

FILLED WITH AWE: FELLOWSHIP

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excerpts from Genesis 6-9

⁵ The Lord saw that humanity had become thoroughly evil on the earth and that every idea their minds thought up was always completely evil. ⁶ The Lord regretted making human beings on the earth, and he was heartbroken. ⁷ So the Lord said, “I will wipe off of the land the human race that I’ve created: from human beings to livestock to the crawling things to the birds in the skies, because I regret I ever made them.” ⁸ But as for Noah, the Lord approved of him.

⁹ These are Noah’s descendants. In his generation, Noah was a moral and exemplary man; he walked with God. ¹⁰ Noah had three sons: Shem, Ham, and Japheth... God said to Noah, “The end has come for all creatures, since they have filled the earth with violence. I am now about to destroy them along with the earth, ¹⁴ so make a wooden ark...

¹⁷ “I am now bringing the floodwaters over the earth to destroy everything under the sky that breathes. Everything on earth is about to take its last breath. ¹⁸ But I will set up my covenant with you. You will go into the ark together with your sons, your wife, and your sons’ wives. ¹⁹ From all living things—from all creatures—you are to bring a pair, male and female, into the ark with you to keep them alive... ²⁰

¹⁷ The flood remained on the earth for forty days. The waters rose, lifted the ark, and it rode high above the earth... Everything on dry land with life’s breath in its nostrils died. ²³ Only Noah and those with him in the ark were left. ²⁴ The waters rose over the earth for one hundred fifty days. At the end of one hundred fifty days the waters had abated, and in the seventh month, on the seventeenth day of the month, the ark came to rest on the mountains of Ararat... Noah removed the covering of the ark, and looked, and saw that the face of the ground was drying.

¹⁵ God spoke to Noah, ¹⁶ “Go out of the ark, you and your wife, your sons, and your sons’ wives with you. ¹⁷ Bring out with you all the animals of every kind—birds, livestock, everything crawling on the ground—so that they may populate the earth, be fertile, and multiply on the earth...” God said to Noah and to his sons with him, ⁹ “I am now setting up my covenant with you, with your descendants, ¹⁰ and with every living being with you—with the birds, with the large animals, and with all the animals of the earth, leaving the ark with you. ¹¹ I will set up my covenant with you so that never again will all life be cut off by floodwaters. There will never again be a flood to destroy the earth.”

¹² God said, “This is the symbol of the covenant that I am drawing up between me and you and every living thing with you, on behalf of every future generation. ¹³ I have placed my bow in the clouds; it will be the symbol of the covenant between me and the earth. ¹⁴

This is the word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

So as we heard last week, this phrase “filled with awe” comes not from the very beginning of the Bible, in Genesis, but much, much later, at the very beginning of the church, in the second chapter of Acts, where it says: “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.”

And 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 When we think about times when we have experienced awe, we might come up with lots of different things: awe can be something that happens rarely like a special meal, but 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.”
Awe examples?

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 professor of psychology at UC-Berkeley who studies all kinds of human emotions; he was actually a consultant on the Pixar movies *Inside Out* and *Inside Out 2*. He’s done a several studies about awe, and in one of them he asked participants 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

And we can point to any number of terrible things that meet the criteria for awe, events that are vast and require a new mental orientation. We were all just recently reminded of the horror of 9/11; probably all of us stared in awe as the Twin Towers collapsed; those events are certainly a vast experience and required new mental accommodation. Pearl Harbor, the Kennedy assassination, Columbine, October 7. Fires and mudslides and earthquakes and floods; shootings of 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 the connection between the “awesome” and the “awful,” it’s 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 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.

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

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>

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, 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 tend to think of the story of Noah in one of two ways: either it’s a children’s story, a story about remembering God’s love, of animals walking 2x2, 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 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 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.

So again we ask, how do we reconcile these two parts of awe, this story that is simultaneously a genocide and something we paint on the walls of the nursery? 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?

Getting there, I think, requires a different look at the Noah story, so very briefly, we’re going to go to Bible Land – this is a phrase from one of my former bosses who used to say that no one wants to know all the details about your study of scripture in your sermon. No one wants to go to Bible Land, just tell them what it means.

