



“Filled with Awe: Fellowship”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
September 10, 2023

Rev. Dr. Stacy C. Smith
excerpts from Genesis 6-9 (the Noah story)

Let us pray: *may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, God our rock and our redeemer. Amen.*

On this day when we celebrate our home-coming in this church, this family of faith, we turn again to our theme “Filled with Awe.” These words come from not from the very beginning of the Bible, as we just heard, but much, much later, at the very beginning of the church, in the second chapter of Acts. There it says, talking about the members of the early church: “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.” “Filled with awe.”

And so last week we defined awe as the experience of encountering something vast, so vast in fact that it requires a reorientation of our thinking so that we can accommodate this new experience.¹ That’s what people felt, scripture says, when they saw the early church living in this new way: they lived as a community, they cared for each other, they pooled their resources and shared what they had equally, people from all walks of life who couldn’t eat the same things or even speak the same language, somehow they all came together to establish and live this new life, this new fellowship, in Christ. And that is worthy of awe.

And when we think about times when we have experienced awe, we might come up with lots of different things: we said last week that awe can be something that happens rarely like a special meal, or the birth of a child or grandchild. Lots of times people find awe in nature, in majestic vistas or the complexities of a honeybee hive. But we also said that awe doesn’t have to be a once-in-a-lifetime occurrence, that we can find awe in the ordinary, daily things, and that when we seek beauty and friendship and love and communion, we can find awe in the “every day.”

¹ *Awestruck: How Embracing Wonder Can Help Make You Happier, Healthier, and More Connected* by Jonah Paquette, PsyD. Shambala, 2020, p. 6

But beauty is not the only thing worthy of awe. There is a darker, more troubling side to awe. Something that is so vast that it requires new accommodation; that can be a wonderful blessing beyond our wildest dreams but it can also be a tragedy. Dacher Keltner is a psychologist who studies all kinds of human emotions including awe; he was actually a consultant on the Pixar movie *Inside Out*, which is all about emotions. So he's done a ton of studies about awe, and in one of them he asked participants were to describe an experience in which they felt intense awe. And while 80% of people described pleasant experiences, in nature or art or love, about 20% described threatening memories of natural disasters or war or terrorist attacks.²

Many of us stared in awe as the Twin Towers collapsed; that was certainly vast and required new mental accommodation. Those of us that remember the *Challenger* explosion know something of the terrible power of awe. Fires and mudslides and earthquakes and floods; shootings of tiny school children, horrible accidents on the side of the highway – all of these experiences can be awe-full, filled with awe, yes, but not in a way we would want to remember, and certainly not in a way we would want to emulate as a community of faith.

And this is not an anomaly, some strange etymological development where two words or two feelings sound the same but mean totally different things. No, our word “awe” traces back at least eight hundred years to the Old Norse word “agi;” some researchers place it as far back as ancient Greece and the word “akhos.”³ But these originating “awe” words don't exactly evoke a beautiful sunset. No, in their original meaning they mean fear, dread, horror, pain. Even the word used in Acts, in our focus passage, is actually not the Greek *ahkos*. It's the Greek word *fobos*⁴ - what does that sound like? *Fobos* out of which we get the word “phobia.” Fear. Terror. These are also elements of being filled with awe.

So what do we make of this “awe” that can be both exquisite and terrible? How do we reconcile them together, can they be reconciled? And what does any of this tell us about this church, and how we are called to be a community of faith that is worthy of the kind of awe that we would want to embody, to promote, to live?

As I thought about these two flip sides of awe this week, and what it can tell us about our church family, one story from scripture kept coming to mind: the story of Noah and the flood. Because it's so easy to see each of these expressions of awe in this story. We

² Gordon AM, Stellar JE, Anderson CL, McNeil GD, Loew D, Keltner D. The dark side of the sublime: Distinguishing a threat-based variant of awe. *J Pers Soc Psychol*. 2017

³ *Awestruck*. p. 14

⁴ <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lang/lexicon/φόβος>

tend to think of the story of Noah in one of two ways: the most common interpretation is very much a children's story of animals and rainbows. This is a story about remembering God's love, about seeing the bright side of every storm. Stories of incredible animals walking 2x2, a giant hand-built ark, and colors splayed across the sky. This is the kind of awe that we want to experience.

But the second interpretation is a story that is most definitely not for children. In this interpretation, God is so angered by human rebellion that God floods the whole earth, wiping out nearly everything in a fit of divine rage. This is a story about a God whom you should fear, a God of wrath who is willing to strike us down⁵ and destroy all that exists with a terribly frightening disaster. This is that other side of awe; the *fobos* side.

But again, how do we reconcile these two parts of awe, this story that simultaneously a genocide and something we paint on the walls of the nursery? What do we do with a God whose love inspires, but who's anger destroys? How do we understand the awe-inspiring beauty of the waterfall, and the awe-full terror when it floods? When we experience the awe of new life or new love, only to watch with awe as that precious life withers away from cancer or addiction or dementia? How do we place ourselves within this story of Noah so that we can appreciate the beauty without being overwhelmed by the loss?

Well, one place to begin is to remember that we are not the first people who have had to reconcile all this. Not by a long shot. In fact, the story of Noah, it's not unique at all. Just about every culture throughout human history tells this story in some fashion, and adds their little twist. You might have heard of the epic of Gilgamesh; this is another famous version of this flood story, but many, many cultures across ancient Mesopotamia and Africa and Asia and Europe, they all tell this story of the flood. In fact one scholar⁶ collected 200 different versions of this story across cultures and time periods and chronicled their similarities. He found, for example, that 88% of the stories include a favored family like Noah, 95% of stories indicate the flood was a global event, that it covered the Earth. In 70% of stories the family survives on a boat, and 73% says the animals were also saved.

