



**"Wonderstruck"**  
**Scripture – Psalm 139:1-18**  
**Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones**  
**Sunday, September 12, 2021**

Pastor Tom Are reflects on one of the differences between his grandfather and himself. His grandfather's "name was Ward, but Tom called him Boss. Tom says his grandfather wasn't really a boss, but he lived with one. Her name was Lorraine. His grandfather was a paint salesman who sold paint supplies to hardware stores across South Carolina."

"When Tom was in college, he bought a car from his grandfather – a brown Pontiac with 150,000 miles on it. He paid his grandfather \$500 for the car. He says 'Boss counted it twice.'"

He asked Tom, "How are you driving back to school? Tom said he would take I-20 to I-26 and get off at the Laurens exit."

"Oh, you can't do that," his grandfather said.

"I can't?"

"No, for goodness sakes, you don't want to drive on the Interstate. Here's what you do. You take Highway 178 through Saluda and all the way to Route 39, and then catch Highway 56 on in. Just watch the speed trap in Chappells."

Tom said, "I think it will be faster to take I-20."

"No, go through Saluda, it's the only way."

"Ok," Tom said. But then he headed to I-20.

Tom says, "As a traveling salesman you would think Boss would be wise about navigating from one place to another, but the man never drove on an interstate – except once. He thought he was taking a frontage road, but it was the on ramp for I-85. He was pulled over and given a ticket for going 35 miles per hour. The officer said, 'Sir, do you know why I pulled you over?' Boss said, 'Yeah, I'm the only one you could catch. Do you see how fast these idiots are driving?'"

"Tom says that he and his grandfather saw most things differently. However, it was his grandfather who taught him that honesty, even when it costs you, is better than the cost of shading the truth. He was the man who taught Tom that Jesus was right when he said being a servant is more important than being the master."<sup>1</sup> He was teaching Tom the necessity of a spiritual life.

Author Marjorie Thompson writes, "There is a hunger abroad in our time, haunting lives and hearts. Like an empty stomach aching beneath the sleek coat of a seemingly well-fed creature, it reveals that something is missing from the diet of our rational, secular, and affluent culture."<sup>2</sup> For some it is a vague feeling that something is missing. There is a hunger within that is not being fed. For others, it is an anxiety that they cannot quite pinpoint or a yearning that defies description. It may manifest itself in a feeling of emptiness or constantly making cynical comments or tension in relationships. The problem may not be psychological or physical or intellectual, but rather spiritual.

Some have only a literal and rational view of the world. To move into the spiritual realm is to add a more-than-literal dimension to our perspective. It is like moving from prose to poetry. To switch to a different comparison, it is like moving from hearing individual notes to being stirred by inspiring music. To be clear, we do not make a choice between prose and poetry. To reject a scientific view of the physical world is to distort reality. However, to reject the spiritual dimension of existence is to limit the frontiers of reality.

Poet and priest John O'Donohue wrote, "Fixated on the visible, we forget that the decisive presences in our lives – mind, thought, love, and meaning – are all invisible. No surgeon has ever opened a brain to discover crevices full of thoughts. And yet our thought determines who we think we are, who we think others are and how we consider the world to be."<sup>3</sup>

There are realities that cannot be measured scientifically, there is a transcendent power that endures through time, there are values that provide both a stable foundation and sage advice for the road ahead, and despite episodes of darkness, there is a Source of light. Today we read one of the most well-known psalms in the Hebrew psalter. The overall sense of it is that its author is wonderstruck. He realizes that God's creation is more magnificent than anyone can comprehend and God's nature exceeds what the greatest intellect can grasp. The more he attempts to put into words God's essence, the more he realizes the impossibility of his endeavor. His words represent the fullness of God's nature, about as well as a few drops of water represent an ocean. A friend said that she is unable to express how grateful she is and I know just what she means.

None other than Albert Einstein wrote, "The most beautiful and deepest experience a (person) can have is the sense of the mysterious. It is the underlying principle of religion as well as all serious endeavor in art and science. He who never had this experience seems to me, if not dead, then at least blind. To sense that behind anything that can be experienced there is a something that our mind cannot grasp and whose beauty and sublime nature reaches us only indirectly...To me it suffices to wonder at these secrets and to attempt humbly to grasp with my mind a mere image of the lofty structure of all that there is."

We all know about IQ, and Einstein had one of the tops. It stands for *intelligence quotient*, and "is a measure of a person's reasoning ability. It is supposed to gauge how well someone can use information and logic to answer questions or make predictions."<sup>4</sup> In the 1990s, Daniel Goleman "popularized neurological research that demonstrated the importance of another form of intelligence: emotional intelligence."<sup>5</sup> EQ, refers to the ability to perceive, manage, and evaluate emotions.

Research on the brain has now revealed a third basic intelligence – spiritual intelligence. Author Dave Tomlinson explains that a neural mass located in the brain’s temporal lobes is dedicated to nudging us to ask fundamental questions about meaning, purpose, and existence. “It is what prompts us to explore the big questions: What is the purpose of life? Why is there something rather than nothing? Which path should I follow?”<sup>6</sup>

Today we find the psalmist pondering such questions. He is reflecting on the Source of life. And while God is in many ways beyond comprehension, the psalmist is certain that God is the ever-present Creator who loves us and is concerned about our wellbeing.

