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Isaiah 6:1-8

Luke 5:1-11

February 10, 2019

AFTER AWE

Being filled with a sense of awe is an incredible human experience. Here are some encounters with the created order that have filled me with awe. Gazing at the progression of a solar or lunar eclipse, watching a meteor shower in a secluded place, witnessing a glorious sunset, being surprised by a brilliant double rainbow, seeing pictures of the earth or of other planets taken from space, soaking in the sights and sounds of a rushing waterfall, hearing the roar of a lion (from the other side of good fencing), seeing sea turtles hatching and then scampering down the beach to swim out into the ocean. Fantastic experiences! What do such awe-inspiring encounters with creation have to say about our Creator?

Here are some encounters with humanity that have filled me with awe. Seeing our two children being born (that actually ranks as number 1), hearing Nancy say our marital vows to God and me and listening to myself saying my vows to God and her, having hands laid upon me as I was getting prayed for when I was ordained, getting to baptize a child or an adult, hearing a congregation sing 'Silent Night' by candlelight, getting to say to a congregation on Easter, "He is risen," and hearing their joyous response, "He is risen indeed!", getting to see someone I have cared about take their last breath, celebrating the completion of a church construction project whether that is for ourselves or takes place on a mission trip serving others, seeing graduates I love turn their tassel, hearing of the discovery of a cure for a dreadful disease, hearing someone delighting in what they understand to be an answered prayer, hearing family members or friends express their love for me particularly when I really needed to hear it, getting to celebrate with someone who has reached an anniversary for sobriety, hearing someone exhibit the courage to say they were sorry for what they had done resulting in estranged parties reconciling, being part of a large crowd chanting for peace and justice, hearing a fine orchestra playing with full expression totally in sync, seeing a child who is differently abled exhibiting the courage to perform before others, getting a glimpse of the complexity

and beauty of the inner workings of the human mind and body, hearing someone say something to me that I understood to be, unbeknownst to them, a message from God. What do such awe-evoking experiences with humanity indicate about the God who came to us as a human?

We heard about Isaiah's experience of awe when he was worshiping in the temple and experienced a vision of being in God's very presence, where he saw angels who were worshiping alongside him. Their chant: "Holy, holy, holy" is the Hebrew language's strongest use of superlatives - that is, nothing is as holy as God! The entire temple trembled at the presence of God, as a result of divine holy power. Isaiah can only respond, "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts." He feels a sense of total inadequacy before God.

In our other scripture text, Simon Peter and his partners, James and John, had been fishing all night, with no success. But Jesus tells them to go back out into the deeper water to let down their nets once more for a catch. After sharing his doubts about the likely success of such a venture, Simon agrees to do so. I don't know if his response is an act of faith or whether he is simply going through the motions to prove the non-fisherman wrong, but the resulting catch is so huge that the weight of the fish is enough to almost sink two boats. I can imagine Simon crying out, "Oh my God!" and then looking to Jesus, and thinking, "Well, yes." Luke then tells us that Simon falls down before Jesus' knees saying, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" He too feels a sense of total inadequacy before his Lord.

These stories about Isaiah the prophet and Simon Peter the disciple are similar in a number of respects. There is an experience of the awesomeness of the Lord, one during a time of worship and one in an everyday work setting. That leads each of them to an expression of inadequacy or sinfulness. However, they are not sent away or abandoned. Instead, Isaiah has an experience of being forgiven and Simon is told that his thoughts about his unworthiness were the biggest fish tale of all. For each of them, there then comes a call to serve God.

Clearly, God could carry out the proclamation of good news without human help. God could dip a finger in a cloud and write a big “God loves you” in the sky and choose not to rely upon unreliable messengers like Isaiah and Simon Peter. God could simply snap divine fingers and heal the sick. The brokenness and violence of the world could be wiped out in the blink of an eye. But we have a God who chooses to operate in ways that engage people like us in the divine initiative of grace, love, and reconciliation. Our Holy God chooses to use imperfect vessels for holy purposes. Look back at the stories of Abraham and Sarah, Rebekah, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, and David – each one of them inadequate for the task God had for him or her. It is striking that the Bible does not turn these spiritual forebears into spiritual giants. We are clearly told of their sinfulness and inadequacies. And therefore, we see God’s awesome ability to make good use of less than stellar material. When God called each of them to a particular task, he or she was afraid or hesitant. Perhaps it is important that all who hear God’s call to serve realize that they/we are not up to the task. It is quite helpful for us to know we aren’t infallible. A sense of appropriate humility keeps us realizing that we must rely upon God and not solely upon ourselves to be able to carry out our mission.

Our credentials for being called by God have more to do with the One who sends and accompanies us, than with our own resume. Our confidence is in the Caller, not the call-ee. Yet, God doesn’t just call us and send us out on our own. We need divine accompaniment and God goes with us. We enter the various ministries to which God calls us as what Henri Nouwen called ‘wounded healers.’ Authentic call comes through the deep awareness of the human need of others and in spite of our own human need. A divine call comes when we have experienced God’s awesome nature and amazing mercy that prepare us to hear and to respond to the question, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?”

If you get a sense that God might want you singular or you plural to do something, and you don’t feel adequate to represent the One who sends you and you don’t feel up to the task, then you may be well on your way to meeting the requirements of the One who sends and accompanies us in ministry. God is less interested in our unworthiness than in our willingness. I hope you will make a list like I shared about some of your most awe-inspiring experiences that God has allowed you to

have. But I hope that you don't just stop with making a list. For a sense of awe can lead to a sense of personal inadequacy. Yet, God doesn't want for us to be left in such a sorry state, so God's further grace shows up in abundance. And part of that grace encounter is the invitation to be used in God's service. That then opens the way to another experience of awe as we get to be in partnership with an awesome God. So this is an invitation to awe, and a reminder about what may come next. Sometimes I end my sermons with an 'Amen.' Today, I'll end it with a 'Wow!'