But he’s retired and not my boss anymore, so we’re going to take a very quick journey into Bible Land and think about what the authors of the book intended and what they wanted to name as “the defining moment in biblical history.”⁶

In a new book called *The Beginning of Difference*, Ted Heibert, who’s a retired guy who I do like to listen to, he challenges the way we think about the book of Genesis. He says, the authors of Genesis “understood their own identity and their relationship to others in terms of family relationships, and they used their own family experience, structures, and language to explain this relationship... They were members of a kinship society in which family was everything...As villages made up larger kinship groups, these groups made up tribes, and these tribes made up peoples, such as the people of Israel, all relationships were described in familial terms.”⁷

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

⁶ Heibert, Theodore. *The Beginning of Difference: Discovering Identity in God's Diverse World* (p. 47). Abingdon Press. Kindle Edition

⁷ Ibid (pp. 38-39)

And for most of us, if we know anything at all about the book Genesis, we think of Abraham as the “founding father” of the faith. This is why we say the Abrahamic traditions, referring to Jews, Christians and Muslims. We have this common father ancestor, out of whom flows the faith we profess today.

But Heibert says, if we center Abraham as the founding father, so to speak, then “Abraham’s family tree does not include members of the other religious communities of the world. So, while Abraham’s family includes three great religions...it excludes at the same time most of the world, the members of all other religions. It separates those inside the family of Abraham from those outside of it.”⁸

This isn’t great, and moreover, Heibert says, this is not what the authors of Genesis intended anyway. He walks us through the argument – and this one I am going to gloss over but if you want more, his book is listed online and it’s a really accessible read. But he says that “Israel’s own historians [in Genesis] actually believe that the flood is the decisive break in their own history, [just like other similar peoples believed. There are a ton of flood stories in other cultures from the same time and place as the story of Noah]. But this one in Genesis is unique because the authors of Genesis think of their flood hero Noah as the pivotal figure in their history and in their ancestry... And they consider Noah [not Abraham] to be their founding ancestor, who defines their own identity and who determines the shape and size of their family.”⁹

And who is that family? Well, in Genesis, “Noah’s three sons, Shem, Ham, and Japheth, become the three great branches from whom their own children branch out, and *from* whom eventually branch out to the ancestors of all the peoples of the world. Noah’s family tree is the world’s family tree. And the ancestors of Israel, including Abraham, descend from [one of Noah’s sons] Shem through a series of his descendants, and become one small branch in this great global family tree.

Heibert says, “Noah founds the grand family, in which Israel is a single lineage. So if we begin our lineage with Noah instead of Abraham, it honestly changes everything. The fundamental claim that the authors of Genesis want to make in the flood story is that all other peoples are their relatives.”

All other people are part of the family.

And I think this is where we see how this story of Noah enables us to reconcile the experiences, or to find a through line, in the midst of the awesome and the awful. Because Noah includes both the promise of God’s love in a rainbow, and the utter destruction that is possible in God’s world. Both of those things exist within the story of our creation. But neither one of those ideas is the reason to tell the story. What makes the Noah story distinctive, what it points to, why it’s there, it’s not the animals or the ark or the rain or the flood. Noah is all about the family.

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, one family of faith,

⁸ Ibid (p. 42)

⁹ Ibid (pp. 48-49)

in God and in Christ. Noah shows us that center of God's awesomeness is not the beautiful rainbow or the terrible flood. Both of those things can elicit awe from us, but the question is not, can we embrace the beautiful such that it overcomes the horrible?

No, the question is, again, what do we do? When we see a rainbow, or when we are stuck in the flood, what do we do? We reach out to each other. The story of Noah shows us that the awesome power of God is enacted in the love that we show the other members of our family. God has wiped out our divisions and recreated the world with friendship, fellowship, and family at the center. That fills us with hope. That fills us with awe.

And that makes total sense. 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, and it's not horrible tragedies or natural disasters. *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*¹⁰, by the experience of seeing other people live out their connection to each other and to creation in fantastically vast ways.

And that brings us to this fellowship, this community of faith, and what we take from the people of the early church. What did they do to inspire awe, where did they create this moral beauty? They treated other people as family, they shared what they had, they took care of each other, they hung out together, they welcomed people home. That is the kind of congregational fellowship that inspires awe.

We can find awe at the beauty of God's creation, and we can 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, sharing meals, having a party, caring for each other as a family – it's that expression of fellowship that fills us with the moral beauty of awe.

May it be so for us. Amen.

¹⁰ Awe: The New Science of Everyday Wonder and How It Can Transform Your Life by Dalton Keltner, 2023. p. 15