

Text: Luke 9: 28-36
Title: Awe-full
Date: 02.27.22
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You may remember that the University of Pennsylvania studied what kinds of articles get e-mailed the most frequently. For almost a year they checked the New York Times website every 15 minutes and analyzed thousands upon thousands of articles. They assessed controlling factors like the placement of the article on the screen or the time of day. They used algorithms to track emotional words and assess their relative positive or negative effects. They took thousands of sample articles and used independent readers to identify qualities like, “practical value” or “surprising.” They asked the question: Which stories do people want to share and why?

Now, granted, this was the New York Times so maybe the results were skewed by a certain kind of reader, but the researchers were surprised by what they discovered. They didn’t uncover a vast liberal conspiracy. They didn’t find that the titillating or the torrid was what people passed on. They didn’t find that the most popular articles were things like: “How your Diet Threatens your Marriage and why its Biden’s Fault.”

What they found was that readers wanted to share articles that inspired awe. The most common underlying theme to the articles that were forwarded was awe. They defined awe as “an emotion of self-transcendence, a feeling of admiration and elevation in the face of something greater than the self.” And, they used two criteria for an awe-inspiring story: its scale was large and it required some manner of “mental accommodation.” It required the reader to view the world in a different way. As the researchers wrote:

It involves the opening and broadening of the mind... Seeing the Grand Canyon, standing in front of a beautiful piece of art, hearing a grand theory or listening to a beautiful symphony may all inspire awe. So may the revelation of something profound and important in something you may have once seen as ordinary or routine, or seeing a causal connection between important things and seemingly remote causes.

What a wonderful discovery.

Oh sure, people still forward articles that are humorous, or to impress their friends with how hip or erudite they are, but the researchers suggest something loftier, something nobler, some more evangelical. Again, in their words:

Emotion in general leads to transmission, and awe is quite a strong emotion....If I’ve just read this story that changes the way I understand the world and myself, I want to talk to others about what it means. I want to proselytize and share the feeling of awe. If you read the article and feel the same emotion, it will bring us closer together.

The story of the transfiguration – forwarded by Matthew, Mark, and Luke – is a story of awe. I’m not sure that the intention of the gospel writer (or the rightful intention of a sermon) is to take this bizarre text and whittle it down to a clear point with a practical application. Rather,

there is something here that is mysterious, transcendent, luminous, and bigger than us. There is something here that is awe-full – that requires mental accommodation.

Consider...

Clearly the disciples were buffaloed.

First of all, they're drowsy. They went up the mountain to pray and they fell asleep.

When they wake, baffled and bewildered, they don't know what to do. The text reads that their sleep was heavy and hard to shake. Maybe as the disciples woke to three shiny men, they thought they were still dreaming. Peter starts blabbering away like a busybody, trying to do something helpful like build a campground, but bemused and befuddled, even he doesn't know what he's doing.

As one scholar puts it:

All that is missing is the cosmic hand, reaching down to give Peter a good “you-are-missing-the point” slap upside the head. One might imagine God's annoyance that Peter didn't have sense enough to remain silent at such a moment. If Moses was told he couldn't see God and live, perhaps Peter should have been told that he couldn't see God and talk so much.

What a wonderful scene.

What a scene full of mystery and awe.

Makes you want to forward it to others.

Dear friends, we all want moments of bright shining awe. There is a deep human desire for the luminous-in-breaking-of-God. We know a longing to be caught up in

something that is bigger than us,
something that causes us to reconfigure, grow,
enlarge our sense of self, world, and the Divine....

I've been to Israel twice. The first time I went wondering if “place mattered.” How are these stories rooted in historical reality? Are these stories just stories that communicate spiritual truths or is there historical detail that matters? When I voiced this question to my traveling companions a Baptist pastor told me that I “needed to get right with Jesus.”

But I didn't come away with very clear answers.

