

Fearfully and Wonderfully Made

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the second Sunday in Ordinary Time, January 29, 1997. Scripture Lessons: 1 Samuel 3:1-10; Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18; 1 Corinthians 6:12-20; John 1:43-51.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Lewis Thomas - scientist, philosopher, and author was asked by the editor of a magazine to make up a list of seven wonders of the world from his perspective as a scientist - seven wonders of the world - counterparts to the seven ancient wonders of the world. The request prompted Lewis to look up that word "wonder" to make sure he understood what it meant. "Wonder is a word to wonder about", he wrote. "It contains a mixture of messages: something marvelous and miraculous, surprising, raising unanswerable questions about itself, making the observer wonder, even raising skeptical questions like, 'I wonder about that.'"

So Thomas set himself to the task of listing what he thought to be seven wonders of the world. Now Thomas is a scientist so his list contained a lot of scientific wonders. A newly discovered bacteria species. A rare species of beetle. Termites. But the seventh wonder of the world, according to Lewis Thomas - the seventh and last and most wonderful wonder of the world is a human child, any child.

He writes, "I used to wonder about childhood and the evolution of our species." He wondered how human beings survived given the long period of vulnerability and defenselessness which we call childhood - roughly the ages of 1 to 12. One sixth of a whole human life span is spent in childhood - in relatively helpless, vulnerable, and defenseless

childhood! "Why didn't our evolution take care of that," he asks. Why didn't our evolution allow us to "jump catlike" from our childhood to adulthood?" According to Lewis Thomas, a human child, any child, is one of the seven wonders of the world.

The author of Psalm 139 agrees with Thomas. Psalm 139 is a prayer, probably written after the destruction of Judah by the armies of Babylon. The Psalmist reflects on God's knowledge of him as an individual. "The One who created the earth, sea, ^{and} sky knows me personally - knows me intimately" the Psalmist confesses. "The Lord knew me even before I was born." The Psalmist prays, "You formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; that I know very well. My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret... your eyes beheld my unformed substance." The Psalmist looks at himself and recognizes that he, a human being, is one of the most marvelous wonders of the world.

We are fearfully and wonderfully made. When our father's sperm and our mother's egg got together, all of our hereditary characteristics, including our sex and our future physical shape, was determined. When we were an embryo, *four weeks old*, our heart began to beat - the foundations of our nervous system was formed, including our brain, nerves and spinal cord. When we were a *six week old embryo*, our nervous system was so developed that it coordinated the movements of our muscles. When we reached the fetus stage of *ten weeks*, our brain and lungs were largely complete. By the end of *twelve weeks*, we could react to

touch, turn our head, kick our legs, flex our wrists, make our tiny hands into fists, curl our toes, and even suck our thumb. "I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made."

We attended a dinner party over the Christmas holidays with friends from Camp Donegal. One of the couples spoke of a friend who claims to look at himself every morning in the mirror and say, "I am wonderful." Now, I can't imagine doing that. But he's got it just about right. We are wonderful! We are fearfully and wonderfully made. It might do us all good to go home and look in the mirror every day and say, "I am fearfully and wonderfully made."

I remember, as a little boy, standing on a stool in the bathroom and looking into the mirror. Probably the first time in my life that I recognized myself as an individual - a person - someone who existed apart from my mother and father. I carefully observed my nose, my lips, my ears, my eyes. They were mine. I thought to myself, "I am me! I am me!" Fear and wonder filled my being. I am fearfully and wonderfully made.

Christians join that ancient Psalmist in our daily prayers as individuals and as a Christian community. We praise and bless God our Father, who knitted us together in our mother's womb, and saw and loved us while we were still without form. We exclaim with overwhelming joy: "I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made."

In every child that's born, in every person who lives or dies, Christians see the wonderful image of God's glory. In every child that's born, in every person who lives or dies, we

see an icon of Jesus Christ. Like us, our children our fearfully and wonderfully made. Listen to a letter written by a father to his newly born child. Sense the joy with which he experiences how fearfully and wonderfully made his child is. He writes, "I saw you for the first time this afternoon. The nurse held you up so that I could get a good look at you through the nursery window. There wasn't much of you that I could see, but I felt very proud. You were my child! I was proud and thankful too - thankful to God for you, thankful that you were well and strong, with your tiny body in proper working order. Your mother and I had prayed that it might be so. Seeing you this afternoon was the answer to our prayers. And there were other things we'd prayed about, things we shall continue to pray about as you grow up; that our words and our lives may lead you to know the Saviour that we know, the Lord Jesus Christ. That you may not only belong to us, but also to Him."

This morning we bring five children to the baptismal font, to Jesus Christ. Five children fearfully and wonderfully made. Five images of God's glory! Five icons of Jesus Christ! We bring five children to be baptized.

Wonder of wonders, here revealed;
God's covenant with us is sealed.
And long before we know or pray,
God's love enfolds us every day.

Let us pray: Eternal God, at the baptism of Jesus in the River Jordan you proclaimed him your beloved Son, and anointed him with the Holy Spirit. Grant that all who are baptized into his name may keep the covenant they have made, and boldly confess him as Lord and Savior; who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, in glory everlasting. Amen.