And he says, if you put all the stories back together, and tried to find the common narrative, it would read like this: "Once there was a worldwide flood, sent by God to judge the wickedness of [humanity]. But there was one righteous family and they were forewarned of the coming flood. They built a boat on which they survived the flood,

⁵ Adapted from Elizabeth Webb; http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1222

⁶ <http://www.icr.org/article/why-does-nearly-every-culture-have-tradition-globa/>

along with the animals. As the flood ended, their boat landed on a high mountain from which they descended and repopulated the whole earth." That sounds familiar, right? Sounds like a good summary of the story we heard this morning.

Now, one question we can ask is why these stories are so ubiquitous, what does it mean that community after community tells the same story in almost the exact same way? Perhaps it points to a real historical event that many cultures experienced. This is an argument that creationists or biblical literalists often hold up to demonstrate that the flood was a literal, historical event, and if that question is important to you, you might find "proof" here. Or perhaps, it says something about humanity in general, that cultures need stories to tell us how our depravity brought us so close to annihilation, and how close we could get again if we go too far. Or perhaps flooding is just a really terrible experience that people have endured throughout all of civilization, and that has motivated people to write stories about what can feel like a randomly destructive event.

But perhaps the better thing to ask is not what makes these stories similar, but instead what sets them apart? What is it about the Noah story that is distinctive from 199 other fables?

And to answer that question, I think, we have to set aside our images of the Noah story as either an adorable assembly of creatures, two by two, or an aquatic genocide delivered by a wrathful God. Because what makes the Noah story distinctive, what enables us to reconcile these two expressions of awe, the beautiful and the terrible. It's not really the animals or the ark or the rain or the flood. Because Noah is all about the bow.

Now according to our flood scholar, the rainbow is only seen in 7% of these other stories, and what the rainbow symbolizes is varied. It might be a bridge to connect the earth to the heavens, or a belt worn by a god; in the Epic of Gilgamesh the god Ishtar lifts up her jeweled necklace into the sky and that becomes a rainbow. But only in Noah do we have the sense that the bow is a weapon, literally a bow like a bow and arrow, that God is setting aside in order to make a covenant with God's people. And that covenant, that intentional decision by God to enter into relationship and fellowship with us - with humanity *and* with all of creation, God says, "I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh." It's that commitment, that covenant, that ensures that beauty and love and grace will always triumph over chaos, war, and grief. It is that covenant with us that is embodied literally in Jesus Christ, Emmanuel, God with us.

As Dianne Bergant, an Old Testament theologian, explains: “In the ancient Near Eastern world, turbulent water was the symbol of the ultimate chaos... For this reason, the promise [of the rainbow carries]... far more than meteorological implications. It had something to do with control over chaos itself... The bow refers to the archery weapon of the divine warrior who was victorious over the forces of chaos...Hanging the bow in the sky would have been a sign that the war was over and all of creation could rest secure.”⁷

This bow, this relinquishing of a tool of opposition toward us in favor of a covenantal pact with us, this is what makes Noah’s narrative distinctive from all the other flood stories. This story doesn’t end with Noah’s family repopulating the earth, or with the animals marching *out* of the ark two by two, or even with the beauty of the rainbow itself. No, it ends with God’s promise to bring order to the chaos, to retire vengeance, and to be in loving, covenantal fellowship with creation. It is the connection, the fellowship, the relationship, the understanding that the distance between us does not actually exist, that we are all one, one creation, one community, in God and in Christ, this connection means that God cannot and will not be an agent of destruction ever again. That fills us with hope. That fills us with awe.

But that doesn’t mean that there won’t be pain, that the “awe”-ful side of “awe” is gone forever. We know that from the rest of Genesis after Noah, from the life and death of Jesus Christ, from our own lives of struggle. But the promise of the rainbow, the covenant of God with us, means that we are never alone in facing it. We are created to need God, and to need each other.

And it’s here that these two flip sides of awe actually come together. Dacher Keltner, our “awe” scholar, says that in his twenty years of research into awe, across cultures, ages, nations and religions, the one thing that most often elicits expressions of “awe” isn’t nature, or music, or science, or art. It’s not even close.

The thing that is most awe-inspiring to us, he says, is other people. Their courage, their kindness, strength, or overcoming. Around the world, we are most likely to feel awe when we are moved by what he calls *moral beauty*⁸, by the experience of seeing other people live out their connection to each other and to creation in fantastically vast ways.

And that’s brings us to this church, this fellowship, this community of faith, this home-coming, reunion Sunday. We can find awe at the beauty of God’s creation, and we can

⁷ Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 2

⁸ *Awe: The New Science of Everyday Wonder and How It Can Transform Your Life* by Dalton Keltner, 2023. p. 15

be awed by the horrors of it. We can appreciate the splendor of the rainbow, and we can be shocked at all the destruction that came before. But when we see moral beauty in each other, when we have fellowship like the early church – being together, caring for each other as a family, sharing meals, eating hotdogs while it rains, maybe – it's that expression of fellowship that fills us with awe.

Friends, there will be beauty and there will be horror. There will be death, and floods, and destruction, and there will be and love and joy and peace. And above it all there will be a rainbow, a promise of covenant, a fellowship between you and God, and you and all of us. May it be so, this day and always. Amen.