

**Grace Episcopal Church, Galena IL**  
**May 31, 2015 – Trinity Sunday**  
**Sermon by Rev. Gloria Hopewell, D.Min.**  
**Text: Isaiah 6: 1- 7**

Where has the awe gone? When did it disappear? Or did it? I mean real awe—a wonder or amazement in the presence of beauty or power. I don't mean the common use today, where everything is "awesome"—from your basic morning coffee to a Jonathan Toews' Stanley Cup play-off goals to—well, those were pretty awesome!

Yesterday, in spite of the rain and cloudiness, I drove through the western 2/3rds of North Central Illinois, not by the fastest route, but meandering along country roads past fields and forests. Typical mid-west—flat and very green, pretty but ordinary. But no mountains or oceans to take away my breath, make me want to stop and gaze. For a time, I wound along the banks of the Rock River, its waters high on the banks. And I thought about its power—both for the good of irrigation and recreation, and its potential for destruction when it overflows. Just off the to the northeast were the twin towers of the Byron nuclear reactors spewing smoke and providing power to keep us all on the electric grid. Again, power for good and for potential destruction. A little bit of awe, perhaps, on an ordinary Saturday afternoon.

Last week's New York Times featured an article by two professors of psychology who suggest that our culture is awe-deprived. We no longer spend enough time experiencing beauty and wonder, being out in nature or taking part in rituals and music and dance—things that make us aware of our smallness—that we are a part of something larger that transcends our separate lives. Their research seems to point toward evidence that experiencing awe makes us more generous and collaborative, less individualistic, and binds us to others. "Even brief experiences of awe," they say, "such as being amid beautiful tall trees, lead people to feel less narcissistic and entitled and more attuned to the common humanity people share with each other."

The prophet Isaiah no doubt felt awe—the kind of awe that produces fear and trembling—when he encountered God in the Temple. It was a place of smoke and seraphs, seemingly that inner sanctuary, its veil opened to reveal God on the throne. Imagine it, if you can—God’s robe billowing out to fill the entire Temple. The seraphs with their six wings and burning coals. This sanctuary was not the place where the people worshiped. They were not allowed in the Holy of Holies. It is the place where one high priest was selected to enter once each year on the Day of Atonement. It is said that a rope was tied to the priest’s leg. In the event he died in the sanctuary, no one else would need to enter. He could be pulled out by the rope. Yes, this was an awesome place and experience for Isaiah.

How often do we experience awe? Maybe in a soaring cathedral in Europe. Maybe cruising amongst icebergs in Alaska or the fjords of Scandinavia. But what about here in this place? The authors of the Times article include religious gatherings and worship among the activities that elicit awe and strengthen the bonds of community. Is that something that resonates with you at all?

Look around you. Look at the symbols in the windows and elsewhere. The candlelit altar where we will share the sacrament in a bit. The people seated around you. Smell the beeswax and the remaining scent of last week’s incense. Touch the smooth wood of the pews and imagine that they are the old ones where people sat for decades and decades just as we do today. Anticipate the taste of the bread on your tongue, the wine on your lips. And listen deeply. Just be present, with your whole self, present to the living God who speaks, the Holy Spirit who blows where she will. Do you hear it?

Sometimes I fear that we use too many words. Beautiful words, inspiring words sometimes, but we try too hard to figure things out, trying to make sense of the incomprehensible rather than just letting these things wash over us. This is so true of doctrines like the Holy Trinity that we celebrate today.

Through the centuries, people have tied themselves into knots trying to explain—first how to explain how it is that we worship the one God, but that God encompasses the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Creator, Redeemer, and Giver of Life. This had to be defended at one time from charges that Christians were not monotheists. Many, many metaphors were employed—some of them being declared heresies and causing folk to be excommunicated. It wasn’t hammered out

in a day, or even a year of Councils. It took a century or two. And though considered foundational doctrine, it is still imperfect. It is not “the thing itself” but only a window to the thing. A large picture window, perhaps, but a window just the same.

Our faith is one of paradox and mystery. And I vacillate. How much energy do we put into trying to make sense of it, trying to understand? And how much do we just sit in awe of the mystery and enjoy it? We are proud to say that as Episcopalians we do not “leave our brain at the door.” And that is a good thing. Blind, unquestioning adherence is not our way. We point to our three-legged stool of revelation: scripture, tradition, and reason. But in the face of these mysteries, the leg of reason gets a bit wobbly. In these moments, our doctrines, our symbols, our rich liturgy all come together to enfold us, to reveal the wonder of God that our human intelligence cannot fully grasp. Only our hearts and our souls are up to the task.

I was going to include some words of a hymn, but when I looked it up, I realized that I was remembering it incorrectly. From “Holy, Holy, Holy” that the choir will sing shortly, I recalled the line as “early in the morning, our souls will rise to thee.” The actual word is “songs,” “our songs will rise to thee.” I like “souls” better. It signifies to me that presence of our whole selves, turning to our God, opening our souls first thing each day for God to fill us with wisdom, love, compassion.

The U Cal researchers end their article with a suggestion about reversing our societal trend of self-focus and disconnection: “We suggest that people insist on experiencing more everyday awe, to actively seek out what gives them goose bumps, be it in looking at trees, night skies, patterns of wind on water or the quotidian nobility of others....All of us will be better off for it.” And I, of course, would add worship. Come, Holy Spirit.

Amen.