

“They Were Overcome By Fear”

Matthew 17:1-9

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Throughout Scripture, in most cases, when we encounter the word ‘fear’ we can substitute the word ‘awe’ or ‘reverence.’

Occasionally, the Hebrew or Greek word translated as ‘fear’ means the kind of fear we associate with bullying or with a rattlesnake. But for the most part, the Biblical meaning of fear connotes the kind of jaw-dropping experience we associate with seeing beauty or encountering the Holy or witnessing something truly extraordinary. Artists and poets and musicians take us into the realm of awe. Farmers and fishermen and through-hikers take us into the realm of awe. Story tellers and lovers and deep-sea divers and midwives understand something of awe. In my view, no one is excluded from the realm of awe.

Matthew gives us a window on awe when he describes the Transfiguration. A handful of disciples have what we now describe as a mountain top experience. It is a mystical moment when time and space are suspended. Suddenly, they find themselves in the presence of Moses and Elijah. Jesus is there huddled with them. They hear the voice of God. They tremble. They are overcome with fear. That is, they are awed. Struck dumb. And then the moment passes. For them, it is like waking from a dream. They are left wondering, ‘was that real?’ ‘What does this mean?’

They head back down the mountain discussing this matter among themselves. Did you see what I saw? Did you hear what I heard? By the time they reach the bottom of the mountain, they have reached a consensus:

This Jesus they have been following has a unique relationship with God and they will do well to associate themselves with him. It doesn't say this in the text, but I picture Peter, James, and John grasping hands, like athletes in a huddle; looking each other in the eye; and knowing a bond now exists among them that will carry them into their unknown future.

It says, "They were overcome by fear." In my understanding of the Greek, they were overcome by awe. They weren't really out on a hike looking for awe. Awe came upon them; surprised them; caught them off-guard. I think that's the way it usually happens. I don't say: Let's go down to New Jersey to see our granddaughter and be awed by her smile. We go there. And it just happens. We witness what we could never have imagined. It doesn't matter that it's three hours down and three hours back on the Garden State Parkway. Time is suspended. I am awed by this child. I call her 'mitsikana.' She calls me Agogo. I see that my encounter with her changes me; makes me more hopeful, more alive, more open to other opportunities for awe.

I would say that awe takes us into the realm of the mystical. Awe takes us out of the realm where things can be measured and quantified and analyzed. Awe takes us into that dimension of life that is beyond knowing. It's like that place long-distance runners describe as 'the zone.' Dancers describe it as rising above the floor. People who meditate describe it as transcendence. I describe it as the place of wonder.

Jesus instructs the three disciples not to be talking about the Transfiguration until after the Resurrection. Perhaps he's afraid that the disciples won't be taken seriously, that they may be mocked if they go around telling what they've seen on the mountain top. Matthew doesn't explain Jesus' instruction to keep quiet about it.

I do know that I have had experiences of profound joy that I knew I wasn't ready to share right away; that some day I might, but not yet. I imagine we can all identify with that. We'll tell our story when the time is right.

It says in the text, "They fell to the ground and were overcome by fear." They fell to the ground! Not only do their jaws drop open; their knees buckle! This is an example of how the body and the spirit are connected. One has an impact on the other. I often tell people that I never leave home without a handkerchief because I fully expect something will touch my soul and I'll be brought to tears. Reading the Transfiguration story, I see I now need to also wear knee pads everyday! How exciting if everyday we were brought to our knees by awe.

This coming Wednesday is Ash Wednesday, the beginning of the Lenten journey. The 40 days of Lent honor the 40 days Jesus spent in the wilderness before launching his public ministry. In the wilderness, he is brought to his knees more than once. He is brought to his knees by the realization that God has a purpose for him, that God has a purpose for him that may cost him his life. There is no longer any doubt in his mind that he has a calling, and that he must pursue that calling; namely, to teach the world to love.

As a pastor, one of the most rewarding things is to watch members of our church find their calling. One becomes a nurse. One goes into teaching. One is an actuary. One becomes an attorney. One drives a school bus. One enters the ministry. Each time word finds its way back to me that a former Confirmation student has found his or her calling, I want to fall to my knees. I am awed each time.

During Lent this year, I'll be inviting us to reflect on our calling. I'll be inviting us to name what brings us to our knees, what inspires awe within our hearts. It's when we allow ourselves to be awed that we know we are alive. And when we allow ourselves to be awed abundantly, we know we are abundantly alive!

I brought my hiking boots to church this morning. My hiking boots are a sign that I am ready to go mountain climbing with Peter, James and John. I want to reach the summit. I want to open myself to the possibility that God has something new in mind for me, something new in mind for South Church! Let's all put our hiking boots on and maybe, just maybe, we'll all be overcome with fear. We'll all be awed by the presence of God. And thereby, we'll all be living in the greatest of hope! Amen.