



**“Filled with Awe: Prayer”
Hebrews 12:18-29**

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Today is the last Sunday in our sermon series, “Filled with Awe,” in which we’ve been exploring what awe is, how we can seek it out in our own lives, and how we can inspire it through our work as a church. And we’ve focused on awe because that’s what people saw in the early disciples. From Acts: “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles.”

Awe, we have said, is the experience of witnessing something so vast that it forces a realignment, a reevaluation of what is possible. Awe can happen at special times in our lives, but it can also occur in the course of everyday business. It’s not always pleasant; we can feel awe at both the beauty and the horror of the world, but our covenant with God means that we trust in God’s love for us, even in the midst of suffering. And if and when we can’t see awe, when things seem mundane or even depressing, when we are having trouble identifying the awesome beauty that is all around us, and the awesome beauty within us, well, the nice thing is that awe can be taught. We can go to others, other disciples, friends, whoever, and we can learn how to open ourselves up to awe and seek it when we most need it.

And so we turn now to the final action that the disciples are described as doing in our text from Acts: prayer. People saw the members of the early church sharing meals together in communion, teaching each other, having fellowship with each other, and also praying with each other, and all those are the impetus for awe.

And you might think that of all things, all the actions that the disciples did, prayer should be the easiest. Because we do it all the time, I’m going to lead like nine prayers this morning. Paul says we’re actually supposed to “pray without ceasing.”¹ When people ask what my degree, a Master of Divinity, means, I typically say, “Basically I have a Master’s degree in praying in public.”

¹ 1 Thessalonians 5:17

But, as you might have guessed from knowing even a little bit about me, I personally find prayer the hardest of all these four things that the early church does. I mean, I'm all about fellowship, sharing meals together, teaching others a little something we know, learning about stuff we don't know, I'm very comfortable with all of that. But prayer, for me personally, it's just hard. And I think that's because we typically understand prayer to be a reflective, solemn, quiet, humbling exercise. And let's just think of some words that don't really describe me – reflective, solemn, quiet, humble, yeah, that's just not me. And to the extent the prayer is a discipline, or a reflective, intentional action of speaking even mildly coherently with God....it's tough. Prayer is tough for me, and maybe for some of you.

And I don't mean, that like, I don't like prayer, or that I don't feel comfortable praying with you all, leading prayers, speaking out loud to God. No, I have confidence that God hears my prayers and understands the intentions of my heart. But that's just why I don't feel like I "pray good." I feel like, God already knows what I need or don't need, or what the world needs, much better than I do. God knows my prayers, God knows everything that's going on, and so what do I bring to this conversation?

Lillian Daniel tells a story about a seminarian intern who was offering the pastoral prayers one Sunday and received a request to pray for a woman who had a name he found difficult to pronounce. It was a Polish name and it sounded nothing like it was spelled, but of course the congregation had learned over the years how to say it. So it was particularly painful to listen to the intern as he prayed out loud and kept stumbling over the name. He would make one attempt to say it, stop himself, try to say it another time, then stop again, wincing, and then butcher the name all over again. Finally he let out an exasperated sigh, and continuing with the prayer, he looked up to the heavens and said, "Oh God, you know what her name is!"²

And that's sort of how I feel sometimes, like I can't quite articulate the prayers I would offer, so I just leave it to God to figure it out for me. Maybe that's just me, but I venture to say that none of us have the prayer life that we might want. We might find it difficult to find time to pray, or maybe you really only turn to prayer when you're that desperate. Or maybe it's too hard to concentrate, and your mind wanders. You don't quite know the words, it feels awkward, maybe you even wonder... am I just talking to myself? And maybe you're not much of a talker anyway, I don't know what that's like but I've heard of people like that, and the idea of speaking with God, out loud or internally, is just not how you communicate with God.

² https://day1.org/articles/5d9b820ef71918cdf20036ee/lillian_daniel_an_honest_prayer

And yet, we know that prayer is fundamental to our faith. Anne Lamott says that “Prayer is taking a chance that against all odds and past history, we are loved and chosen, and we do not need to get it together before we show up. The opposite may be true: we may not be able to get it together *until* we show up...”³ So we need prayer, maybe first and foremost, before communion, and fellowship, and teaching, we need prayer. So how should we pray? And more specifically, how might we do so in a way that is beautiful, vast, reorienting, and filled with awe?

