in the forest—what is and is not harmonious with ourselves? And what is religion, if not a humility before the power and concord of existence? for only through humility may we commune with that power, that concord which we call Divinity. Truly, if we look, without flinching, at the fabric into which we are woven, we cannot be but humble, and we cannot be but curious.

All things are worthy. They are worthy of understanding. They are worthy of gratitude. If we despair, let us despair with acceptance. If we grow weary, let us still not lose our admiration. May we un-barb our words and unclench our fists, take the razor from him whose throat it licks, for it is worthy. May we bring not our complaints, not our fierce, unfeeling homilies, but may we bring our adorations, for it is good. It is weighty, and it is strange, but it is good.