

## Wonder (Advent 3)

### Time with Children

*Reading the picture book, You Are Stardust by Elin Kelsey, illustrated by Soyeon Kim<sup>1</sup>*

"You are stardust. Every tiny atom in your body came from a star that exploded long before you were born. You started life as a single cell. So did all other creatures on planet Earth. Like fish deep in the ocean, you called salt water home. You swam inside the salty sea of your mother's womb. Salt still flows through your veins, your sweat, and your tears. The sea within you is as salty as the ocean. The water swirling in your glass once filled the puddles where dinosaurs drank. From ocean to sky to land and back again, the same water has been quenching thirsts for millions of years.

"You learned to speak the same way baby birds learn to sing... by chatting with your parents. "Ma ma ma!" "Tweet tweet tweet!" Be still. Listen. Like you, the Earth breathes. Your breath is alive with the promise of flowers. Each time you blow a kiss to the world, you spread pollen that might grow to be a new plant. Inside your brain, electricity stronger than lightning powers your every thought. You sneeze with the force of a tornado. Wind rockets from your nose quicker than a cheetah sprints. You grow at night when your bones are resting, just like the sheep you count to help you sleep. You may sprout even taller in the spring and summer, just like the plants in your garden. Your hair falls like autumn leaves. You tend to shed the most hair in early autumn and save your thickest growth for the heart of winter. Your body constantly changes. New cells line your stomach every three days. You'll replace your skin 100 times by the time you turn ten. Just as forests grow new trees in place of old ones... you grow entirely new skeletons throughout your life.

"If you were a planet, you'd be a lot like the Earth. Rainforests on land and algae in the oceans are the Earth's lungs. From your head to your toes, inside and out, billions of teeny microorganisms live on planet You. You know how it feels to be a good friend and so do other animals. Bats and sperm whales get their friends to babysit. Elephants remain best buddies for life. You, me, birds flying through the rainforest. We are all connected. We are all nature. We are all stardust."

### Wonder

Did you know that we tend to shed the most hair in early autumn when the leaves of trees are beginning to fall? Or that the water we drink is the same the dinosaurs drank?

This Advent, we've been asking, 'how does a weary world rejoice?' Last week, we read the story of Mary and Elizabeth and how their relationship allowed each to rejoice in the midst of a complicated and potentially life-threatening pregnancy. We saw how connection allowed joy

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<sup>1</sup> Here's a pdf version of the text along with small versions of the illustrations:  
<https://readwj.files.wordpress.com/2022/03/you-are-stardust-elin-kelsey.pdf>

not only to bubble up, but to be amplified as well. This week, we skip forward a few verses in the story as we are invited to be amazed at the birth of John the Baptist.

Before I read our passage for this morning, will you pray with me?

### Prayer of Illumination

Present God,  
Settle our hearts.  
Still our minds.  
And stir our imaginations,  
That we might hear your Word for us this day. Amen.

### Luke 1:57-66

Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her. On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him Zechariah after his father. But his mother said, "No; he is to be called John." They said to her, "None of your relatives has this name." Then they began motioning to his father to find out what name he wanted to give him. He asked for a writing tablet and wrote, "His name is John." And all of them were amazed. Immediately Zechariah's mouth was opened and his tongue freed, and he began to speak, praising God. Fear came over all their neighbors, and all these things were talked about throughout the entire hill country of Judea. All who heard them pondered them and said, "What then will this child become?" For indeed the hand of the Lord was with him.

The Word of the Lord.  
Thanks be to God.

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How does a weary world rejoice? One of the ways is by allowing ourselves to be amazed. Because I tend toward the nerdy persuasion, I did some research this week on amazement, awe, and wonder. The science around these emotions is new, but there is general agreement that they are "feelings that come when we're in the presence of something so vast or profound that it transcends our understanding of the world."<sup>2</sup> Something so vast and profound that it transcends our understanding of the world. Something so vast and profound that it transcends our understanding of the world.

Perhaps, like me, the first thing that comes to mind when you hear that definition is the grandeur of nature. I'll never forget the sense of wonder I felt the first time I saw the red rock mesas of northern New Mexico, the sense of awe I felt standing on a mesa and watching a

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<sup>2</sup>Jonah Paquette, *Awestruck: How Embracing Wonder Can Make You Happier, Healthier, and More Connected*, p.6.

thunderstorm move across the land, the way the wind sang and had a power unlike anything I had ever experienced before.