To try and answer that question, we are going to look at this really complicated passage from the book of Hebrews. Just like a Presbyterian, to take something real normal and easy like prayer and then attach a passage like this to it. I know, just go with me. So when we turn to our scripture passage this morning, you can certainly be forgiven if you thought to yourself, what in the world does this have to do with prayer? Or even, what in the world is this passage from Hebrews actually saying? Totally understandable on your part, because the letter to the Hebrews is a very complicated letter to understand. So we’re going to talk a bit about biblical literacy here, but stick with me for just a few minutes, I really think it will pay off.

OK, what in the world is going on in Hebrews? Frankly, we don’t really know. They don’t call it the “riddle of the New Testament” for nothing.⁴ First off, we don’t know who wrote this letter. It’s attributed to the apostle Paul, it probably wasn’t him, it was probably a disciple of the early church writing in Paul’s name. This is not news, by the way. Basically no one ever thought that Paul wrote this thing: Origen, Augustine, Luther, Calvin, they all said, nah, this ain’t Paul.⁵

And that’s in part because, the writing here is really complicated Greek. You can kind of tell that from the English translation itself, but in the original language, it’s even more dense. The writer here was most likely trained in classic Greek oratory; this is a learned person speaking at a very high level about complex Jewish theology. The author may have been Jewish, may not have been, we don’t know, but they obviously have intimate knowledge of Hebrew theology and is writing to a Hebrew population. Also we don’t really know where the author is, and we don’t know if the author is writing to Hebrews in Jerusalem or Rome or wherever they may have scattered to.⁶

So basically, don’t think of this as a letter, think of this as a dissertation. And maybe a dissertation written about discipline you know almost nothing about, by someone you

³ *Help, Thanks, Wow: The Three Essential Prayers* by Anne Lamott, p. 6

⁴ *The Letter to the Hebrews* by William Barclay, revised edition, p. 5

⁵ *Ibid*, p. 9

⁶ *Ibid*, p. 9

don't know, to a PhD committee somewhere. That's literally about as much as ancient and modern scholarship has been able to put together about the letter to the Hebrews.

But here's what we do know about this letter to the Hebrews: it is all about prayer, the awesome power of prayer, this means of communicating with and to God that reaches deep into our souls and our churches and our communities and breaks forth into unfathomable awe.

Stacy, you are maybe thinking, where do you get that in this passage? So what this author is trying to do is to align two very different ways of approaching God: the way known to the Hebrews that he's writing to, and the way of Christ. And the metaphor he uses are the two mountains, Mount Sinai and Mount Zion. He doesn't say Mount Sinai in the text, just to keep things even more complicated, but that's what he means.

And so on one hand, you have the Hebrews or the Jews, and they are used to worshipping at Mount Sinai. And for them, it is always dangerous to approach God. Exodus says, if you see God, you will die. On one day of the year, the Day of Atonement, that was the one time all year when the High Priest entered the Holy of Holies where the very presence of God was [believed] to dwell. No one ever entered in except the High Priest, and he [could only enter] on that day. When he did, the law [said] that he must not linger in the holy place for long, 'lest he put Israel in terror.' It was dangerous to enter the presence of God and if a [someone] waited too long, [they] might be struck dead."⁷ This is one way of approaching, of communicating with, God.

And on the other hand, you have Mount Zion where Jesus Christ reigns supreme. He has shouldered the burdens of fear and taken the place of a necessary sacrifice, not out of vengeance but out of love. On Mount Zion, God reigns triumphant. Zion is a place of salvation and safety where God has written our names in the Book of Life in permanent ink.⁸

And so you might expect the author to say, OK Hebrews, stop worshipping over here on Mount Sinai, where everything is scary and gloomy, and get over here to Mount Zion, where everything's coming up roses. That tends to be how we think of the New Testament versus the Old Testament: the Old Testament God is scary, the New Testament God is sweet. But that's not quite what this dissertation on Hebrew theology says to us. Instead of saying: Sinai BAD. Zion GOOD. It's more like, Sinai is the bad cop, and Zion is the good cop. And you sort of need both in order to get to the truth.

