

“God Speaks Hebrew and Paradigms Shift”

Rev. Dr. David A. Kaden
Epiphany 5C (February 10, 2019)

>>Open our eyes that we might see wondrous things in your word, Amen.<<

In her book published last year titled *The Cow in the Elevator: An Anthropology of Wonder*, professor of anthropology, Tulasi Srinivas, shares a story from her fieldwork in Bangalore, India. The story is about a cow in an elevator.¹ “In January 2009,” she writes, “I found myself trying to help lure a reluctant cow named Kamadhenu into a mirrored elevator. Her handler pushed her [from behind] while I held a tempting sheaf of ripe bananas in front of her. Kamadhenu was spooked at seeing her reflection in the surrounding mirrors of the elevator. She lowed miserably, uncertain of this claustrophobic mode of transport.” Srinivas had been invited by a local Hindu priest to observe a house-blessing ceremony “at a high-rise luxury apartment complex” Ancient Hindu agrarian customs, she says, “required a sacred cow to walk through [a] new house” - a practice that has become complicated for modern Hindus living in high-rise apartments only accessed by elevators. When anthropologists involve themselves in the lives of the people they study, they call it “participant observation.” Luring a cow into a mirrored elevator with a sheaf of bananas took “participant observation” to a new level for Srinivas. “After an hour of sweet talking, bribes in the form of bananas, and some hefty shoves . . . , we were successful,” she writes. “Kamadhenu rode the elevator, her eyes brimming with fear. Once off the elevator, though, she quickly regained her composure, chewing her cud in a bored manner as she was led down the fancy mirrored corridors. . . . [She] obediently followed directions [and] wandered through the million-dollar [penthouse], [blessing as she went,] climbing a short flight of stairs to the enormous bedrooms and . . . walk-in baths, [and then] she stoically left a [cow pie] on the marble floor of the kitchen . . . , an added blessing,” writes Srinivas, who doesn’t say whether her “participant observation” involved clean up.

Srinivas’ book describes the ways in which Hindus today preserve ancient, agrarian rituals in their modern context with its bustling cities and glass towers. Sacred cows transported in elevators to high-rise apartments is just one example of this ancient-modern tension. What Srinivas discovers in her research is that, in spite of the challenges of preserving ancient traditions, the people she studies are filled with wonder at the quirkiness of their lives. She calls it their “serendipitous stumble into the mysterious.” The people,” she writes, “[find] meaning and value in the smallest of tasks, and pleasure in the smallest of things.” They have learned “to be surprised by the everyday,” she says, they have learned to cultivate wonder.²

That great Jewish theologian of the twentieth century, Abraham Joshua Heschel, wrote extensively about cultivating wonder.³ “Our goal,” he once said, “should be to live life in radical amazement. . . . Get up in the morning and look at the world in a way that takes nothing for granted. Everything is phenomenal; everything is incredible; never treat life casually. To be spiritual,” he says, “is to be amazed.”⁴ It’s the experience Jim Haven

¹ Tulasi Srinivas, *The Cow in the Elevator: An Anthropology of Wonder* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 34-35.

² Srinivas, *The Cow in the Elevator*, 212-215.

³ E.g., Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Man is Not Alone: A Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1951), 13.

⁴ Cited in <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/28/opinion/brooks-alone-yet-not-alone.html>

describes after peering through his first telescope as a boy.⁵ Haven is the co-founder of a nonprofit organization called “Look Up,” dedicated to helping people experience wonder when gazing at the stars in order to change how they live on earth. The first time he looked up through his first telescope, Haven says he saw Saturn. “Seeing that [rockstar] planet for the first time [outside of a photograph, he says,] instantly changed my perspective.” “It filled me with a sense of wonder. And by wonder, I mean that ‘wow. This is crazy. I don’t even know how to explain what I’m feeling or seeing sense of awe.’ The kind that encompasses your whole being. It was electric,” he says. Such experiences are “good for you,” he goes on. According to research at UC-Berkeley, “people who have experiences of wonder and awe think more critically, act more ethically, exhibit generosity, and have a better connection to the world” Wonder also “has the power to stimulate curiosity and creativity” “The world,” he says, “needs a bit more wonder” So, he concludes, we should all “Take a moment to free [ourselves] from the patterns of everyday life. Pause, and capture what [we] can from the stars. And let [our] mind[s] take [us] into the vastness of space.”

