

Message Title: WONDER

Guest Speaker: Nancy Beach

*Nancy Beach is a Teaching Pastor at Willow Creek Community Church and Executive Vice President for the Arts at the Willow Creek Association*

### NAPERVILLE VERSION – WONDER

I'm curious – did any of you pick up some pennies as you walked into the sanctuary today? We hid pennies near the entrance, the lobby area, and by some of your seats. Did you notice them or take the time to pick one up? This idea stems from one of my favorite books, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, where the author Annie Dillard describes a compulsion of her childhood growing up in Pittsburgh. She writes, “For some reason I always “hid” the penny at the roots of a sycamore, say, or in a hole left by a chipped-off piece of sidewalk. Then I would take a piece of chalk, and starting at either end of the block, draw huge arrows leading up to the penny from both directions. After I learned to write I labeled the arrows: SURPRISE AHEAD or MONEY THIS WAY. I was greatly excited, during all this arrow drawing, at the thought of the first lucky passerby who would receive in this way, regardless of merit, a free gift from the universe.” Years later, Annie reflected on her penny hiding. And here's what she said that so inspires me:

“I've been thinking about seeing. There are lots of things to see, unwrapped gifts and free surprises. The world is fairly studded and strewn with pennies cast broadside from a generous hand. But – and this is the point – who gets excited by a mere penny? ...It is dire poverty indeed when a man is so malnourished and fatigued that he won't stoop to pick up a penny. But if you cultivate a healthy poverty and simplicity, so that finding a penny will literally make your day, then, since the world is in fact planted with pennies, you have with your poverty bought a lifetime of days. It is that simple. What you see is what you get.” (Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*)

The world is planted with pennies. I believe that our Creator has lavished this earth with wonder upon wonder. And he watches to see who will notice, who gets excited by the intricate details, who will give thanks. In Psalm 40, David writes these words:

“Many, Lord my God, are the wonders you have done, the things you planned for us. None can compare with you; were I to speak and tell of your deeds, they would be too many to declare.” (Psalm 40:5)

He adds that the world is a huge stockpile of God wonders and God-thoughts. The question we are going to explore today is, are we awake to those wonders? Are we cultivating the kind of spirit and rhythm of life that is likely to pay attention and to be truly delighted by the discoveries all day long of God at work in creation and in our relationships?

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Wonder points us to God – it's truly our call to worship. The early church knew all about wonder. In Acts 2 we are told that "Everyone was filled with awe" among those rookie believers.

Children are naturally filled with wonder. According to research, children ask 125 probing questions per day. Some of you bear the weight of those questions! Adults ask only six probing questions per day. How did we adults lose 119 questions every day? Children are naturally curious. They can be completely entranced by even the most ordinary things. Perhaps you've seen this video on You Tube or as part of a television commercial. I get such a kick watching this baby's response to a simple piece of paper...

### **Baby Ethan Video**

Isn't that great? But something terrible happens to us as we grow toward adulthood. We start becoming immune to wonder. We exchange awe and adventure for apathy. How many of us are stuck in a cycle of routine, yawning through life? There are so many arch-enemies against Wonder. Here's a list of some deadly foes to cultivating a spirit of wonder:

#### Enemies of Wonder

- Hurry
- Stress
- Too much technology
- Noise
- Information overload
- Workaholism
- Lack of solitude
- Absence of celebration
- Boredom of routine

Anything on that list intruding on your these days and affecting your soul? Which ones do you struggle with the most?

Now at this point, some of you have concluded that this whole topic is a lightweight message, not grounded enough in Biblical truth, and perhaps even childish. But there is a huge difference between being **childish** and being **childlike**. When we cultivate a sense of awe and pay attention to the everyday miracles of God, we are driven to give thanks to the source of each and every good gift. We become more humble and more grateful. We live out the attitude of David, who wrote,

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“My heart is not proud, O Lord, my eyes are not haughty...  
But I have calmed myself and quieted my ambitions.  
I am like a weaned child with its mother; like a weaned child,  
I am content.” (Psalm 131: 1,2)

Cultivating a spirit of wonder involves paying attention, waking up. In Isaiah we read, “You who dwell in the dust, wake up and shout for joy!” And yes, this is a childlike perspective. Throughout the Scriptures, when people wanted to praise God they would often use the word “Hallelujah!” These days we don’t use that word often in our everyday conversation. But I think there’s another word that captures the same spirit. It’s the word “WOW!” I think we should go through life saying “Wow” whenever possible. My teenage daughters would say I use the word a bit too much.

