

What Really Matters, Pt. 6
These Things Too Wondrous!
Proverbs 30: 18-19

**First Presbyterian Church
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One of the great privileges of my life was to know Jean and John Christian Bernhardt. John Christian served for decades at the helm of the family owned business, Bernhardt Furniture. The Bernhardts had been intertwined with the town of Lenoir, North Carolina and the First Presbyterian Church for generations. John Christian's great, great grandfather was the first pastor. Jean's ancestor was moderator of the Southern Presbyterian Church. For more than a century, their company had created a living for thousands of Lenoir families. The Bernhardt family prized learning and philanthropy, conversation and word play. Both Jean and John Christian loved Scripture and poetry. Though I was in my thirties and they in their eighties when we met, we had an immediate and lasting kinship over our love for the beauty of words and particularly the Word of God.

Several years ago now, Miss Jean, as we called her, shared with me one of her favorite Bible passages. Her love for the text made it glow with significance, and I felt as if I were hearing it for the first time. Her own sense of wonder and beauty were evoked by this wonderful proverb. She learned it in the King James Version and taught it to me the same way. Indeed, for one who loved the English language so much, this was the only version to learn. It goes like this:

There be three things which are too wonderful for me, yea, four which I know not: The way of an eagle in the air; the way of a serpent upon a rock; the way of a ship in the midst of the sea; and the way of a man with a maid. (Proverbs 30:18-19).

Solomon, full of wisdom, who had searched out knowledge from all corners of the world, named the moment when inquiry tumbled into wonder. Knowledge has limits, and where book learning leaves off, the mystery of life takes up. In fact, the more you know of physics and science and chemistry, the more glorious, not less, the world seems to be. If the pace of life and the pounding of its demands has not completely deadened us, perhaps we can remember. If the constant noise of news and jingles doesn't drown us out, nor the racing in the blood of our responsibilities, we might just recall what it is like to be struck with a sense of wonder.

Did you ever spend a day in a boat in one of our Louisiana bayous? You cut the engine and let the primeval stillness sink into you. Perhaps you were deep into Bayou Black, looking at the pure but inky colored water that evoked the name. Moss hangs from the trees on the shore. You half expect to see a Brontosaurus appear at water's edge, so ancient does it feel. You look up into a clear blue sky and notice an eagle flying over head. She's gliding on the current of under air, barely moving a wing. She is just soaring, majestic, free. You wonder if the bird feels the joy of such flight. How can it be that a creature can stay aloft in the sky?

Most of us recoil at the sight of a snake in the woods, or the yard, or even in the laundry room. Eight of ten people will tell you snakes give them the creeps. But still we visit the reptiles in their glass cages at Bluebonnet Swamp. We want to see the snakes move. We are drawn even as we are repelled. We are moved at a visceral level by these reptiles so alien, so other. How do they move like they do? Liquid muscle flows and the snake slides like water, impossibly fast. Nothing at all like the way we walk or run. How do they do it?

Or hopefully you have known the joy of being on a sailboat, or at least seen one from the shore? There's no comparison between sailing under wind power and motoring. From somewhere unseen the wind comes to fill the sail, and the boat slips through the waves. One moment you may be becalmed, another you may be leaning with all your might to keep the boat from tipping as the sail strains under the power of invisible air. Going one way you tack and tack, and tack again just trying to get home against the wind. Then you turn and race across the sea with the sails full out. And what is the indescribable longing from seeing a white sail on a distant horizon?

The world is full of wonders. We walk in miracles every day. Mystery surrounds us, though very little is as mysterious as the way man and woman are drawn to each other to complete the image of God. She the graceful gazelle; he the lumbering grizzly. She the breath of spring; he the lover of belching and all noises bodily. She the keeper of beauty; he the keeper of the remote. But then I have my bias...Somehow the two together in the mystery of the dance, meet, connect, wed, unite, and live out their days in the image of Christ with his bride. Who can fathom the dance of love nor speak its pleasure, its humor, its pain and its bliss?

Yes, this life is full of wonders. There be three things too wondrous for me, yea four which I know not: The way of an eagle in the air; the way of a serpent upon a rock; the way of a ship in the midst of the sea; and the way of a man with a maid. Surrounded by such mystery, this week we attempt to pause,

and let our hearts catch up with our pace, to give thanks. This year, even more than other years, we are thankful. People are finding more poignancy, more urgency, more joy in gathering together. The home-calling, home-coming urge is strong. Our homes and our churches, our soil and our nation are more precious than ever before. We've been through elections and storms, economic downturns and personal transitions. Yet here we are. Still living. Still hoping. Still called as God's people to love and serve his world in Jesus' name. As the year reaches its midpoint, we soon celebrate our nation's birthday, and for many the pace eases enough for reflections.

