

A sermon preached on May 31, 2020 – Pentecost Sunday – based upon Acts 2:1-21 entitled, "We Need to Open Ourselves Up to the Experience of Awe in these Troubled Times"

These are challenging times. The Pandemic that has taken more than 100,000 lives, and now the murder of George Floyd by a police officer, the protests against racial injustice and the rioting tearing apart so many cities. I am at a loss on my own for what to say at such a time, but am grateful for the ancient wisdom contained in the story of Pentecost and the light it can shed. I want to consider the story through the lens of the distinctly human experience of what we call "awe."

Psychologists have been studying awe for about 15 years. Awe is by its nature unpredictable, and when we experience it we find words inadequate to describe what we're feeling. It varies in intensity, and the settings that can trigger an experience vary almost infinitely. Encounters with natural world can often evoke awe: watching a beautiful sunset, gazing from the top of a mountain, looking up into a star-filled night sky are common settings, but awe can also be found simply contemplating a single blade of grass.

Most people experience awe in witnessing the birth of a child. We can experience awe in listening to particularly beautiful music, or in a particularly moving worship service. An act of bravery – police officers, for instance risking their lives to save someone who is intent on committing suicide can be evoke awe for both the police officers and those who witness their heroism.

For some the contemplation of a profound idea can inspire awe, as can a particularly intimate conversation in which we listen to another reveal their story with raw honesty with all its pain and joy.

and so want to simply want to explore the story of Pentecost and what it has to tell us, and in particular to hear the story through the lens of an experience of awe.

Psychologists speak of two qualities that characterize awe. One they call "perceived vastness" – the humbling sense of becoming aware of something vastly greater than

oneself, and with it the a sense of interconnectedness. The other they refer to as the “need for accommodation” – that the experience brings an awareness that our usual perception of what is real is inadequate and needs to change. This can be as simple as the awareness that one needs to slow down and smell the roses.

Every astronaut who has travelled deep into outer space and gazed back at the beautiful blue-green orb that is their home has described a profound sense of awe that evokes tenderness and the recognition that we humans and all living beings are connected. They say that if somehow every human being could see what they are seeing all wars would cease.

Psychologist have conducted studies that demonstrate what I think we all know intuitively – that even a mild experience of awe can move people in the direction of greater compassion. In one study people were divided into two groups. One was given the assignment of staring at the side of a rather mundane building for sixty seconds. The other was asked to gaze up into a grove of elegant Eucalyptus trees. Afterwards someone “accidentally” dropped several pens. Those who contemplated the Eucalyptus trees helped pick up more pens.

As people of faith, we interpret the experience of awe as one in which we are drawing closer to the great mystery we refer to as God or the Holy Spirit. The Bible is full of stories of people experiencing awe. One of the most famous is the one in which Moses in the midst of his doing his daily job as a shepherd has his attention captured by a bush that appears to be burning but isn’t being consumed. He chooses to turn aside to investigate, and in doing so encounters the Living God whose nature is compassion – how God has heard the cry of the people suffering unjustly under the oppression of Pharaoh in Egypt and commissions Moses to be an instrument of their deliverance. The story of Pentecost is found in the second chapter of the book of Acts, and this morning I will be telling the story from memory. You can check it out for yourself to see what I’ve left out.

Acts tells the story of the early church with the primary agent being the Holy Spirit. It was written by the Gospel writer Luke who tells us that after Jesus’ crucifixion he rose

from the dead, appearing to the apostles for a period of time before ascending into heaven. Before his departure he gave the apostles the following instructions: "Wait in Jerusalem until you have received power from on high." What the heck does that mean? The apostles don't know for sure, but they do as they are told, spending the next forty days simply awaiting. They don't strategize regarding how to proceed in carrying out the ministry. They recognize that they are not in control and cannot force the hand of God to act. All they can do is slow themselves down and wait.

We cannot manufacture an experience of awe, but there are things we can do to open ourselves up to the possibility of awe, and the primary thing is slow ourselves down inwardly. We can seek to let go of our tight grip that seeks to be in control and set the agenda for what will occur.

We are told that the Apostles – perhaps 120 of them – were all gathered together in a house. Although experiences of awe are perhaps more commonly associated with moments of solitude sometimes being together with a crowd of others can evoke awe. For instance thousands of people at a rock concert singing along with a song the band is playing is often described as one of awe. Similarly, people with their hearts and minds open together before God in worship can induce awe and wonder.

Suddenly, strange things begin to happen in that room. A power is experienced – the "Holy Spirit." The experience can't be captured directly in words so Luke is compelled to rely on metaphors and similes. There is a sound *like* that of a "violent wind" coming from heaven. Something *like* tongues of fire appear, reminding us of the burning bush Moses witnessed.

The imagery clearly expresses that this power has the potential to be destructive, evoking fear along with awe. Sometimes old structures aren't life giving need to be brought down so that something new and life giving can take its place.

A "tongue of fire" hovers over each of the apostles, empowering these uneducated Galileans to speak in the varied languages of the world.

The Jewish festival of Pentecost was a thanksgiving for both the harvest and the gift of Torah, and it drew to the holy city of Jerusalem Jewish pilgrims from all over the world – people who spoke different languages. When the strange sounds start coming from the house like Moses turning aside to investigate the burning bush they are drawn to the house to investigate. The apostles spill out onto the streets and the pilgrims are awe struck to hear their own native languages being spoken. These “outsiders” suddenly feel welcomed into the circle. Quite mindful that they are witnessing a mystery beyond their understanding, they ask, “What does this mean?”

