



REMEMBER WHAT YOU DON'T KNOW

May 7, 2017, Confirmation Sunday

Mark 4:35-41

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After the door, locked from the inside, was forced open, an elderly patriarch is found dead in his study. He has clearly been strangled. A Bible lays open by his lifeless body. A single sentence is underlined, “The wages of sin is death.” The only other people at the snowed-in country estate are the cook, the maid, an old army buddy, and the victim’s three adult children. Mystery. Whodunit? How? And why? Mysteries are compelling. They stoke our imagination. They feed our need to ponder and discover. They challenge us to uncover what is yet to be known.

Michael Yaconelli writes about the first time his nephew saw snow:

“His eyes stretched wide with astonishment, as though the only way to apprehend what he was seeing was for his eyes to become big enough to contain it all. He stood motionless, paralyzed. It was too much for a two year old...He twitched and jerked each time a snowflake landed on his face, feeling it tingle as it was transformed from hostile cold to friendly warmth, caressing his face with tiny droplets of water. Just behind his large eyes you could see sparks flying from the crosscurrents of millions of electric stimuli overwhelming the circuit breakers of his previously small world. His mind was a confusion of strange, conflicting realities: white, cold, floating, flying, tingling, electric, landing, touching, sparkling, melting—causing an overload so great, so overwhelming, he fell backward—a slow-motion landing in the billowy whiteness, the snow tenderly embracing him. He had given up trying to understand snow and had given in to experiencing snow. It was a moment of wonder.”¹



It was a moment of awe. Psychology Professor Barbara Fredrickson describes awe as an emotion experienced when an individual is “overwhelmed by greatness.”² Awe is when we are flooded by emotion because we have suddenly found ourselves in the midst of something so much greater than ourselves that it is beyond our comprehension. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel believed that awe, that “being overwhelmed by greatness” was being lost in our world, that “the awareness of grandeur and the sublime is all but gone from the modern mind.”³ And I believe he is correct about this concern. We allow ourselves to experience far too little mystery and awe these days.

Mystery is the mother of awe. When we are in the presence of something we cannot fully comprehend we have the opportunity to be transformed, to be overwhelmed by wonder. In our “let’s google it” world it seems as if there are fewer opportunities to experience awe.

The mass accumulation of facts we have at our fingertips these days is a remarkable gift. But this stack of facts can obscure deeper truths about our world and ourselves. By having some knowledge of the world we can be seduced into believing we have full understanding of the world.

The disciples find themselves in a similar situation in our text this morning, which Caroline read so beautifully. They had already been with Jesus for a while. They had seen him heal. They had heard him teach. They felt like they knew who he was. And then they found themselves on that boat at night and a storm blew up. In the darkness, in the midst of the storm, when the chaos of the sea comes crashing over the side, what we think we know is not always that clear. The disciples were frightened and confused as to why Jesus was not awake in the midst of this crisis.

But if they thought they were afraid in that moment they did not know what fear could look like. Jesus rises up, rebukes the wind, and commands the sea, “Peace! Be Still!” All became still and a whole new fear descended upon them. The



disciples' eyes were opened. They realized they were in the presence of someone, something beyond their comprehension. They were overwhelmed by greatness. They were stunned by the sublime power and grandeur in their midst. They were in awe of the saving power of God. Their only response to all that had occurred was a question, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?"

2017 Confirmands, welcome to adult membership at The Brick Presbyterian Church. You have spent this past year asking questions and learning together. Adam, and Arlean, and Ashley, and Sarah have sought to teach you what we believe and why we believe it. I know that you have learned a lot this year. We Presbyterians are known for our learning. We believe that the life of the mind is a significant and important element in the life of faith. We rightly believe in careful analysis of the biblical text, and well-reasoned theological arguments. The risk we face in our remarkable tradition is that in the midst of our quest for knowledge of God we make God too small by limiting who God is to merely what we believe we know about God. If we fall into this trap we have lost our way. If we believe that we have figured out who God is and what it means to be faithful we are very far from the truth.

As Michael Yaconelli puts it, *"Tamelessness is not an option. Take surprise out of faith and all that is left is dry and dead religion. Take away mystery from the Gospel and all that is left is frozen and petrified dogma. Lose your awe of God and you are left with an impotent Deity. Abandon astonishment and you are left with meaningless piety."*⁴ What is being described is the static and sleepy sort of faith that will be useless in those times of your life when it is dark and it feels as if chaos is threatening to overtake you. No matter how smart and prepared we all think we are, life will bring us times when none of the answers we have solve the challenges before us.

As we continue on this journey of faith together we must not lose sight of the inherent mystery in our midst. The fullness of who God is will ever be beyond our comprehension. And if we minimize God so we can claim to understand the divine we are not in relationship with God at all.



But if we allow ourselves to entertain the doubts and the questions; if we allow ourselves to recognize that none of us really knows what we are talking about when we talk about God; if we allow ourselves to lift our vision to the horizon beyond all that we have learned we can appreciate the great mystery before us; we can discover awe; we can recognize God's immense saving power; we can be overwhelmed by greatness. We have the opportunity to see that all of this that we do in our daily living and our life together as a church happens under a tremendous eternal canopy, and beside a God whose depths are unfathomable by mortal minds.

Emily Dickinson put it like this, "We both believe, and disbelieve, a hundred times an hour, which keeps believing nimble." So let us gather together and be the church, not to answer all our questions, not to dispel all our doubts, but that the mystery of the divine might cause us to stand in awe before our God.

About a decade ago it was August but it was chilly. There was nothing but darkness in the predawn hours as we sat atop Cadillac Mountain on Mount Desert Island off the coast of Maine. A group was gathered together, all bundled up, some in sleeping bags, against the brisk breeze coming off the Atlantic. We sat there and we waited and we watched. As we shivered in the darkness we were hoping for a glimpse of the sun rising over the ocean. They say the top of Cadillac Mountain is the first place you can see the sun rise in the United States.

After a while it seemed as if the sun would never come. I tried to check my watch but it was too dark to read the face of it. You could almost feel a little anxiety from all those present, as if perhaps the sun might not rise on this day. And then it happened, an almost imperceptible sliver of fledgling illumination, the slightest pulling back of the darkness from the horizon. And then the top of the sun rose out of the water, bright orange aflame against a backdrop of dark greens and blues. And this ragtag group of bundled-up people broke into spontaneous applause. We were joyful. We were overwhelmed by the greatness of the arrival of the light. We were filled with awe. And what had taken so long to arrive was suddenly upon



us as that entire circle of sun broke free from the horizon. The arrival of a new day was a miracle in our midst.

Now everybody on that mountaintop that morning knew that the earth revolves around the sun and in fact anybody can go online and look up the exact time the sun rises and is seen from that vantage point. There was absolutely nothing to be seen or explained that had not been done so before. But there was a greater knowledge to be found that day. Abraham Heschel puts it like this, “Awe is the beginning of wisdom.”⁵

May that be what we find in this time and place together. Whether we are 13, 33, 53, or 83, may we never stop asking the question, “Who then is this that even the wind and the sea obey him?” May we not be so solely concerned with understanding God that we lose the opportunity to experience God. Let us ponder the mystery and allow ourselves to be in awe.

Thanks be to God. Amen.



^{1,4} Yaconelli, Michael, *Dangerous Wonder*, Navpress, USA, 2003, p. 29

^{2,3,5} Nijhuis, Michelle, “Is Awe Really Good for You?” *The Atlantic*, September 22, 2016.