

# “Life, a Mystery to Explore”

Wisdom of Solomon 1:13-15, Lamentations 3:22-26, & Mark 10:13-16

Pastor James York

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How are we to be like children? How do children receive the Kingdom of God? How old were these children? What exactly did Jesus mean by the Kingdom of God?

Kierkegaard explained that worship is like a play. God is the audience. You are the actors. My role is to direct you. Worship is a verb. You are the ones who have gathered here to play, explore, love, perform worship for God. As your director I hope to stimulate more questions than answers, heighten your curiosity, spark a sense of wonder and inspire you to explore. I hope to encourage you to perform your loving service of worship.

Pastor Eugene Peterson wrote, “Life is a mystery to be explored, not a problem to be solved.” Throughout this sermon, aspects of children will be generalized, not all children reveal these aspects. Children enjoy exploring and asking questions. A favorite question is why. As we explore how to receive the Kingdom of God like a child perhaps it involves plenty of why questions. Perhaps there is no right answer. Perhaps the answer is different for each person. Perhaps the answer for you is different today than it was yesterday and will be tomorrow. The church is ever reforming. Scripture is living word. The Holy Spirit highlights different aspects for your transforming life. This is part of your worship work to constantly be perceiving God’s love in your life and sharing that love. The Apostle Paul explains it as praying without ceasing.

Children delight in doing stuff for the first time. Last week I saw a smiling grandma trying to learn how to ride a Segway wearing a shirt that said, “When was the last time you did something for the first time?” Children are curious, open to learning and discovering new things and different perspectives. Children are not afraid to fail. They learn from failures, remaining curious, as they keep trying new ways. Often they do not have a preconceived objective of what their play will create.

Children are content to be dependent on adults. Children are trusting. Children are vulnerable in the positive aspect of vulnerability. Vulnerable to love, to share emotions and thoughts, to cry, laugh, dance, and sing. Vulnerable by speaking what they think and feel without filters. Vulnerable by not calculating their impact on themselves or others. Vulnerable by admitting when they don’t know something, admitting when they need help, clear when they want a hug, a push, a kiss, to be carried. Vulnerable by their willingness to savor love.

Children are joyful. Children laugh, giggle, and squeal in delight. Children rejoice in telling you that they learned something new. Children celebrate new experiences.

Children have grand imaginations. My favorite ordination questions is, “Will you pray for and seek to serve the people with energy, intelligence, imagination, and love?” Imagination trumps cynicism. When a problem arises cynicism gets stuck in asking why? Imagination sees possibilities. Imagination sees the problem, and then imagines solutions, asking, why not? Imagination makes dreams reality. A test revealed that 95% of five year olds are highly imaginative, half of ten year olds, and only 10% of adults. How are you nurturing your imagination?

William Paul Young wrote, “Why do children love to hide and seek? Ask any person who has a passion to explore and discover and create. The choice to hide so many wonders from you is an act of love that is a gift inside the process of life.” God has hidden an eternal abundance of wonders for you to find and savor.

The world is full of wonders for you to explore, imagine, find, and be curious about. Recently I read, *Grandma Gatewood’s Walk*. In 1955, at age 67, she was the first woman to thru-hike the 2,168 mile Appalachian Trail. She was a solo hiker. She hiked without the right gear. She wore Keds sneakers and carried an army blanket, a plastic shower curtain, and a few supplies in a homemade denim bag slung over one shoulder. She hiked the Appalachian Trail three times, 2,000 miles of the Oregon Trail, and numerous other trails. She often blazed new trails and performed trail maintenance.

One aspect of her story that resonated with me was although she was asked numerous times, why, she never really answered the question. As a fellow hiker, an answer to the why question also eludes me. I have had numerous similar conversations with other hikers. We share a bit of our stories. We glimpse the wonder hikers

enjoy, yet are unable to articulate that wonder. Grandma Gatewood has sparked curiosity, imagination, and exploration for a multitude of people.

The world is full of wonders to experience, puzzles to check out, new horizons to discover, new forms of behavior to be tried out, limits to test, and rules to be broken to discover what is beyond the rule. Imagination enables one to keep hiking through chaos and confusion to the joys God has placed all along the trail.

By the time we reach adulthood, 85% of us are no longer highly imaginative. Most of us are born with multi-intelligence, various ways of experiencing God and diverse talents. Our culture urges us to focus and excel in one intelligence, one career, to only do what we are good at even if we enjoy other activities that we do poorly. Christianity elevates certain God perceptions. Religion, not God but religion, says there is one right way to worship, one right way to live. Instead of using our whole imagination, we are encouraged to specialize in the “in demand” areas causing humanity to miss the full abundance. Instead of using our whole imagination to envision fresh ways of abundantly living, we tend to tweak what has worked in the past and use old models and ways of doing things. Instead of using our whole imagination to enjoy our infinite God who loves us in an infinite array of wonders and calls us to lovingly serve in a unique way for each person, we try to put God in a box, speak for God, and champion certain ways of living and serving. Grandma Gatewood ignored her critics who petitioned, you are not the right age, you do not have the right equipment, you are not prepared, you should not hike alone, what is your reason, are you compensating for something. She did not let these imagination-killers deter her from hiking.

