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## Wonder Leads to Worship

*"O Lord, our God, how glorious is thy name in all the earth! Thy majesty is praised high as the heavens. When I look up at thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars set in their place by thee, What is man that thou shouldst remember him? O Lord, our God, How glorious is thy name in all the earth!"*

Psalm 8:1, 3-4, 9 (adapted)

Young children do not understand much of what adults experience when we worship. Our worship contains many symbols which are meaningful to us, but only confuse young children. Children, however, can and do experience wonder which is the beginning of worship.

Worship is our response to God for who God is and what God has done for us. It is our praise, our confession, our hearing the Word, our going out to live again in the world. Adult worship is based on our knowledge or experience with God in the world.

Young children have little experience in the world; so they are gathering information about what God's creation is like. They

cannot refer back to earlier experiences as we can. Since children are nearer to the world, they are often more sensitive to its mysteries than we are. They can respond with wonder.

Wonder is sensing the mystery hidden in life. It is a response of feelings, of intuition, which can not be adequately expressed with words. That is the reason adults use symbols. Words are inadequate. Children may simply say "Look!" or "O-o-oh!" because they can't find the right words.

Adults can have experiences of wonder. You may have stood on a mountain top and been overcome with the beauty of the view. One night I read about a light year, and thought about how vast an amount of space that is. Later I read about a star at the far reaches of our galaxy that is four light years away. Our galaxy is only one of many! I was suddenly struck by the enormity of our universe, so huge that it is almost beyond my comprehension. I realized that there were tears in my eyes and goose bumps on my arms. My mind formed no words. I was simply filled with awe—with wonder. Then I had thoughts I wanted to share.

"How great God is," I said to my husband. "That God could know and love each one of us personally and at the same time create such a huge universe."

#### **Wonder Comes Through Nature**

Children experience wonder especially in God's creation. You and I need to be sensitive to our children's wondering and enter into it. We can interpret their experiences in Christian terms.

"Mommy, look!" called Juanito.

"What have you found?" asked his mother as she came to where Juanito was on the porch.

"Look at this spider web!" Juanito said to his mother.

"Oh!" said his mother. "It's so big and so delicate."

"Look, Mama, the spider is at home in the middle of the web. Did he really make that web all by himself?"

"Yes, he did," replied his mother. "It is amazing, isn't it?"

"I wonder how he could do it?" said Juanito thoughtfully.

"God planned for spiders to be able to spin webs. He made their bodies able to do it." replied his mother quietly.

"I think I'll sit here and see if he spins any more," said Juanito settling himself on the porch.

Juanito's mother was sensitive to his feelings of awe. He was

not looking for a technical answer to his question about how spiders spin webs. He was expressing a feeling. If he had wanted a technical answer, he would probably have persisted in his questioning. Then his mother could have supplied what information she had or they could have made plans to find out together. Wonder and curiosity often go together.

Adults can share feelings of wonder and reverence with children. We can help them become sensitive to God's creation.

Shanda's father was hoeing in the garden when he said to her, "Shanda, do you hear that bird singing different songs?"

"No," she replied as she continued to dig in the dirt.

"Listen carefully," her father urged, "and look up on that telephone pole."

Shanda looked and listened. "I see it!" she exclaimed. "It is flying up in the air and coming back to the same pole."

"It's a mockingbird," said her father. "I always feel happy when I hear a mockingbird and see it flying into the air like that. I'm glad God planned for mockingbirds!"

Shanda watched the mockingbird and then went back to her digging. From that day on Shanda recognized mockingbirds and pointed them out to others. Shanda's father had shared not only information about the bird, but also his feelings of joy and thankfulness for mockingbirds.

Our whole attitude toward God's creation communicates to our children respect or disrespect for both creation and the Creator. We teach our children to care for God's creation when we teach them to recycle resources; to not litter; to enjoy the beauty of wild flowers but not to pick them; to appreciate the life cycle of each species, even bugs and worms.

A kindergarten class went to a wildlife sanctuary one spring day. As they prepared to go on a tour, the guide said that they would be visiting the plants' and animals' home. He helped the children understand why they should not step on bugs as they walked down the trail. The children caught the spirit of reverence for all life and very carefully stepped around even the ants they saw on the trail.

Make a special point to take your children to places of beauty. Talk to them about the beauty of creation. Find out a little more yourself about the life cycle of plants, animals, and the birds in your area. Help your children become aware of dandelion seeds

and why they fly away, of what those seeds are that stick to socks in tall weeds, and of the birds in your backyard. The places you take your children could be a park, a natural history museum, the zoo, or a field where wild flowers grow. You could simply go outside your home to see a lady bug or a plant that is determinedly growing in a bit of dirt in a crack in the sidewalk. Be aware, be sensitive, and thank God for what you have seen. As Job's friend said to him, "Stop and consider the wondrous works of God." (Job 37:14)

Jo Carr has written a delightful book titled *Touch the Wind* in which she lists many ways to have creative worship with young children. She includes activities such as sleeping outside at night, making mud pies, and planting seeds. These are activities children enjoy, but what have they to do with worship?