With the wonder that Solomon described for us as our backdrop, I'd like to spend our remaining time entering into thanksgiving with you. Let's just think together for a few minutes and give thanks for:

- Hot showers on cold mornings. The spray that awakens and relaxes all at once. Fluffy towels and clean clothes to put on. Textures of wool and cotton, leather and nylon.
- A cup of coffee with a newspaper or a devotional or an open Bible. The lack of conversation that yet serves as communion before tongues are awake enough to speak civilly.
- The joy of the beast who greets you in the morning with a full body wag that says, "Look, it's you again! We're together another day! Isn't this great! Why don't we celebrate by having something to eat?"
- The familiar sights outside your favorite window. The tree you watch grow year by year. You follow it through the seasons, the greening and the orangening, the unleaving and the shading.
- The smell of a fall day with dusty leaves decaying; the smell of spring when all things are new; the hot smell of August and the sinus opening clarity of a winter morning.
- Crawfish spread out on newspaper on a late April evening, with the sound of the voices of the people you love laughing all around you.
- The child who proudly dresses herself in plaid pants, red socks, and all three of her favorite shirts at once.
- The look of a dog trying to hide his guilt while a piece of the meat wrapper hangs from his jowls.

- Little tiny three year old hands held in the loving wrinkled fold of ninety year old hands.
- The toddler who reminds us that just walking upright is a big deal and a lot of fun—who cares if your legs take you past the produce and right out the door to the grocery store parking lot the moment Mom stopped to talk to a friend? Someone will find you—they always do.
- Waking up laughing. Finding a hand that will hold your hand in the middle of the night. Watching the clock together. “Are you awake?” “No, I’m not!” Making eggs together at 3AM.
- Flying in to the New Orleans airport from the south, over the Mississippi basin. Seeing the green, greens of the delta marshes, the canals that snake through the foliage, and the land that stretches out endlessly, and feeling like you’re home.
- Driving out into the country at night and standing outside under a clear sky. Seeing the winter stars reminding us of how big the universe is, and how awesome is the God who regards us. A shooting star surprises you as it streaks across the night sky.
- Arguing politics and knowing you are free to do so. Worshipping without restraint or constraint. Knowing you are part of the grandest experiment in government by the people and for the people that the world has ever seen.
- The goodness of our land, the bounty of our mines and fields, lakes and forests, the wide open spaces and room to grow, the care of our people and the prosperity that flows and flows and flows.
- The joy of work and knowing you can keep most of what you make, and do with it as you will—a luxury not afforded most people.
- A country full of resolve and willingness to change, to struggle, to grow.
- Friends who’ve known you so long it’s no use pretending. Their voices on the telephone. A thousand, thousand memories that are always assumed and rarely need speaking. They show up at hospitals and funerals, ball fields and church pews. They are the sinews of your life.

- The miracle that any of us survive the years between 16 and 26. How could we have thought we were so smart when, upon further review, a mule knows better than we did?
- Coming home after a long day and feeling your own bed, which truly seems to have missed you.
- The sound of a fire starting in the fireplace. Flames dancing and winter gloom going up the chimney.
- Singing. Making music. Hearing strings and organs, horns and pipes. Playing in concert with others; harmony.
- The clink of crystal, the warmth of a wool sweater, the sleek feel of skinny dipping in a mountain lake; the heat of summer sand underneath you.
- Salmon. French fries. Summer tomatoes. Ice cream. Orange juice.
- The satisfaction of figures adding up. The amazing way numbers divide, multiply, invert, square, cube and go from fractions to decimals, from Fahrenheit to centigrade—is it multiply by $5/9$ or $9/5$ ths?
- The growth of a person from a cell with all the information complete to a little girl who cries at first breath in the daylight world, just nine months later.
- The audacity of a cat who won't so much as acknowledge your existence 23 hours a day showing up purring and full of affection at supper time. This is the same beast who came to your lap without a sound the night you felt like you were all alone in the world.
- One more day, one more hour with your own ones.
- The feeling that when you pray, you are not just talking to yourself. The presence in the night that slowly pours the peace that passes understanding into your heart.
- The blessed Holy Spirit inside who cries out Abba Father as you pray, and the felt reply from the Father who says, "My child!"
- The joy of confessing it all and being received anyway. The mystery of forgiveness in those who love us which points us to the greater mystery:

Christ Jesus on the cross and in the tomb so we might scamper free in the world on our way home to heaven.

- The peace that passes understanding in the face of loss and grief, for Christ is risen from the dead never to die again. There is more life to come!
- The wondrous exchange in which God, the most outrageous of all traders, swaps us his forgiveness for our sin; his love for our lostness; his peace for our anxiety; his welcome for our fear; his purpose and destiny upon us for our selfish wandering; his new start for our old mistakes. He makes these ridiculous trades willingly.
- The wonder that you have been bought with a price. God chose you. You and I are not own but belong to our faithful Savior Jesus Christ, in life and in death, and after death. This not from our goodness or our merit but from his boundless favor.
- The incredible satisfaction that God has commissioned us to be his agents and ministers of reconciliation in the world—we have meaningful, eternally meaningful service to render.

Proverbs 30 found three, no four, things too wondrous to consider. But certainly there are more. Though the world is hard, evil is relentless, and weeping abounds, there is yet much joy. The world is full of wonders. There is much for which we give thanks. This 4th of July, we will draw close with those whom we love, we will set aside differences and lift our heads toward heaven. We will breathe relief and thanks for all that comes from his gracious hand.