

**WESTMINSTER**  
PRESBYTERIAN  
**CHURCH**



SERMON

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# Into the Deep

Dr. Jo Forrest



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Any sermon series on water offers endless possibilities. It begins as God's source for life. God's vengeance uses it in drowning floods. A common cup dissolves enemy hatred. Water washes us with grace in baptism.

As Ed and I divvied the readings, he claimed Jonah. Next week, get ready for a petulant prophet saved by a big fish.

Today we consider Leviathan, an unknown creature of the deep, whose name rolls off the tongue. Leviathan makes cameo appearances at the climax when humans face life's deep mysteries.

Here is one writer's idea of the world God created and Leviathan's place in it.

*God, by your word you created everything that is seen and unseen. Each day we walk this earth, we learn more of your grandeur and our humanity. Breath your spirit into these ancient words that we feel you within us as intimately as that person who penned this hymn. Amen.*

### **Psalm 104: 1-12, 24-29**

<sup>1</sup> Bless the LORD, O my soul.

O LORD my God, you are very great.

You are clothed with honor and majesty,

<sup>2</sup> wrapped in light as with a garment.

You stretch out the heavens like a tent;

<sup>3</sup> you set the beams of your chambers on the waters;

you make the clouds your chariot;

you ride on the wings of the wind;

<sup>4</sup>you make the winds your messengers,  
fire and flame your ministers.

<sup>5</sup>You set the earth on its foundations,  
so that it shall never be shaken.

<sup>6</sup>You cover it with the deep as with a garment;  
the waters stood above the mountains.

<sup>7</sup>At your rebuke the waters flee;  
at the sound of your thunder they take to flight.

<sup>8</sup>They rose up to the mountains, ran down to the valleys,  
to the place that you appointed for them.

<sup>9</sup>You set a boundary that they may not pass,  
so that they might not again cover the earth.

<sup>10</sup>You make springs gush forth in the valleys;  
they flow between the hills,

<sup>11</sup>giving drink to every wild animal;  
the wild asses quench their thirst.

<sup>12</sup>By the streams the birds of the air have their habitation;  
they sing among the branches.

<sup>24</sup>O LORD, how manifold are your works!  
In wisdom you have made them all;  
the earth is full of your creatures.

<sup>25</sup> There is the sea, great and wide;  
creeping things innumerable are there,  
living things both small and great.

<sup>26</sup> There go the ships  
and Leviathan that you formed to sport in it.

<sup>27</sup> These all look to you  
to give them their food in due season;

<sup>28</sup> when you give to them, they gather it up;  
when you open your hand, they are filled with good things.

<sup>29</sup> When you hide your face, they are dismayed;  
when you take away their breath, they die  
and return to their dust.

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The Book of Psalms gathered the prayers and poetry penned by the ancient Israelites. These 150 selections, likely conceived and edited over hundreds of years, express praise to God and every other human conceivable response to being alive.

You will find psalms that dispense wisdom of habits to shape a good life.

At the opposite extreme, some psalms rage. You can sense fist-shaking anger at God for some tragic event. Literally shouting “How could you God, do this to me?” Jesus cries these words from the cross.

Rarely do we read those poems, much to our detriment, since every life will stumble into unexplainable evil. Such psalms of lament give us permission to voice the anguish and despair in our hearts.

The ancient Israelites were attacked and exiled by warring nations. We cannot be surprised some writers beg God to vanquish their foes. We tend to avoid reading pleas for another's demise with descriptive, violent deaths, as if not fit for polite company.

Other times, we find solace in psalms that beg for forgiveness, ever aware of our capacity to harm another and ourselves. Anytime you feel your sin, mistakes, or failures, look to the psalms.

And we love those poems that praise God for healing and saving and protecting us.

God's spirit guided people just like you and me to write these. You will always find a psalm to name what haunts or pleases you.

Do you wonder who might have written today's psalm or what precipitated such praise? Let's try.

Perhaps a young adult standing on the cusp of the next grand adventure in life, about to embark on a new apprenticeship or set sail for a distant shore. He stands in complete awe of the order and harmony of creation. God stretches out the heavens like a tent, sets a home on imaginary beams that rise above the waters.



As without effort, God raises mountains and commands the waters. Perhaps this writer knows the opening chapter of Genesis, only this poem celebrates God's mastery rather than merely producing.

Although the psalm was composed long before the time of Jesus, it exudes the same sentiment as John's gospel that proclaims "for God so loves the world," painting a portrait of God so much in love with creation that God takes on our flesh to be with us, loving us, skin to skin.

The only creature with a name, Leviathan, sports in the deep, alongside ships. Imagine the sighting of Leviathan as alluring as a vacation package to the Galapagos, a paradise governed by God. You can read the unbridled enthusiasm as if he were to say, "this is gorgeous, let me at it, God."

In the simplest of words, the writer is in awe of creation. Sensing awe is not the same as noticing beauty. We feel awe before things we don't quite understand. As if standing before vastness, like the expansive turquoise sea or towering mountain cliffs, or any of the Seven Wonders of the World.

*The late Abraham Joshua Heschel, the esteemed rabbinic author, who writes, “Awe enables us to perceive intimations of the divine in the world, to sense in small things the beginning of infinite significance, to sense the ultimate in the common and the simple; to feel in the rush of the passing stillness of the eternal.”<sup>1</sup>*

The power of awe prompts someone, to press deeper towards mystery. The euphoria from that sense of awe becomes addictive. An adrenaline rush compelling him forward.

So, imagine this youth venturing out, confident, thinking everything ordered within his grasp. Sadly, those of us a bit road hardened know how quickly, even a few feet from shore, we can feel unmoored and chaotic.

