

Psalm 29
Awe
Rev. Lou Nyiri
May 30, 2021

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This morning's message is based upon Psalm 29, let's lean in & listen...to God's word for us this day...

[Scripture Slide – Psalm 29]

Psalm 29 - The Voice of God in a Great Storm (A Psalm of David)

- ¹ Ascribe to the LORD, O heavenly beings, ascribe to the LORD glory and strength.
- ² Ascribe to the LORD the glory of his name; worship the LORD in holy splendor.
- ³ The voice of the LORD is over the waters; the God of glory thunders, the LORD, over mighty waters.
- ⁴ The voice of the LORD is powerful; the voice of the LORD is full of majesty.
- ⁵ The voice of the LORD breaks the cedars; the LORD breaks the cedars of Lebanon.
- ⁶ He makes Lebanon skip like a calf, and Sirion like a young wild ox.
- ⁷ The voice of the LORD flashes forth flames of fire.
- ⁸ The voice of the LORD shakes the wilderness; the LORD shakes the wilderness of Kadesh.
- ⁹ The voice of the LORD causes the oaks to whirl, and strips the forest bare; and in his temple all say, "Glory!"
- ¹⁰ The LORD sits enthroned over the flood; the LORD sits enthroned as king forever.
- ¹¹ May the LORD give strength to his people! May the LORD bless his people with peace!

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Let us Pray:

Come, O Holy Spirit, come.
Come as the fire and burn,
Come as the wind and cleanse,
Come as the light and reveal,
Convict us, Convert us, Consecrate us...until we are wholly thine.

And now, Lord, my prayer is simply this:

That the words of my mouth

And the words of all our hearts will be found pleasing and acceptable to you,
for you are our rock and our redeemer...Amen.

Sermon

You may recall from history class that at one time people believed the Earth was the center of the universe. The presumption was the sun, moon, stars and planets all revolved around the Earth. This understanding of Earth's spatial relation to other celestial bodies is commonly referred to as "geocentric."

[Slide – Copernicus / Galileo / Kepler]

Around the mid-16th century a group of scientists Copernicus, Galileo, Kepler began to challenge this geocentric understanding – insisting the Sun – not Earth – was at the center. Gradually, this geocentric model was replaced by a heliocentric one.

This change in one's way of thinking is what we call a "paradigm shift."

A paradigm is a distinct set of concepts & practices which define a scientific discipline at any particular period. The shift occurs when previously established theories collapse & new understandings take their place.

This shift in thinking is preceded by moments of eye-opening wonder.

It is eye-opening wonder which prompted Albert Einstein to posit how the most beautiful experience we can have is *the mysterious*.

[Slide – Einstein]

"[Mystery] is the fundamental emotion that stands at the cradle of true art and true science. Whoever can no longer wonder, no longer marvel, is as good as dead, and [their] eyes are dimmed."

Einstein continues, "It was the experience of mystery – even if mixed with fear – that engendered religion. A knowledge of the existence of something we cannot penetrate, our perceptions of the profoundest reason and the most radiant beauty, which only in their most primitive forms are accessible to our minds."

"It is this knowledge and this emotion," Einstein concludes, "that constitute true religiosity. In this sense, and only this sense, I am a deeply religious man."

Einstein's words recall for me the quote by Madeleine L'Engle – author of the young adult fiction novel *A Wrinkle in Time* & who served four decades as a librarian and writer-in-residence at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City, L'Engle said,

[Slide – L'Engle] "Never look at the stars and yawn."

Now, don't believe Madeleine L'Engle ever said that...well, here is a book Madeleine L'Engle signed for Candace with that very inscription...

[Slide – L'Engle Signed Book] "Never look at the stars and yawn."

L'Engle & Einstein get to the heart of wonder & awe – which are emotions of note which prompt people to delve deeper & leap further into the unknown. Wonder & Awe moved scientists in the 16th century to look at the world in a new light. Wonder and Awe move science minded & non-science minded individuals of the 21st century to look at the world in new ways.

Helen De Cruz, professor of philosophy and humanities at Saint Louis University in Missouri, writes, "Awe increases our tolerance for uncertainty and opens our receptivity to new and unusual ideas, which are crucial for paradigm change."

De Cruz goes on to explain – noting how *awe* is also a spiritual and moral emotion – "all clear cases of awe," she discusses, "have two components: an experience of vastness and a need for a mental accommodation to that vastness."