In today’s reading from the prophet Isaiah we see the power of wonder. Isaiah provides a first person account of a vision he saw while praying in the Jerusalem temple. “I saw the Lord,” says Isaiah. And then he quickly qualifies this statement by saying that he actually saw not God in God’s fullness, but merely the outer edge - the hem - of God’s robe dangling in the temple, filling the space entirely. And all around him he heard angels - Seraphim, in Hebrew - calling to one another antiphonally, “Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord,” over and over and over, finishing their refrain only to start it again as they experience new waves of wonder at the God they sing to. The implication in the text is this song continues *ad infinitum*: as the Seraphim discover something new about God they sing their song again, and then the cycle repeats, and then again and then again. As they sang, says Isaiah, the temple foundations shook violently and the space filled with smoke. When I was in seminary, I took a Hebrew translation course, and we had to translate large chunks of Isaiah into English, including this chapter. After we translated the first half of Isaiah 6 in class one day, a fellow student raised his hand and asked the professor, with a smirk, what language God speaks. Without hesitating, my professor said, “Hebrew. Read the rest of Isaiah 6,” he said. “God speaks to Isaiah in Hebrew. Hebrew is the heavenly language” he said. God may speak Hebrew in this text, and the angels may be singing in Hebrew over and over, and the temple may be shaking down to its foundation, but it’s Isaiah’s response to this scene of wonder that is striking. He says his lips are unclean - basically, he’s at a loss for words, which reminds me of a second century poem written by a gnostic Christian, who groped to describe God, who the writer calls, “invisible Spirit”: everything exists in this spirit, says the writer; it is total perfection; without lack; perfect in light; illimitable; unsearchable; immeasurable; ineffable; this spirit is life itself, says the writer; how can I even speak of it?⁶

“What exactly *is* wonder,” asks Tulasi Srinivas, in her book on the anthropology of wonder? “The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines wonder as ‘the emotion excited by the perception of something novel and unexpected . . . ; astonishment mingled with perplexity’” Religion scholar Rudolph Otto in his book *Das Heilige (The Idea of the Holy)* described the feeling of wonder as “numinous.” Wonder is a mixture, he said, of “awe, bewilderment, curiosity, confusion, dread, ecstasy, excitement, fear, marvel, mystery, perplexity, reverence, . . . surprise.”⁷ The Bible is stuffed full of stories about wonder. Adam and Eve were filled with

⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=elH0a1N1zXc>

⁶ *The Apocryphon of John*, 2-4, selections, ca. mid-2nd century CE.

⁷ All cited in Srinivas, *The Cow in the Elevator*, 6-7.

awe, and even fear, at the mere sound of God's footsteps. Hagar, a little later in the Bible's first book of Genesis, was filled with awe at God's tender concern for her little child Ishmael. Moses was wonderstruck after hearing God's voice - a voice that scripture struggles to describe: it's like a chorus and a waterfall and a thunderclap. The prophet Elijah was dumbstruck at God's "still small voice" - the whisper - of God. Other prophets marveled at God's amazing capacity to change and adapt. St. Paul says he had a vision of the highest heaven where he encountered things that he says were too wondrous to describe. In today's gospel reading, St. Peter falls to his knees in wonder after meeting Jesus. Modern writers, like poet Christian Wiman, describe feeling wonder at the beauty of love - love he describes as God's "excess energy" that flows through all of us. Theologian Hans Kung was filled with awe at God's selflessness: God wills nothing, said Kung, but humanity's well-being. And there's songwriters, like Sufjan Stevens, whose song *Seven Swans* is a song of amazement at God's relentlessness - God chases us, he sings, and won't let up until we know we're loved. "A great song," says songwriter Nick Cave, "makes us feel a sense of awe."⁸ There's the awe of scientists, who wonder at the beauty of the natural world - at nature's capacity for pushing creatures to aesthetic extremes - to the point of challenging some fundamental assumptions about natural selection itself (a point I will return to in next week's sermon on Beauty). And, Albert Einstein once said, "The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true art and science."