There is not much you can do to significantly raise your IQ. However, this is not the case with emotional intelligence or spiritual intelligence. They can be greatly enhanced. There are steps we can take to insure that our spiritual intelligence matures and flourishes.

Marjorie Thompson reminds us that tomatoes need stakes or cages. Beans need poles or a trellis. Creeping vines like clematis will latch onto whatever structure is nearby. “Without support, these plants would collapse in a heap...When it comes to spiritual growth, humans are much like these plants. We need structure and support.”<sup>7</sup>

Where do you find yours? Faith does not miraculously thrive on its own. We need to blend into our days certain practices. Our spiritual life will excel if we engage in worship, spend time in prayer, reflect on Scripture, wrestle with profound questions of meaning and purpose, and share God’s love with others.

Theologian Howard Thurman writes: “How good it is to center down! To sit quietly and see one’s self pass by! The streets of our minds seethe with endless traffic...While something deep within hungers and thirsts for the still moment and the resting lull. We seek...a strong sure purpose that will structure our confusion and bring meaning to our chaos...what are we doing with our lives? Where are we trying to go? Where are our values focused?...Where is my treasure and what do I love most in life?...As we listen, floating up through all of the jangling echoes of our turbulence, there is a deeper note which only the stillness of the heart makes clear. It moves directly to the core of our being. Our questions are answered, our spirits refreshed, and we move back into the traffic of our daily round with the peace of the Eternal in our step. How good it is to center down!”<sup>8</sup>

The Creator of all there is cherishes you as a beloved son or daughter and wants the very best for you. God will give you the strength you need to survive your storms. God will guide you to paths that will enrich your life. And God will infuse you with hope.

May each of us commit to those spiritual practices that will deepen our relationship with the One who was and is and is to come so that we may survive the turbulence of the present and know the peace and joy of a beautiful life.

#### NOTES

1. Tom Are, “Proclamation of the Gospel for the Salvation of Humankind,” September 5, 2021.
2. Marjorie Thompson, *Soul Feast*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), p.1.
3. John O’Donohue, *To Bless the Space Between Us*, (New York: Doubleday, 2008), p. 187-188.
4. Alison Pearce Stevens, “What is IQ – and how much does it matter?” October 13, 2016.
5. Dave Tomlinson, *How to Be a Bad Christian*, (Great Britain: Hodder and Stoughton, 2012), p. 39.
6. Ibid.
7. Marjorie Thompson, *Soul Feast*, p. 137.
8. Howard Thurman, “How good it is to center down!”

## Prayers of the People – Sudie Niesen Thompson

God of All Time and All Creation,  
Wonderful are your works that we know very well!

In the beginning you swept over the watery chaos and called forth life:  
fruit-bearing trees and birds that take flight;  
sea creatures to fill the waters,  
creeping things to move upon the earth.  
And, on the sixth day, you made us —  
created in your image, according to your likeness,  
fashioned for life with you.  
We praise you, for we are fearfully and wonderfully made!

You have made us for yourself, O Lord,  
and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.  
Eternal God, we confess that our hearts *are* restless.  
In this age — when so much feels so broken —  
we confess that our hearts are *often* restless.  
So, during this time we have set apart as sacred,  
we come seeking something that seems elusive:  
we come seeking your peace, which surpasses all understanding.  
The Psalmist declares that you have searched us and known us.  
Search our hearts, we pray, and transform them by your grace.  
Where there is sorrow, make space for joy.  
Where there is hatred, sow seeds of love.  
Where there is uncertainty or unease, fill our hearts with your peace.  
Search our hearts, we pray, and attend to the longing we carry:

Holy God, we long for healing and wholeness —  
for ourselves, for our communities, for all creation.  
We pray for those who seek healing in body, mind or spirit.  
Strengthen those who are battling disease,  
give hope to those in the depths of despair,  
and surround those overcome by worry with your peace.  
We pray for communities affected by natural disasters.  
Draw near to those from California to Louisiana to New York  
who are mourning the loss of lives and livelihoods.  
Sweep over the chaos wrought by fires and floods, and call forth new life.

We pray for our world that has long known the scourge of violence.  
As our nation marks the 20th anniversary of 9/11,  
we lament again the loss of life  
and remember those whose lives have been shaped by the tragic events of that day:  
the families and friends who have never stopped grieving a loved one lost;  
the first responders who rushed toward the wreckage,  
many of whom suffer poor health because of their service;

the women and men of our armed forces who answered their country's call  
and now bear wounds both seen and unseen;  
the people of Afghanistan and Iraq,  
who endured years of warfare, but still don't know peace.  
Yes, Lord, we long for healing and wholeness.

Ever-Present God,  
we praise you, for we are fearfully and wonderfully made.  
May all that we say and all that we do  
testify to the truth that we are yours —  
created in your image, according to your likeness,  
fashioned for life with you.  
Hem us in — behind, before — and guide us on our journeys of faith,  
so that our very lives might glorify you.

This we pray in the name of your Son, our Lord, who gave us words to pray:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And, lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil for thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory forever. Amen.**