

## Exploring the Neighborhood of Creation

From *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places*

By Eugene Peterson

We wake up each morning to a world we did not make. How did it get here? How did we get here? We open our eyes and see that “old bowling ball the sun” careen over the horizon. We wiggle our toes. A mockingbird takes off and improvises on themes set down by robins, vireos, and wrens, and we marvel at the intricacies. The smell of frying bacon works its way into our nostrils and we begin anticipating buttered toast, scrambled eggs, and coffee freshly brewed from our favorite Javanese beans.

There is so much *here* – around, above, below, inside, outside. Even with the help of poets and scientists we can account for very little of it. We notice this, then that. We start exploring the neighborhood. We try this street, and then that one. We venture across the tracks. Before long we are looking out through telescopes and down into microscopes, curious, fascinated by this endless proliferation of sheer Is-ness – color and shape and texture and sound.

After awhile we get used to it and quit noticing. We get narrowed down into something small and constricting. Somewhere along the way this exponential expansion of awareness, this wide-eyed looking around, this sheer untaught delight in what is here, reverses itself: the world contracts; we are reduced to a life of routine through which we sleepwalk.

But not for long. Something always shows up to jar us awake: a child’s question, a fox’s sleek beauty, a sharp pain, a pastor’s sermon, a fresh metaphor, an artist’s vision, a slap in the face, scent from a crushed violet. We are again awake, alert, in wonder: how did this happen? And why this? Why anything at all? Why not nothing at all?

Gratitude is our spontaneous response to all this: to *life*. Something wells up within us: Thank you! More often than not, the thank you is directed to God, even by those who don’t believe in him. Johnny Bergman was a young man in my congregation. He and his wife were enthusiastic participants, but then the weeds of a distracting world choked their young faith. They acquired children. They became suddenly wealthy and their lives filled up with boats and cars, house-building and social engagements. They were less and less frequently in worship. After a two-year absence, on a bright sunshiny Sunday, Johnny was there again. Surprised to see him I said, “Johnny! What brought you to worship today?” He said, “I woke this morning feeling so good, so blessed -- so *created* – I just had to say thank you, and this is the only place I could think to say it rightly, adequately -- I wanted to say it to Jesus.” The next Sunday his string of absences resumed, but, all the same, the moment struck me as epiphanic, and so very accurate. The sheer wonder of life, of creation, of this place where we find ourselves alive at this moment, requires response, a thank you. There is something so deeply congruent with the world we live in and who we are that when we become aware of it we exclaim at the miracle and wonder of it. In the ancient world, Plato observed that all philosophy begins in wonder. In the modern world Heidegger used the phrase “radical astonishment” to underline Plato. Leibniz asked the question that continues to provoke our endless ruminations on finding ourselves plunked down in this place, in this time: “Why is there not nothing?”

Wonder. Astonishment. Adoration. There can’t be very many of us for whom the sheer fact of existence hasn’t rocked us back on our heels. We take off our sandals before the burning bush. We catch our breath at the sight of a plummeting hawk. “Thank you, God.” We find ourselves in a lavish existence in which we feel a deep sense of kinship -- we *belong* here; we say thanks with our lives to life. And not just “Thanks” or “Thank it,” but “Thank You.” Most of the people who have lived on this planet earth have identified this *You* with God or gods. This is not just a matter of learning our manners, the way children are taught to say thank you as a social grace. It is the cultivation of adequateness within

ourselves to the nature of reality, developing the capacity to sustain an adequate response to the overwhelming giftedness and goodness of live.

Wonder is the only adequate launching pad for exploring a spirituality of creation, keeping us open-eyed, expectant, alive to life that is always more than we can account for, that always exceeds our calculations, and that is always beyond anything we can make.