We might think of each of these examples as symbols all pointing to the same numinous feeling - a feeling that Jim Haven, who was filled with wonder when he looked at Saturn, says helps us to be better human beings: thinking more critically, living more ethically, and connecting more deeply to our world. It's a feeling of "radical amazement," as Abraham Heschel puts it, which teaches us to "get up in the morning and look at the world in a way that takes nothing for granted." "Humankind will not perish for want of information," he once said, "but only for want of appreciation." Maybe each of these examples of wonder - whether in scripture or popular culture or in evolutionary biology or among armchair astronomers - are teaching us the art of pausing - pausing in the midst of life's busyness and in the midst of yet more crazy news from the world around us, teaching us to pause and appreciate the simple wonder of life itself.

...It's a lesson that Duke Divinity School professor Kate Bowler learned. Back in December she wrote an opinion piece about focusing on the here-and-now in the midst of her battle with cancer.⁹ "I found out at age 35 that I had Stage IV cancer," she writes, "[and] time [for me] did not point toward the future anymore. It was looped: start treatment, manage side effects, recover, start treatment. I lived in the present tense. Even the seasons began to fade. The spring used to be about grading papers near the duck ponds at Duke, and summer was a long Canadian road trip to debate the merits of curling. *Is it a sport? Isn't it just a hobby?* The fall was consumed by preparing lectures for seminary students and customizing Halloween costumes that could fit over snowsuits, and the winter began with the first inflatable reindeer terrorizing the lawn. The future had been as real to me as the present or the past. Christian theology," she writes, "has rich categories for the future, about the kingdom of God turning the world on its head, but I was hearing little of these ideas. ... [T]he sicker I became, the more 'hope' was a word that pointed to the unbearable: a husband and a baby left behind I tried to explain this to my friend Warren, an esteemed reverend-doctor [He and] I teach

⁸ <https://www.brainpickings.org/2019/01/24/nick-cave-music-ai/>

⁹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/28/opinion/sunday/resolutions-hope-cancer-god.html>

at a divinity school that trains pastors, ... and I told him that I had given up on the future. After a long pause he asked, 'Would you agree that true happiness is to enjoy the present without anxious dependence on the future?' 'I'm really hoping you are going to tell me that Jesus said that,' I said. ... 'That was Lucius Seneca, the ancient philosopher of Stoicism,' he said, laughing. 'Look,'" he went on, "'it takes great courage to live as if each day counts.' ... Worried I would not have a future," writes Bowler, "I [took his advice, and] tried to live without one. I sowed myself into the moment with its needles and white blood cell counts, diaper changes, and grocery pickups. But even as I resolved to keep myself in the present, the future kept interrupting. I was scrambling to find my son, Zach, a larger onesie or discovering that Christmas had now become the season of 'Please don't pull that off the tree.' ... Much of Christian theology rests on the image of God as the ultimate reality beyond time and space, ... but where does that leave the bewildered believer who cannot see the future and whose lantern casts light only backward, onto the path she has already taken? ... The terrible gift of a terrible illness is that it has in fact taught me to live in the moment. ... [But,] in losing my future, [I discovered that] the mundane began to sparkle [with wonder]. The things I love ... become clearer, brighter. This is transcendence, the past and the future experienced together in moments where I can see a flicker of eternity. So instead of New Year's resolutions, I drew up a list for 2019 of experiences that had already passed: a record ... of genuine surprise. 1. *My oncology nurse became a dear friend.* 2. *Even in the hospital I felt the love of God.* 3. *Zach is under the impression that I never get tired.* These are my small miracles," Bowler concludes, "scattered like bread crumbs, the way forward dotting the path behind me."

...Maybe each of these examples - the cow in the elevator; the wisdom of Abraham Heschel; Jim Haven and his telescope gazing up at Saturn; Isaiah's experience in the temple; the stories of awe from scripture; the words of songwriters; the wonder of scientists at the natural world; the honesty of Kate Bowler about her battle with cancer - maybe all of it is pointing to the same thing - the same thing articulated by Abraham Heschel decades ago: "The miracle," he said, "is that we are here, that no matter how undone we've been the night before, we wake up every morning and are still here. It is phenomenal [it is wondrous] just to be." Amen.