



## TALES OF AWE

February 10, 2019, Fifth Sunday after Epiphany

Isaiah 6:1-8; Luke 5: 1-11

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A woman is walking down the street. Yesterday had been her last day of a brilliant and fruitful career. For decades her days had been filled with adrenaline and deadlines. She was used to snapping her fingers and having her staff respond in the moment. Every second counted if she was to be successful and she usually was successful. And now she had already done all her errands for the day and it was only 11 AM in the morning.

Whoever knew how endlessly a day could stretch out when it was not filled with a million split-second decisions to be made. What the heck was she going to do with all this time? She was not sure she even knew who she was, removed from being behind her big desk in her office. She felt some odd amalgam of wounded self-importance and purposeless ennui.

Lost in her thoughts she stepped off the curb to cross the street when suddenly she was roughly grabbed by the arm and pulled back. Being a New Yorker, she assumed the worst and spun around to face her assailant. She found herself inches from what appeared to be a homeless person as she heard the blaring horn of a bus that thundered behind her. The man in front of her said, "Watch where you are going lady." He started to walk away. As the confusion and fog lifted and she realized he had saved her she called after him, "Wait. Let me give you something." He turned around and with a toothy grin said, "I am fine lady, just heading to get some lunch." And he disappeared down the stairs into a church basement that was apparently serving lunch to all comers.



The woman stood there for a moment, frozen. A range of emotions coursed through her; an adrenaline rush of coming within a whisker of tragedy; thankfulness for the man who had snatched her from disaster; and a sense of elation that she was safe and sound. No, it was bigger than elation, it was euphoria. It was an overwhelming sense of pure joy, just for being alive. She was in awe of existence itself and for whoever had gifted her with this existence. She had always been fairly impressed with herself and her accomplishments but they did not seem quite as important in this moment. She was not much of a churchgoer but she found herself offering a prayer of thanksgiving to God; offering a prayer that did not come from a place of need or complaint, but of deep gratitude for absolutely everything in life. She realized it was more than she ever deserved.

She went home that day and could not shake the sense that each new moment was a gift she had received from that man on the street, or from God, or from somebody. When she got up the next morning she knew what she needed to do, even if she did not know why. She made her way back to those church steps and walked down them and offered to work a ladle, or clean the tables or whatever was needed. She was a little unsure if she would be welcomed or not. After all she had never done anything like this this before. But she was greeted warmly, handed a serving spoon and was soon in the thick of serving others.

Maybe she did it to run into the person who saved her to thank him. Maybe she did it because she felt there was a debt to be repaid. Maybe she did it because she needed something to do. Whatever the reason, she kept showing up day after day and soon her days were shaped by the rhythm of feeding others. Sometimes she would even offer the prayer of grace before the meal. She made friends with those she served beside and with those she served. Everything had somehow changed; her view of the world; her view of herself; her view of those around her.

Our two Scripture texts this morning tell this same story. Isaiah is a priest living in Judah at the end of one era and the beginning of another. The death of King Uzziah portends the end of a time of relative independence for the nation. The Assyrian empire is becoming an increasing threat. The way life used to be will just



not continue and Isaiah and his people are left to grapple with the immense change before them. Isaiah, as a priest, spends his days in the temple. Day after day he dutifully and faithfully performs the rituals that are prescribed. This day he is performing the rituals and worrying about what the future will hold for him and the nation. And then, the quiet emptiness of the temple was no more. All of a sudden there was not an inch of room in which to move or even a whisper of air to breathe. The presence of God was absolutely everywhere, filling everything, enveloping Isaiah. And his ears were filled with cries of angels, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts, the whole earth is full of God’s glory.” Isaiah was pinned against the wall, overcome, overwhelmed, overtaken, breathless in the presence of the holy.

Isaiah was in awe. In the face of such perfection, he is immediately aware of how less than perfect he is. Isaiah cries out announcing his imperfection. But he is not rejected for his lack of worthiness. He is touched by an angel of God, assuring him he had been made clean. And then he accepts God’s call to be a prophet, calling out “Here I am, send me.”

Simon, who we know as Peter, is a fisherman. He spends his days on the sea, fishing. But the past night there were no fish to be found. He is weary from a night of hard work and perhaps wondering how he will feed his family. Jesus, the man who had recently brought healing to his mother-in-law, comes on to his boat and teaches the crowd on the shore. He is pleased to have this healer in his boat. But then Jesus makes a strange request, “Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.” Peter thought to himself, “Jesus is a pretty compelling teacher and healer but what the heck does he know about fishing?” But out of respect for this man who healed and taught he set back out to sea.

The nets that had previously glided through the water effortlessly and fruitlessly were now heavily laden with fish. They seemed to come out of nowhere and everywhere. The catch was so much, it was too much. In all his days of fishing Peter had never seen anything like it. It was remarkable, no more than that, it was miraculous. Peter was in awe. He was in the presence of something and someone well beyond his understanding and he suddenly felt unworthy to be in such a place.



He falls at Jesus' feet, laying bare his imperfection. But Jesus does not send him away. Instead he announces to Peter that not only is he welcome in this holy space, but he has an important role to play in God's plans. He is being called to bring others into Jesus' transforming presence.

We are bankers, and teachers, lawyers, and artists, retired people and stay-at-home parents, and we do what we do every day. Walk the kids to school and go to the office, and go about the rhythm of our days. And in the midst of our daily routines there is the opportunity for moments of awe, some dramatic and some not so dramatic. There are opportunities for moments when we are overtaken by a sense of gratitude; moments when we recognize the beauty of existence itself; moments when we sense that we are in the very presence of God.

We are presented with the potential for these moments every day, but we often choose to brush by them because we allow ourselves to be consumed by our daily tasks. That woman saved from walking into traffic could have shaken off her surprise and never looked back. Isaiah could have been so busy engaged in his rituals that he did not look up to see the presence of God. Peter could have been so consumed by counting the haul of his tremendous catch of fish that he did not recognize who Jesus was.

Awe is a powerful thing, but also a delicate and potentially fleeting experience. It is easily paved over by our inherent assumption that the routine should rule our days; that our expectation should always be for the ordinary. But when we let a moment of awe linger; when we allow ourselves to recognize just how small we are in the presence of the vastness of this world and the glory of our Creator; we are given the gift of humility. And in our humility we can see God. We can recognize a God who has chosen each one of us. For we have indeed been chosen by God to serve a greater plan than perhaps we can comprehend. We have been created and chosen by the divine. Each of us has been given talents to serve in this world to bring healing to this world to further God's purposes in this world.



So, today, and tomorrow, and the day after that, watch closely for moments of awe. Not all of them will involve being saved from an oncoming bus, or choruses of angels, or being knee-deep in fish. But they will meet us where we are. Isaiah was met in the temple. Simon was met on the sea. For us, perhaps we are met in the boardroom, or at the kitchen table, or while waiting for flight at the airport. It may come from a quiet moment of introspection, or an unexpected blessing in a bustling day, or it may drop out of nowhere. But when these moments come, they are not to be squandered.

Allow yourself the freedom to not rush by them but rather revel in them. Listen carefully for how God may be calling you in those moments. Trust that the whisper of that call is indeed real and true and vital to who you truly are.

Each of us and all of us together are being invited on a wild and wondrous journey with our God. Let us not let our routines and preconceived notions prevent us from accepting the invitation. For if we allow ourselves the freedom to experience awe, we are in fact welcoming the transforming presence of God into our lives. We will never be the same. We just might find ourselves saying “Here I am, send me.”

*Thanks be to God. Amen.*