Or the sky over Lake Michigan as the sun is beginning to rise—how each morning is different from the morning before and how so many of them look like paintings come to life for a brief few moments.

But vastness isn't limited to large landscapes. Hannah and I watched this video the other morning and I found myself amazed at the way a pine tree grows, the continual addition of layer after layer of pine needles:

<https://www.instagram.com/p/C0RJbQfNZEz>

But just as vastness isn't limited to large landscapes, amazement and awe aren't limited to mother nature. Sometimes, particularly for those of us of the nerdy persuasion, learning something new can evoke a sense of wonder or awe. I'll never forget the first time I saw this episode of The West Wing:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vVX-PrBRtTY>

I remember immediately googling Gall-Peters Map and discovering that this was, indeed, true and feeling like everything I knew had to be recalculated.

But wonder isn't limited to new ideas or new vistas, either—there are wonders all around us if we're willing to look for them. Beginning on his 42nd birthday, poet and author, Ross Gay, wrote a brief essay every day for a year on something that had brought him delight that day. Halfway through his year, he wrote this,

“Today, while I was reading on the airplane with my knees smashed into the seat in front of me, a toddler toddled down the aisle in her pink onesie with the panda-head hood. She was a remarkably postured little creature, like so many of her ilk, and bold, toddling toward the back of the plane in front of her mother, who was doing a good job of letting the tot explore.

“But as the baby got near my row, the man in front of me with his sleeping mask slid up on his forehead widened his eyes and smiled manically, making kissy noises at the baby. He spoke a language I didn't understand, but the sounds he was making to this baby ... made me wonder if baby talk is a universal or universal-ish language, for I understood exactly what they were saying. ... the man was so enchanted with this petite creature with wisps of hair feathering north and big eyes that he couldn't resist first poking the child's tummy before scooping the squirt onto his knee, where she stood, bouncing and grinning, looking back to her mom, who looked a touch nervous, before being set free and retreating back down the aisle, and returning again, upon which the choir of babbling would commence, everyone reaching toward the

munchkin ... scooping her up again and again, until I was so flabbergasted by the endurance of love and delight incited by this child to whom I presume none of these people was related ... that I found myself, despite the very engrossing book I was reading about something horrible, laughing out loud and babbling with them; convinced again of something deeply good in us.”<sup>3</sup>

Gay titled this essay, “Babies. Seriously.” Which feels about right. There is so much in our world and in our lives to be amazed by. But wonder isn’t always easy, and it’s not always our default response. As we grow older, as we learn more and see more, wonder gets harder. We get more jaded, more set in our ways, more certain that we have seen it all, and wonder becomes something we have to practice.

Zechariah and Elizabeth’s neighbors were witnesses to something amazing—a child born to a couple far beyond childbearing years. Any child is a miracle, but John’s birth was of another magnitude. But awe isn’t always our default emotion. Rather than being amazed at what God was doing in their midst, Zechariah and Elizabeth’s neighbors left in fear, worried about the anomalies and strange things happening around them. As one researcher of these emotions wrote, “vastness can be challenging, unsettling, and destabilizing. [When awe is evoked,] it reveals that our current knowledge is not up to the task of making sense of what we have encountered.”<sup>4</sup> Cynicism, fear, certainty, all of these things can choke the life out of wonder—we see strange things happening in our midst, things that do not align with what we believe to be true or good, and instead of being curious, instead of leaning in, learning more, we have a tendency to close ourselves off, to assume the worst, to defend our beliefs and our view of the world at all costs.

But when we do that, when we fail to be curious, to wonder, to allow ourselves to be amazed, we miss an opportunity to rejoice, to notice the new ways in which Christ is breaking into our world, even here, even now. And so I want to leave you with one last example of wonder, this one entitled, “Letter to a Person on Their First Day Here.”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l5-EwrhsMzY>

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<sup>3</sup> Ross Gay, “Babies. Seriously.” *The Book of Delights*, p.152-153.

<sup>4</sup> Dacher Keltner, *Awe: The New Science of Everyday Wonder and How it Can Transform Your Life*, p.8.