Jo Carr says, "Just be aware of God in his world and say so, occasionally and simply. Celebrate the beautiful, the unpredictable, the temporary, the daily, with your child and the experience of worship that comes may very well come to you both."<sup>15</sup>

### Family Worship

We want to increasingly include our children in formal experiences of worship. I say increasingly because as children mature, they will be able to participate in family and congregational experiences of worship.

A table grace is a very small, but important way to introduce children to prayer. The family can include young children by singing or letting the young child say the grace or by saying a prayer in very simple sentences. Young children can participate better when they understand what is being said. If you want the children to say the grace, let it be in simple words or in the child's own words. A singing grace frequently used says:<sup>16</sup>

"Thank you, God, this happy day,

For food and homes and friends and play."

In this grace children can thank God for the things that are most important to them in their lives.

Prayer can be used in other ways. You can share your own simple prayers with your children. You can use short pieces of

<sup>15</sup> *Touch the Wind* by Jo Carr, The Upper Room, Box 840, Nashville, TN 37202 \$1.50

<sup>16</sup> "Friends At Church," Mary Edna Lloyd, Copyright © 1960 by Graded Press.

scripture such as verses from the Psalms. Learn to use prayer spontaneously when the occasion calls for it, in a natural voice with eyes open. I was recently in a group in which the leader used something he called "open-eyes prayer." We did not bow, and he looked at us while he prayed. We knew he meant it. We knew he cared for us. We can use the same technique with our children. We can say, "Thank you, God, for the warm sun," as we bask in the sun.

"Oh, God, sometimes it is hard to be nice to friends," may be a prayer when there is trouble between two children. Prayer should not be used to make children feel guilty about their actions or feelings, but it should simply be a statement of how life is for those children at that time.

As the children grow older, they will have experienced prayer in many forms. It can become a natural kind of expression for them to use and develop as they mature in their faith.

It is important for children to see their parents reading the Bible. We cannot leave the task of acquainting our children with the Bible to the church school. Parents have much more influence with their young children than anyone else. Plan to use the books and story papers your children receive at church school. Read them to your children and look up the Bible passages and read them from the Bible. They are short verses, but they begin the child's knowledge of the Bible.

During Advent children can be involved in family worship by using the Advent wreath. A simple Advent service can be observed each week which includes a Christmas carol, a scripture reading and the lighting of the Advent candles. Young children enjoy learning the songs and lighting the candles. An observance such as this is a way to help children understand the true meaning of Christmas in the midst of trees and presents.

It is also helpful to the children when parents lessen the role of Santa Claus at Christmas. Santa Claus can be a reminder that Christmas is coming and that we should buy or make gifts for persons we love. Young children can be encouraged to make a small gift for members of the family.

There are other celebrations in the family which can also be worship—moments of thankfulness or praise to God. These celebrations could include birthdays, homecomings, recovery from illness, a weekend together. Moments of joy can become

worship by praising God—by thanking Him for the gift of relationships.

### **Young Children and Corporate Worship**

Whether young children should go to Sunday morning worship is a question that is sometimes hard to answer. Some ministers encourage children's attendance at worship; others discourage it. So what should parents do? We have already said that young children have short attention spans and that they understand little symbolic language. Therefore, they will understand only a part of a worship service.

In general it is very hard for two's and three's to sit through a worship service. Some four's and probably most five's can come to worship and participate to some extent. Whether these guidelines work for you will depend on both you and your children. I'm sure there are some two's that come successfully to worship every Sunday and that there are some five's who do not want to come or cannot sit through the service.

Churches may provide a church school session for young children during worship so that the children who want and need to can be learning through age level activities while their parents are in worship. This session should not be just babysitting, but a session suited to the needs of young children. Arrangements can be made for rotation of adult leadership so that no adult has to miss worship every Sunday, and which permits constancy of care for the children.

Children who do attend worship should have pencil and paper or an interesting book handy for times when the service is beyond their understanding. Parents can help the children by sitting near the front of the sanctuary where they can see what goes on and by explaining what is happening. "The minister is reading from the Bible now." "Listen to this hymn and see if you have heard it before." "This is a prayer. Let us bow our heads"

Even if you do not take your children to worship every week, take them for some special services. At Christmas when there are short plays or musical programs, take your children. Our children especially enjoy seeing some of their teen-aged friends participate in music and drama during special services. You may take your children to worship monthly or just occasionally when you and your children are ready for the experience.

Questions are often asked about taking children to Holy Communion. One mother thought all the references to blood would be frightening to her children and would not communicate the true meaning of communion. Other parents feel strongly that young children should participate in communion. When the minister is sensitive to the young children who are there, it can be a very meaningful service.

Sometimes when ministers serve communion to young children they say "Take and eat and remember that God loves you." Young children, of course, do not understand the symbolism of communion. But when they feel the love that the adults have for them and for one another, they begin to get the meaning of the sacrament. Fuller understanding will come later.

Young children do benefit from and can participate in worship in the family and in the congregation. When they have many experiences on their level, a foundation is being built so that when they are older they can worship God out of their own experience. Their response to God will not just be an intellectual one, but one made in response to feelings and experiences.

### **Things to Think About**

1. What is something you do in your family that has qualities of worship that you never thought of as worship?
2. What are two other activities you could do in your family that may be experiences of wonder—for you and for your child?
3. In what other ways could your young children be included in family worship? At home? At church?