Curiously though they are some people who gather to watch and listen to what is going on who are not awestruck; who seem actively resistant to taking into the profound mystery they are witnessing. Cynically they dismiss the phenomenon as nothing more than drunken rabble rousers. “Move along, folks. There’s nothing here to pay attention to.”

Why would some people altogether miss – or resist – the experience of awe that the others are so powerfully drawn into? We can’t say for sure, but there is some suggestion that they are the “insiders” who live in Jerusalem year around – people who expect to hear their native tongue spoken. Consciously or unconsciously they perceive the threat that the Holy Spirit poses to their status as “insiders” and “gatekeepers” who hold the power of who gets to be a part of the circle.

Peter stands up humbly but powerfully and begins to address the very large crowd of people. It is important to briefly remember his backstory – how he had sought to follow Jesus, but his ego kept getting in the way. How the night before Jesus died he boasted of loving Jesus more than the other disciples and declared he would never abandon Jesus. That night with his three denials his ego-centered life came crashing down. Only with the appearance of Jesus at the resurrection did a new self rise from the ashes – a vessel ready to be filled with the Spirit of God.

Now, Peter is both humble and powerful, as led by the Spirit he boldly informs the crowd that these men are not drunk as some suppose. Rather, this is the fulfillment of a prophecy of Joel that spoke of how in the last days the Spirit would be poured out on

all flesh. Joel cast a vision of broad inclusion and empowerment, where old people would dream dreams and young people see visions, and both slaves and free people – a strict status division in that society – would be overcome as both would equally receive the gift of the Spirit.

If we were to read further in the chapter we would hear how after Peter shared the story of Jesus and his great love 3000 people decided that day to follow Jesus, creating a community of caring and compassion, characterized by everyone sharing all they have with one another, so that none were found to be in need.

So an extraordinary shared experience of awe moved people to express love and compassion.

I want to simply point out that experiences of awe are crucial for we human beings – that they show us the way of the prison cell of our egos and connect us to the larger whole of all living things. Such experiences open up the circle of God's love rather than close it down.

And when we live lives in which the experience of awe is a rarity at best, it diminishes our humanity and breeds hostility, leading us to divide the world into sharp categories of "my people" and "not my people."

I can say with some certainty that the police officer who murdered George Floyd was living a life devoid of the experience of awe – like the residents of Jerusalem who said before the holy mystery before them – "move along folks, there's nothing here to see. Just a bunch of drunks."

It seems to me that our society has been moving in a direction that makes it harder to access experiences of awe. Our lack of encounter with the natural world – a primary location of experiences of awe – is one contributor. The increased time we spend interfacing with technology is another. And in general, it is the increasingly hurried pace of our lives that perhaps is the largest barrier.

In certain ways the present pandemic has made it even more difficult to experience awe. Life stuck at home can often feel monotonous, tedious. We are cut off from one another and perhaps also from nature. And we can't gather together physically for a shared experience of worship.

But there are ways to work against this. When I force myself to leave behind my computer and go for walks in my beloved Old Troy Park I find myself escaping my cramped self into mild experiences of awe as a gaze upon the wonder of trees and other living beings.

The daily sessions I've been holding on Zoom have had their moments of awe as we share stories from our lives and come to know one another in new ways.

Here are two stories shared in just the past week. One woman described a time in her life when she was feeling overwhelmed by fear regarding a serious illness with which one of her children was struggling. At her work place there was a chapel near her office that she could go to on her lunch hour. There was a statue of Jesus with his arms outstretched. She described going into the chapel when she was feeling particularly overwhelmed and in her imagination placing her daughter into Jesus' arms, and as she did an extraordinary sense of peace mysteriously descended into her heart.

At another session a woman described how a few years back she had a mammogram which showed a spot that caught the attention of her doctor. There were two options laid out to her. The first was to have a biopsy and wait for the results, and if there was a malignancy to proceed to a lumpectomy. The other was to go directly to the lumpectomy. She said that she rarely remembered her dreams, but the night before she was to see her doctor, she had a dream in which a loud, authoritative voice said, "Get it out!" several times. When she woke up the immediate connection she had with the dream was to the decision she had to make with her doctor. She said she felt a little embarrassed to tell the doctor what she had heard in the dream and what it meant to her, but she did, asking to proceed directly to the lumpectomy. The doctor was willing but said that it was highly unlikely, given her history, that she had cancer.

Nonetheless, the lumpectomy was done and when the tissue was tested it indicated that yes, it had been cancer.

Such stories suggest that our notions of what is rational and reasonable can not always contain the mystery of how the Holy Spirit is at work in our lives.

And this gives us hope in the present time of crisis.

One of the most basic things we can do is to try and open up to learning about the experience of people who come from quite different backgrounds as ours. Sometimes technology can be an instrument of awe. Darryl shared an essay he had found online written by a African American man describing what it felt like to grow up black in America – how every day there was the sense of white people looking at him suspiciously – of actual encounters with police when he was viewed as a suspect in a crime merely because of his skin color. There was a feeling of awe for Darryl – and myself – as I momentarily got out of myself to imagine the experience of life of someone encountering life without my privileges.

In a similar way I think it could be an awe-inspiring experience to read an essay by a police officer describing what it is like night after night to patrol a city's streets.

This is a time that calls for deep listening – and in doing so there is the opportunity to experience awe – and recognition that there is so little we understand and the Holy Spirit is at work in this present chaos to bring about new life – the inclusion and empowerment of all God's children.