I recall a summer vacation a few years ago when our family was driving through a magnificent stretch of highway in the Colorado Rockies. There are so many stunning vistas to experience that frequently you can pull off to the side at areas marked for taking photos and drinking in the beauty. As our family made our way through that spectacular region, I kept hanging my head out the window, saying “Wow! Look at that mountain there! See the snow! Wow! Look at those animals – what are those? Meanwhile, my two daughters had I-Pods in their ears. They would occasionally glance out the window to appease me, nod, and give me a little smile. My husband seemed to think the road was a raceway. He had no intention of pulling over to any of the scenic photo spots. I got the distinct impression he was trying to set a record of getting through the Rockies quicker than any man before him.

That vacation marked the beginning of my family referring often to “Mom and her Wows.” They look at each other and say, “There goes mom, doing her Wow thing again.” So on a vacation last year, I asked my girls if they wanted to try parasailing with me off the coast of Florida. They said OK as long as I didn’t say too many “Wows.” This really stretched me. We were above the ocean on a glorious day, with fish jumping below us, puffy white clouds in the gorgeous blue sky, sun warming our faces, and beautiful white sand on the shore. I was perched between my two precious daughters, and I must admit, I said “Wow!” a few times – but you have no idea how many Wows I had to stuff down.

### **Photo of Parasailing with Girls**

I think all of us should say “Wow” a lot more. I am no longer going to apologize for any of my wows. Like one of my good friends says, “I want to be among the easily

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impressed.” And my goal for this weekend is that all of us will be inspired to become “Wow” kinds of people.

### **The Wonders of Creation**

First, I think you and I should often say “Wow” to the wonders of creation. When we marvel at the beauty and detail of the designs crafted by our Magnificent Creator, we have an appropriate picture of how big and awesome our God is. Pastor Mark Batterson, in his excellent book *Wild Goose Chase*, recounts the story of how God showed Abraham the stars in the book of Genesis, chapter 15. Mark writes that God took Abraham outside, on a field trip, and gave him an assignment to count the stars. This was an object lesson Abraham would never forget, because God told him that one day his descendents would outnumber the stars. Every time he gazed at the wonder of the night sky, Abraham would be reminded of God’s promise to him. I hope we’ll each take some time this summer, somewhere further away from the city lights, to look up at the wonder of the sky. In this way, we can always right size who we are in the scheme of things, and how big our God is.

The story is told of Teddy Roosevelt and his naturalist friend William Beebe who would routinely go outside after dinner to look at the night sky. They found a faint spot of light in the lower left-hand corner of Pegasus, and would recite the following statements together:

This is the Spiral Galaxy in Andromeda.

It is as large as our Milky Way.

It is one of a hundred million galaxies.

It is 750,000 light years away.

It consists of one hundred billion suns, each larger than our sun.

Roosevelt would pause and grin. Then he would say to his friend, “Now I think we feel small enough! Let’s go to bed.”

You and I don’t have to go to the Rocky Mountains, the Alps, Big Sur, or even the Botanical Gardens to get a picture of the wonder of creation. For the next few moments, we’re going to focus on the wonder of our human bodies. I gathered much of this information from a fantastic book titled *Fearfully and Wonderfully Made*, written by Phillip Yancey and Dr. Paul Brand. All too often, I think we complain about our bodies – what isn’t working right, which parts we wish looked different, how we sometimes feel aches and pains. I’m aware that some among us today are dealing with physical challenges or disabilities, and maybe right now your body really isn’t working right. But most of us take for granted the myriad of miracles taking place every single moment in these bodies God designed.

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**Eyes** – For just a moment, let me ask you to close your eyes. Consider these organs of sight, those of you who have the ability to see. An amoeba has 1 cell. One of our human eyes has 107 million cells. Seven million of them are cones, each loaded to fire off a message to our brains when even a few photons of light cross them. You can open your eyes now. Look around the room. Those cones are what give us a full band of color awareness. You and I can easily distinguish a thousand shades of color. The other hundred million cells in our eyes are rods – backup cells for use in low light. When we stand under the moonlight, we don't see color – but we can distinguish a spectrum of light so broad that the brightest light we perceive is a billion times brighter than the dimmest! The human brain receives millions of simultaneous reports from our eye cells. It sorts and organizes them all. The human eye is a miracle. Two members of my extended family lost their sight in terrible accidents. Both of them would attest to the deep loss of living without the wonder of sight.