De Cruz, continues, "Awe is a self-transcendent emotion because it focuses attention away from ourselves and toward our environment."

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Awe – along with curiosity and wonder – are emotions which prompt the search for knowledge – and also the ability to change our mind.

Psalms 29's author stands in just such a place – filled with awe – recall verses 3,4:

³ The voice of the LORD is over the waters; the God of glory thunders, the LORD, over mighty waters.

⁴ The voice of the LORD is powerful; the voice of the LORD is full of majesty.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, one of the 20th century's leading Jewish theologians & philosophers, insists, "awe is critical for not taking the world for granted and thus losing the ability to experience it with depth and reverence."

Awe, therefore, is a pathway not only to knowledge, but also to wisdom and to God.

Before we go further, let's pause to make sure we're on the same page when talking about awe:

[Slide – Ducklings & Mountains]

Aww is for ducklings, puppies and cats.

Awe is for mountains, sunrises or sunsets – places one recognizes life's grandeur.

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Awe usually happens in unpredictable way & often at unplanned times – the key to living is to be open to those moments & receptive to what those awe-inspiring emotions might be telling us.

Presbyterian theologian, Frederick Buechner illustrates awe when he speaks of seeing a forest of giant redwoods for the first time.

[Slide – Children Hugging Redwood Tree]

"There were some small children nearby," Buechner said, "giggling, chattering and pushing each other around. [When they entered the forest], nobody told them to quiet down. [As we entered,] they quieted down all by themselves. Everybody did. You couldn't hear a sound of any kind. It was like coming into a vast, empty room"

It was – in effect – a paradigm or way of seeing the world shift for Buechner.

He continues, "Two or three hundred feet high [they] stood. [You realized] that all your life you had been mistaken. Oaks and ashes, maples and chestnuts and elms you had seen for as long as you could remember, but never until this moment had you so much as dreamed what a tree really was."

While those children in Buechner's recollection may not have had the life experience to describe the feeling as awe – the emotion was still there – and it took their breath and voice away. It would not be surprising to learn of that moment that it was the place one of those kids awakened to thinking about God – or a career in

ecology / dendrology / arborist / naturalist – or simply fell in love with the outdoors (a love that would bring bearing to their future choices).

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While awe begins with audible silence – it is often followed by a vocal “wow!”

For me, it was standing in front of the Grand Canyon – in the Mojave Desert – or the highlands of Scotland. For our family it was flying into the sunrise of Amsterdam – we realized that as we wanted to sleep there were others rising to greet the day.

Something happens to us in awe-filled moments – whether we believe in God or not – when we feel a sense of awe – we begin to shift from “the world is not all about me” – to “the world is larger than me” – perhaps even “this is (or may be) God’s world.”

[Slide – Abraham Lincoln]

Abraham Lincoln is quoted as saying, “I never behold the heavens filled with stars that I do not feel I am looking in the face of God. I can see how it might be possible for [one] to look down upon the earth and be an atheist, but I cannot conceive how [one] could lie looking up into the heavens and say there is no God.”

Awe opens us up to a sense of possibilities we heretofore had not imagined.

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Awe says to us, “this is life beyond what I have known.”

Awe is where we catch an intimation of God – what the ancient Celts would call “thin places”

[Slide – Thin Places]

The places where we find ourselves catching a glimpse of God...places where it becomes easier to see God’s presence.

Awe is where the impulse of belief in God often starts – it is where we make, as Helen De Cruz says, “a mental accommodation to vastness.”

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These awe experiences take many forms:

The beauty around us...

The surge & sound of ocean waves...

The quiet of a summer evening...(sans cicadas)...

The lyrics of poetry or music...

The smell of wood smoke in crisp autumn air...(which is warmer than temperatures these past two days)...

The site of family or friends driving up our lane to visit...

When we find ourselves wading into the depths of awe – may we remember to consider what God might be saying to us – or – what such awe-inspiring moments may be declaring about God – may we remain open in such moments.

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May we learn to embrace such moments with:

Reverential silence as we soak it in...

Wonder-filled response as we breath out wow...

Mysterious possibility as we ponder what new ways of seeing and believing might spring forth from such encounters.

May we be inspired to *Never Look at the Stars & Yawn!*

Amen & Amen.