There are places where the details made unmistakable geographical/historical sense. And there are other stories with no certainty or evidence or historical integrity. Depending on your tour guide's theological, political, or religious slant different stories happened in different places. For example, there are two graves for Jesus.

There is a great deal of Luke that makes geographical sense. These last few weeks we've followed Jesus down from the rocky hills of Nazareth to the sloped shores of the Sea of Galilee and onto a plain for a sermon. This morning Jesus takes his disciples up a mountain....

However, there is no indication what mountain. The Gospel of Matthew has it as a “high mountain.” The Franciscans built a beautiful chapel atop Mount Tabor to commemorate

the transfiguration, but there's no evidence in the text or the historical record that they're right....

Our text is geographically uncertain, but theologically overstuffed.

The mountain in our story has been called "the Mount Rushmore of Heaven" because the Lawgiver, the Prophet, and the Messiah are all present. And, there are allusions to Moses on the mountain top – with light shining through faces, and God speaking in a cloud. There's a kind of high-level cabinet conversation about the departure of Jesus. And, the word for departure here is the same word used for exodus. They are talking about the glory of God as exodus....

exodus for the enslaved,
exodus from sin,
exodus from all that dehumanizes.
exodus from death.

The glory of God is on display and light is breaking out all over and the disciples are rubbing sleep out of their eyes and the transcendent God is unmistakably present.....

Awesome! (I don't say "awesome" very often.....)

But. The truth is, we don't get many moments like that. We live by a dappled light in a messy world. Most of us do without the benefit of moments of transfiguring light. On our best days we are simply doing the best we can with what we've got and who we are and we tend to get moments of muted transcendence.

The light of a morning sun over water,
the joy of a child running across a field of a freshly mowed grass,
the beauty of music that makes your hair stand-on-end and your eyes pool-up with water,
the silence of a sky of stars over a desert mountain.

We tend to get moments of muted transcendence – even in the image of God shining back at us in another person. We tend to get moments of muted transcendence. And yet as Adam Thomas notes:

Over the years, however, our luminosity tends to fade. Every inhospitable word spoken, every neighbor mistreated and every resource hoarded layers grime over our radiance. Every hand un-extended, every gift squandered and every road not taken leaves layers of apathetic dust. The world tells us that the radiant things out there are things we purchase. "When you wear the shiny stone or drive the shiny car, you too will shine." Too often we cede our light to the glossy detritus of the world and forget that we are the ones God made to shine.

So where then are the moments of awe? Where does transcendence tumble in?

If it's muted and muddled in creation and creature, where does God's glory break in? What requires mental accommodation on our part?

The testimony of scripture is that Jesus illumines the face of God.

If you want to see God look in the face of Jesus. If you want to hear God listen to voice of Jesus. If you want to see divinity it's pushing through the surface of Jesus. God is shining through his skin. We encounter God in that light. For, in Jesus, the image of God is not smudged, diluted, diminished, or defective, but clear, unmistakable, and self-authenticating. I don't know where else to look to see God as clearly.

And, if God is clearly illumined when Jesus' face is glowing, then God is just as clearly illumined, when Jesus looks over Jerusalem and weeps,

when Jesus teaches,

when Jesus breaks bread with friends,

when Jesus suffers on the cross,

when Jesus breaths his last.

Even there, glory breaks in. And its awe-full.

Dear friends, whether in church or classroom or funeral home or office cubicle or AA meeting or wedding party or lonely restless night.....

if you're looking for God,

if you want to encounter God,

if you long for awe – look to Jesus.

In the words of Fleming Rutledge:

(This is one of my favorite quotes. I go back to it often....)

Even as the preacher stands before you bent and crippled by sin like the all the rest of humanity, the message is that the light of redemption has dawned upon us all in the journey of the Son of God through death into life. It is true on the brilliant days but even more true on the cloudy ones when faith is tested and hope is nearly dead: the very glory of God shines in the face of Jesus of Nazareth. He dies and he shines for you.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.