The “oh wow” sensation slips into the stark reality of questioning everything known about himself and the world around. What lurks beyond in that deep that now does not appear so tame? Can I really do this? What if I fail? The placid order of the world starts to fall apart as his insecurity rises.

Maybe now he remembers Psalm 74 that questions “God, why do you hold back as our enemies destroy us?”

That Levithan he saw sporting on the waters, as if God’s rubber ducky, turns into the multi-headed dragon in the eyes of one who

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted by Diana Butler Bass in her blog “Jellyfish and Stars,” *The Cottage* on August 23, 2023, [https://dianabutlerbass.substack.com/p/jellyfish-and-stars?utm\\_source=substack&utm\\_medium=email](https://dianabutlerbass.substack.com/p/jellyfish-and-stars?utm_source=substack&utm_medium=email)

wrote Psalm 74. In that psalm, God fights a primordial battle with the devil, personified by Leviathan.

The awe that left him breathless in wonder before he set out on his journey turns into the gasps of anxiety, unable to settle his heart and mind from the fear of the unknown.

The words of the prophet Isaiah resonate hoping one day God's "cruel and great and strong sword will punish Leviathan the fleeing serpent, Leviathan the twisting serpent, and will kill the dragon that is in the sea." (Isaiah 27:1)

This is when awe takes on new emotional, physical, and intellectual meaning. The root meaning of the word awe doesn't always mean 'wonder'. *Awesome*, and its sibling *awful* are suffixes of the word *awe*. That is why awe rises from both beauty and from harsh mysteries. Like a violent storm, wildfire, or watching a loved one die.<sup>2</sup>

Now we imagine our writer, after one day of being unsettled...followed by another day of fear...and another event dispenses with illusion of all things in order. At some point in life, that awe of paradise turns to the awe of despair.

I have no simple recipes of how to hold on or what happens. This is the deeper mystery of faith found in prayer, taught in community,

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<sup>2</sup> Rachel Botsman, "Be Amazed at Things Outside of Yourself," *Rethink by Rachel*, August 21, 2012 [https://rachelbotsman.substack.com/p/be-amazed-at-things-outside-yourself?utm\\_source=substack&utm\\_medium=email](https://rachelbotsman.substack.com/p/be-amazed-at-things-outside-yourself?utm_source=substack&utm_medium=email)

given as a gift. We know from our ancient ancestors, people just like you and me, that in the silence, in the dark, God still speaks. For God so loves the world, God remains faithful to pull us up from the abyss.

Professor Dacher Keltner studies people's experience of awe across cultures and incomes. Among his many discoveries, awe is not something likened to a cashmere blanket, available only to those with comfortable lives. Keltner found that prisoners, facing unfathomably difficult circumstances, experience awe, whether when reading the Qur'an or singing in a church band. "Awe," he writes, "is almost always nearby, and is a pathway to healing and growing in the face of the losses and traumas that are part of life."

If anything, he writes, those who have comfort or status may find it harder to access.<sup>3</sup>

Let me close with a story of a sea creature, not as exotic as a multi-headed Leviathan.

The writer Barbara Brown Taylor tells of being on a barrier island where loggerhead turtles were laying their eggs.

One night while the tide was out, she watched a huge female heave herself up the beach to dig her nest and empty herself into it. Taylor noticed slow, salt tears run from her eyes.

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<sup>3</sup> Edward Posnett, "Book Review: *Awe*," *The Guardian*, January 25, 2023. Awe by Dacher Keltner review – the transformative power of wonder | Science and nature books | The Guardian

Afraid of disturbing her, Taylor left but returned next morning to see if she could find the spot where her eggs lay hidden in the sand. She found only her tracks, leading in the wrong direction. Instead of heading back out to sea, she had wandered into the dunes, which were already hot as asphalt in the morning sun.

A little way inland, the turtle lay exhausted and all but baked, her head and flippers caked with dried sand. After pouring water on her and covering her with sea oats, Taylor fetched a park ranger, who returned with a jeep to rescue her.

Then she watched in horror. The ranger flipped her over on her back, wrapped tire chains around her front legs, and hooked the chains to the trailer hitch on his jeep. Then he took off, yanking her body forward so fast that her open mouth filled with sand and then disappeared underneath her as her neck bent so far it looked as though it would break. The ranger hauled her over the dunes and down onto the beach. At ocean's edge, he unhooked her and turned her right side up again.

She lay motionless in the surf as the water lapped at her body, washing the sand from her eyes and making her skin shine again. Then a particularly large wave broke over her, and she lifted her head slightly, moving her back legs. Every fresh wave brought her life back to her until one of them made her light enough to find a foothold and push off, back into the water that was her home.

Taylor writes of watching her swim slowly away and remembering that nightmare ride and she noted that it is sometimes hard to tell

whether you are being killed or being saved by the hands that turn your life upside down.<sup>4</sup>

Awe brings us deep into the heart of creation. Through breathtaking awe, we relinquish the spotlight, aware we are never the one creating, never the one in control. After the harrow of awe, we tremble not before the Leviathan of life. We tremble before God, who remains with us in the struggles. We tremble in awe of a love that brings God to pull us through.

We no longer need fear the mistakes we will make. We can lay them before God, who gathers us into a loving embrace, forgives us, and pushes us back into life. We know that when we lose our bearings, God comes to us in the terrors of the night pulls us from the wilderness to return to the deep beauty of life.

Maybe the writer of Psalm 104 composed it in his youth. If so, we can imagine he edited and edited throughout his life. After the turmoil and fear, of a life lived with God's grace, perhaps as a humble senior, mostly blind, he chants praise to God for what is ordered and secure. Maybe this writer set down his pen in the twilight with a wisdom to guide us into the deep.

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<sup>4</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, *Learning to Walk in the Dark*, (New York: Harper Collins Publisher, 2014).





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