**Feet** – Now let's turn our attention to our feet. Flex and then wiggle the small bones in your right foot. We each have 26 bones lined up in each foot, about the same number in each hand. If we could look at them, they would be only half the width of a pencil. And yet they support our weight in walking, running, and for a rare few among us, even pole vaulting! During strenuous exercise, our feet cushion up to one million pounds of pressure. Not all of us compete in athletics, but we do walk an average of 65,000 miles or more than 2 ½ times around the world in a lifetime! No researcher has yet discovered a material as well-suited for a body's needs as bones. Bone cells have been proven to form the lightest structure, made of least material to support the body's weight. Our body weight is evenly spread out through architecturally perfect arches which serve as springs, and the bending of knees and ankles absorbs stress. Our bones are miracles. It's a miracle when we sit, stand, run and reach. We don't pay attention to our bones unless we fracture one. And then, our bones have an amazing, God-designed ability to heal through an elaborate process.

When my daughter broke her ankle playing basketball, I could see through x-rays the wonder of this process. When a break occurs, repair cells swarm in and within two weeks, a sheath called callus surrounds the region, preparing for the creation of fresh bone. In just two or three months, the fracture site is marked by a mass of new bone that bulges over both sides of the broken ends like a garden hose. Later, surplus material is scavenged so the final result nearly matches the original bone. That is the miracle of the healing cycle with bones.

**Skin** – OK, one more Wow concerning our bodies, though we could spend days talking about this stuff! I want to focus a bit on the wonder of our skin. Grasp one of your arms with the other. The collagen clustered under your skin is changing shape in response to the pressure, fitting its shape to the precise shape of your arm. When your hand

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surrounds an object – a ripe tomato, a hammer, another hand – your skin cells beneath redistribute themselves and assume a shape to comply with the shape of the object being raised.

There is no organ like the skin. It averages only nine pounds of our weight, yet it flexes and folds and crinkles around joints. Our skin is rolled thin like pie dough and studded with half a million tiny transmitters, like telephones jammed together waiting to inform the brain. Our skin is tough enough to withstand the rigorous pounding of jogging on asphalt, yet sensitive enough to have bare toes tickled by a light breeze.

Just try to imagine your life without the sense of touch. Our love for others begins with the primal sense of touch. What if we couldn't feel the hug of a friend, the invigoration of a hot shower, the petting of a furry dog, the mud as we dig in the garden?

We subject our skin to lots of abuse throughout a day, losing 10,000 skin cells every 24 hours. Just shaking hands or turning a doorknob can produce a shower of several thousand skin cells. Here's a lovely thought – up to 90% of all household dust consists of dead skin! And guess when our skin cells grow back? Mostly between midnight and 4:00 am when we are resting.

If we had time we would explore the wonders of the 600 muscles in our bodies, or the unbelievable miracle of our brains. Or even our simple thumbs. Isaac Newton once said,

“In the absence of any other proof, the thumb alone would convince me of God's existence.”

Have you felt any wows well up within you as we explore the wonders of the human body? Can I hear a collective WOW??? The psalmist said:

You created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made.

(Psalm 139:13,14)

Next time you get a minor cold, or feel a little ache in your joints, remember all the countless times your body has worked well. So much of what is required even for us to breathe in this moment is a major miracle. I stand in awe of what God, the Magnificent and Sovereign Creator, has designed in this world.

**Pause for Prayer** – think of something you appreciate in creation, maybe even something you saw this morning or a part of your body. Take a moment to thank God quietly for what He has made.

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### **The Wonder of Relationships**

There's a second area of wonder in our lives, and it's the wonder of human relationships. A year ago June, I experienced 12 hours marked by a vivid contrast. On a Friday night, we celebrated my older daughter's graduation from high school with an outdoor party at our home. It was a spectacular summer evening, and so many people who have marked Samantha's life were able to join us. In our dining room we had set up photos that revealed the progress of 18 wonderful years with her. It was a great party, filled with much joy.

My daughter was born in 1989. Another young woman was born that same year, and her name is Kate Vaudrey.

### **Photo of Kate**

The morning after Samantha's party, our family attended a memorial service for Kate at our church. The Vaudrey family has been a part of our church for about 10 years. Kate is the middle child of 5, and she had just completed her first year of college at Azusa Pacific University. One morning last summer, she said good-bye to her family and jumped in her car to go to her job. On the way, Kate suffered a brain aneurism completely out of the blue, lost control of the car, and died later that weekend in the hospital, surrounded by her family. Her organs were donated to save the lives of 3 other people. But Kate's family and friends, all those who loved her ferociously, grieved her loss and are still grieving. I cannot fully imagine the depth of their pain.

