

“Thirsting for Awe”

Psalm 65

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Here’s the challenge of preaching on what it means to thirst for awe: you can’t talk your way into awe. Awe, or wonder, is something that is best experienced, not described. Dictionary definitions of words like awe and wonder do little to bring them to life. Awe is meant to slow us down, soak up words or sights or sounds and allow them to wash over us and slow us down - to notice something new or to let ourselves be changed by them. Many of the Psalms in the Bible are poems of awe about an awe-inspiring God but they are the section we tend to skip over the most, favoring stories with a beginning, middle and end with concrete actions and humans at the center. Psalms feel too abstract when we rush through them rather than unpack them line by line or read them slowly and allow ourselves to evoke the images that they describe.

Similarly, awe is an integral part of our faith lives but it often gets set aside. When we have one prayer, we are more inclined to lean toward gratitude or if we are in need of something we rely on “Help me God.” We orient our prayerful longings toward justice and peace. And those are important - but so is awe. Awe gives us an energy and imagination that prepares us to do the work of justice and peace. Awe is what we are asking God for when we start to consider our lives as more than survival, when we start to imagine what it means to thrive.

One way of understanding awe is thinking of our daily lives is in terms of output and input. Our output is the work we do, the tasks we undertake. I get ready in the morning, I prepare food for myself throughout the day, I go to work and answer emails and produce ideas and take meetings. I call my mom. I play with my dog and feed my cats. That is all output. It’s what I am

putting out into the world. That tends to be where I find my worth. I believe there is value in my work, I believe how I take care of myself and my pets and the people around me is a reflection of who I am so I put a high value on my output. It is the parts of my day and weeks that feel most nonnegotiable.

Input are the things I take in that change my perspective, that fill my spirit, that make me a more interesting person, a person who feels more alive. Input are things like going for a walk in my neighborhood and noticing my surroundings, meeting a friend for coffee and listening to their stories, going to a museum or watching a movie that teaches me about someone else's experience, it can be spending time sewing or taking my kayak out on a lake or reading an interesting book. Input leads to awe. It is also the easiest thing to cut out because it feels optional or frivolous at times. We don't stake our worth and meaning on the input we receive - it's all about our output. When we get stressed and burned out, we eliminate those various inputs because the output that people are asking from us or we are asking from ourselves feels too overwhelming and consuming. The thing is, the input we receive leads us toward awe which leads us towards growth, towards renewal, toward remembering why it is we are toiling away with all of our output to begin with. Having a strong output is dependent on being offset by steady input - both carry value.

Output is like working hard on a thousand piece or five hundred piece puzzle, taking hours to match up every piece and slowly putting them together. Input is when you pause to look at the completed puzzle you have created, marvel at the work that went into it, noticing the different details in the image and wondering at the artist who created it. When we finish the puzzle, we might be so tired it is tempting to crumple it up and put it back in the box, or walk away and let someone else admire it. But when we leave time for the pausing, the noticing, the

marveling - we are more likely to pull out another puzzle at a later time. We are more likely to find joy in that particular kind of output because it is balanced by the input of joy at the end.

A world that tells us we are only as valuable as our work leaves us thirsting for awe. Being lost in the wilderness can feel like being consumed by burnout or anxiety - by looking up and out into the world and only seeing caution signs instead of an invitation to linger, to go deeper, to dive in. Awe invites us to make meaning in the world around us - to look at and underneath and inside something - to wonder how it came to be.

Awe invites us to look at a puddle of water and imagine something bigger - where did it come from, is it connected to the rainfall, did it fall from the same cloud that watered my garden or refilled the Red Cedar River, will it be a micro-ecosystem for worms and bugs or will it be a source of play for a child or a dog or maybe even me if I let myself stomp through it when no one is looking. Awe pushes us to sit with mystery and the unknown, to imagine beyond the limits of what we know for certain into something bigger.

For the Psalmist, our sacred poets, God is awe. Their poetry takes the wonder of the natural world and imagines God the Creator as playing a role in every part of it.

God silences the roaring of the seas.

God silence the roaring of their waves, silences the tumult of the people.

God enriches the earth by watering it.

God is a river, full of water, using that water to preparing grain for us.

God waters the furrows of the earth, settling into its ridges, softening with showers.

In this way, awe becomes about responding to God. Noticing God at work in the world - noticing the systems of beauty across nature both that we can see and at a microscopic level that are forming and reforming constantly. Awe is responding to the evidence of God in our midst - to

bearing witness to God's creation and then responding to it. So we witness God at work in our neighborhoods, in our homes, in our ecosystems. Our response might be an exclamation "Wow!" when something amazes us. Our response might be to add to creation - a moving painting that inspires a poem, a poem that inspires a play, a play that inspires a conversation that connects two friends. Awe is responding to the evidence of God in the world around us and in doing so, we become a part of the beauty, apart of the wonder, apart of the systems of creation around us. To do this, we first must notice - we must seek out the water fountains and riversides that quench our thirst for awe.

In Michigan we have a special appreciation for the connection between awe and water. We are surrounded by Great Lakes and even more smaller, less great but still beautiful bodies of water. We pilgrimage to them in the summer. We swim in them and canoe on them and fish from them. In the winter, when water freezes, we are still surrounded by it - even today it surrounds us. So instead of resisting it we put on our skies and our snowshoes. We find ways to fish through the ice. We skate across the frozen lakes. In Michigan we have a cultural understanding of the power of water and the way it can restore us - not just physically, but spiritually.

And being in Central Michigan, we understand the paradox that even as we live in the state with the highest percentage of water - 41% of Michigan is covered in water - we are in the most landlocked part of the state. We have to be the most intentional in seeking it out. If we want to experience a Great Lake it's not just a morning trip but it's a long day trip or a weekend away. If we want lakes we have a few nice ones, but we look with envy on our neighbors who have a lake for every neighborhood or lakes so big they would swallow up our towns so we drive and we seek out those lakes and rivers that replenish us, that move us to awe.

Ann Lamott, in her book on prayer called, "Help, Thanks, Wow," has this to say on the matter:

Let's think of reverence as awe, as presence in and openness to the world... Try walking around with a child who's going, "Wow, wow! Look at that dirty dog! Look at that burned-down house! Look at that red sky! And the child points, and you look, and you see, and you start going, "Wow! Look at that huge crazy hedge! Look at that teeny little baby! Look at the scary dark cloud! I think this is how we are supposed to be in the world – present and in awe."

It begins with present. In the wildness of Lent, how will we be present to God? Where will we seek out the holy in our daily lives? When will we set down our work to make space for mystery and wonder and awe? When will we stop our output long enough to receive new input? There is no lack of things to inspire us, to move us, to revive us - there is awe waiting to be discovered, to be noticed, to be witnessed. The question is: how will we be present? Will we satisfy our thirst and dip our toes in the water of awe? May it be so.