⁷ Ibid, p. 3

⁸ <https://cepreaching.org/commentary/2019-08-19/hebrews-1218-29-2/>

Theologian Scott Hoezee says, “Reading this passage creates the sensation of watching a tennis match. In a good tennis match, the ball is going back and forth, then those in the stands are constantly swiveling their heads. They look left, then right. Left, then right again. Now Serena hits, then Venus. Serena, Venus, and so on.

“And the book of Hebrews is like that. The author keeps toggling back and forth between words of fright... and then words of great comfort... Turn left: God is majestic and terrifying. Turn right: Jesus is wonderful and tender. Turn left: God is going to shake the earth. Turn right: [Our] kingdom cannot be shaken. Turn left: God is a consuming fire! Turn right: Jesus is our loving Savior.”

“Back and forth and back and forth it goes. The author wants [us to] know several things simultaneously, to hold them in tension... On the one hand we do not need to feel the sheer terror the Israelites felt at Mount Sinai. Back then it was all booming thunder, dread, gloom, darkness. Even God’s buddy Moses was quaking in his sandals.

“But that’s not the mountain we are coming to, the author assures us. No, we are coming to Mount Zion, Jerusalem, the heavenly city of God... This is a place of love and safety. Our salvation is already accomplished by [the sacrifice of Jesus]. No need to fear. No need to tremble. All is well... We have already been made perfect in Christ.

“But no sooner is this said than the tennis ball gets hit back to the other side of the net. The author will not let us forget for even a moment that the God we serve is holy and majestic and awesome and, all things being equal, worthy of a goodly dose of reverence and fear. God is still going to shake things up in heaven and on earth. There is still a lot of serious business to attend to here. Don’t mess with this God. Don’t get so cozy with God as to forget that existential divide between the creatures and the Creator... This God will still terrify those who oppose [her].

“But then the ball gets batted back the other direction. But remember, the author says, we are in a kingdom that is already well established and safe and cannot be shaken. Remember that with you all is well. Don’t forget grace. Don’t forget Jesus.

“[To use another sports metaphor, the book of] Hebrews puts us... on the balance beam of faith. You can fall left or right but to stay on the beam you have to know BOTH how gracious and tender Jesus is AND how radically holy and awesome he is. This is not a God to be trifled with. Salvation from this God is not something to take lightly. It may all be grace and all be free and all be wonderful and true and secure in a kingdom that cannot be shaken and yet . . . our God is all-consuming.

Worship God with gladness but also holy fear. Sing to God with joy but also a dose of humble wonder that you can talk to this God at all.”⁹

And ultimately, I think this is what it means to be filled with awe. To know, to trust, to believe that God is the vast, powerful, radical Creator, and also that God is the one who calls you by name, who knows your every gift and every flaw, who can count the number of hairs on your head, and who chose to live a life in a world like yours, in a body like yours, and suffer a death like you will, all because he loves you. That belief, that truth necessitates a reorientation of everything we have ever known or experienced. It fills us with awe, and inspires awe in others who see the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles.

I honestly don’t know if, at the end of the day or the sermon, I guess, if I am any better at prayer than I was. But it doesn’t really matter. That’s the thing about prayer. That we can do it at all, that God has called us into a relationship with him that gives us the avenue for prayer, that is awesome.

The wonderful writer Anne Lamott says, “I do not know much about God and prayer, but I have come to believe...that there’s something to be said for keeping prayer simple: Help. Thanks. Wow.”¹⁰

Help is something we all know about. We’re going to pray for all kinds of help here pretty soon, when we share our prayers of the people. Thanks is also something we’re familiar with; we say prayers of thanksgiving, we offer thanks at meals.

But our prayer of Wow is maybe something we need to do a little more of. She says, “The words ‘wow’ and ‘awe’ are the same height and width, all w’s and short vowels. They could dance together. Even when, maybe especially when, we don’t cooperate, this energy – the breadth, the glory, the goodness of God – is *given*... Awe is why we are here. And this state is the prayer: ‘wow.’”¹¹

May it be so, this day and always. Amen.

⁹ <https://cepreaching.org/commentary/2016-08-15/hebrews-1218-29/>

¹⁰ *Help, Thanks, Wow: The Three Essential Prayers* by Anne Lamott, p. 1

¹¹ *Ibid*, p. 83-84