I never had the privilege of meeting Kate. But after the celebration of her life, I felt like I did know her. Kate was an artist. For such a young woman, she could truly paint. We have a photo of her last painting that she quickly put together the day before she died.

### **Photo of Kate's Painting (tree)**

Some people with tremendous artistic gifts are incredibly focused on their art, and prefer lots of time alone. This was not true of Kate. She was a ferocious lover of God and people. All kinds of people. She worked for a time at Starbucks, and customers who came in for a latte departed with one of Kate's contagious smiles. Stories were told at the memorial service of the myriad of ways in which Kate served people. More than once, a quote from the artist Vincent Van Gogh was mentioned. Van Gogh wrote:

“The more I think about it, the more I realize there is nothing more artistic than loving others.” (Vincent Van Gogh)

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Kate lived out that truth. In the exhibit that displayed her artwork out in our church lobby, there were also tons of photographs of Kate from the time she was a baby...just like the photos I saw the night before of my daughter, born in the same year. I was reminded how unpredictable and fragile our lives are, how quickly they can be turned upside down, how needful it is for us to treasure every moment we are given on this earth. Kate somehow knew that life is something to be seized, to be lived full out for God and for others.

I can't explain why a brain aneurism happens to a young girl on the brink of her adult life. But I believe that if Kate were among us right now, she would urge us all to live life to the fullest, to grow in our capacity for wonder and awe, to appreciate not only the beauty of creation, but also the incredible beauty of the people who cross our paths, and especially, the people closest to us.

I just finished reading a memoir where a young woman describes what was so lovable and contagious about her dad. Her words inspired me to want to be more like this guy. She writes:

I think people like him because his default setting is open delight. He's prepared to be wowed – by your humor, your smarts, your white smile, even your handshake – guaranteed, something you do is going to thrill him...People walk away from him feeling like they're on their game, even if they suspect he put them there. (Kelly Corrigan, *The Middle Place*)

When you encounter another human being, is your default setting open delight? Jesus told his disciples that the primary way others would know we are among his followers will be by how we love one another.

I'd like to ask you to think right now of good friends or family members you can't imagine life without. Is everyone thinking of one or two names? Now make a commitment to express your appreciation for one or more of those people even today. Determine to give the person a call, write a note or e-mail, or if you can, look that person in the eyes and tell them what you most appreciate about them. Don't let the day go by without expressing love.

### **The Wonder of Grace**

Finally, the biggest WOW of all is the wonder of God's grace. The simple truth that deeply flawed sinners like you and me can be reconciled, brought home into the presence and friendship and guidance and protection of our Heavenly Father ought to astonish us on a regular basis. We must never grow accustomed to grace, yawning our way through

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life as God's children. I don't ever want to "get over" the stunning fact that because of Jesus, I can be forgiven and then empowered, part of his team building his kingdom on this earth.

For those of you who are Christ followers, do you remember when you first understood and embraced the wonder of grace? For some of you, that may have been many decades ago. Because of a strong Christian family and church, I came to faith as a 7-year-old. I had attended Daily Vacation Bible School at our church, and on the way home, riding bikes with my girlfriend, I asked her if she "wanted to do it", to become a Christian. We stopped by a tree and prayed the prayer of faith. Last year, in honor of that moment, I returned to the suburb where I grew up and walked along that street, thanking God for introducing me to grace at such a young age. I didn't know what tree it was, but it was important for me to mark the moment.

Others among us are newer to the family of faith. And some of you may still be investigating Christianity. But if you are a person blessed to have learned about grace and received it, I want to ask you to pause for just a moment and thank the God of grace.

### **Moment of Prayer**

As we close, my question for all of us is this: Are we WOW kinds of people? Are we cultivating a spirit of wonder as we walk through our one and only life? God promises in Isaiah 29 that He will astound us with wonder upon wonder. He has strewn pennies all over the earth for us to notice – wonders in creation, in the bodies we inhabit, and in our relationships with others. He waits to see who will notice, who will celebrate the pennies and give thanks. One of my friends told me that when she sees some detail in nature, she makes a habit of looking toward heaven, and simply saying, "I saw that."

C.S. Lewis said, "It's a terrible thing to be grateful and have no one to thank." Whenever you and I awaken to wonder, we are driven to thank someone. And the source of all the beauty on this earth, the Magnificent Creator who designed the galaxies, crafted our bodies, and gave us the joy of family and friends is the one we can thank. Wonder is our call to worship. It drives us to gratitude and to praise. Let's be WOW kinds of people...all day long.

### **Closing Prayer**