In college my favorite subject was economics. My roommates and I enjoyed analyzing and finding the optimum combination of variables. Occasionally Leslie would come and visit and listen to us analyzing and solving just about everything. Her eyes would glaze over as we debated the marginal utility of something. I think she was a little frightened that we could have an entire conversation devising economic formulas to determine the residual benefit of Dave’s old book bag, my shoes, or her aging pinto station wagon. My senior year we were invited to a competition where we would present an innovative product. We presented a way to raise beef that uses fewer resources and yields more nutritious meat. We carefully analyzed the trip and decided to optimize our experience. Our analysis was accurate. I did more on that trip than any other trip in my life; however, we did not savor anything. We stuck to our schedule leaving no room for imagination, curiosity, wonder, or exploration. Every moment was planned. We experienced a lot, but it was the most exhausting trip I have ever taken. We became irritable instead of enjoying our time together. Leslie calls this conquer mode. I get focused on completing something, causing me to become driven to finish it, making me oblivious to my surroundings. Our culture celebrates conquer mode. The focused drive that makes us the fastest, smartest, richest, or best in any category. The rationale is life is a problem to be solved and conquered. I am glad I have my Agricultural Economics and Master of Divinity degrees, that I am a farmer, feed mill grunt employee, nutrition consultant, and pastor in rural, suburban, and city contexts; for, it expands my imagination, my sense of wonder, and my experiences of God.

Backpacking is probably the most inefficient way to get from point A to point B. Backpacking is not about completing the journey or conquering the trail it is about savoring the journey, exploring the mystery of one’s surroundings and discovering wonders. Backpacking heightens my imagination and wonder.

Ten years ago I endured my most difficult days of hiking. It was scorching hot. The trail went through a foot gripping muck. My skin was covered with biting black flies and hungry mosquitoes. Every step sapped my energy and heightened my discomfort.

That night I read Eugene Peterson’s words, “Life is a mystery to explore and not a problem to be solved.” My day of backpacking was not enjoyable, because my focus was on how hot it was, how many bugs were biting me, the negative aspects of the trail, and how many miles I needed to hike to reach my planned campsite. Eugene explained how many people live their lives like this. Focused on only a few aspects of their surroundings, driven to get somewhere. If I can just get through this week. If I can just get the loan paid off. If I can just graduate from school. If I can just complete this project. If I can just make it to vacation. If I can just get over this illness. Many people take a slice of life and try to solve it, conquer it and get through it.

The next day was an awesome day of backpacking. The conditions did not change. It was still hot and buggy, but I opened my senses to more of my surroundings. I saw the light dancing on the forest floor as it cascaded through the leaves. I heard the birds singing. I saw the birch leaves flip back and forth from green to silver. I heard the leaves rustle. The prophet Isaiah said the trees of the field will clap their hands and you will

go forth with joy and be lead forth with peace. Perhaps we are filled with peace and joy when we perceive God's wonders. The previous day I did not see the trees clapping their hands. I only saw the bugs and felt the heat making myself miserable. Today I saw the trees clapping their hands enjoying peace.

Late morning, I heard the babble of water and then the rumble of a waterfall. I went off trail to explore the sound finding a 30-foot waterfall. At the bottom was a small deep pool. I spied a perfect diving rock. I swam and enjoyed this cool refreshing oasis. The waterfall and even the small creek were not on my map. They were off the trail. If I would have been hiking like the previous day, I would have gone right past it unaware it even existed. If I would still have been concerned with conquering the trail, getting back on schedule, I would not have taken the time to enjoy this wonder-filled spot. My most meaningful hikes have been when I relaxed, not driven to reach the next summit, or get around the next bend or descend to the next river, rather enjoying the wonder God has put at that place, at that time, for me to savor.

I wonder how often I miss a blessing, because I am in conquer mode. I wonder how often I bruise another, because I am driven to completing a task efficiently. I confess I still too often struggle with being overly-focused on completing the task rather than nurturing relationships.

Eugene Peterson recommends listening to explore the mystery of life. He urges us to take time to really listen to others, so we can discover life from a different perspective. Sharing stories joins our unique realities, sparks curiosity, rediscovers our playfulness, and gives wings to our imaginations. Sometimes the most economically efficient way of completing a task comes at a great cost to relationships. Life is not a formula to solve rather a mystery to explore.

William Paul Young wrote, "When you accept the beauty of God's mystery you don't have to be right all the time. You don't have to have all the answers. You can love a good question and know that God can be found in good questions."

Job was a righteous man that enjoyed abundant blessings. Job lost everything. Job had three, knowledgeable but unwise, supposed friends. They came up with all sorts of answers and reasons. Each of them was confident they had the right answer. Job did not need their lectures. Job needed their compassion.

William Paul Young wrote, "Look at us human beings it is so much easier to be right than to love." Children are not concerned with being right. Children are compassionate. When an adult decides that they are right, often they stop listening and become determined to force what they perceive to be right on another. God made each person unique. Every person has different experiences. Perhaps what is right is different for each person.

God is an awesome listener. God loves each of us perfectly. For 35 chapters, God listens to all the supposed right answers from Job and his friends. God answers with 4 chapters of questions. God rebukes the friends for adding to Job's suffering by their false assumptions, critical attitudes, and what they thought were the right answers. Job is humbled. In God's unanswerable questions Job glimpsed wonders that revived his imagination. In the mystery, Job experienced God. Job discovered how to explore the wonder of God's blessings. Was this Job discovering how to receive the Kingdom of God like a child?

I hope I sparked your imagination and curiosity. I hope I have encouraged you to ask questions. I hope you will explore and savor the abundant wonders God has for you. Amen