

May 31, 2015
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Isaiah 6:1-8

Being Awe-ful

Have you seen that commercial with the animal friends? There's a chimpanzee putting his arms around a dog, a sheep and an elephant sitting next to each other companionably digging, a cockatoo using a claw to pick out a piece of pasta from a pot and give it to a dog. I saw this video first as a TV commercial (Yes, these adorable animals are somehow selling something, though you may have forgotten what. Who remembers? ...Android phones), but I watched it again on youtube as part of my research for this sermon. Some of the online comments describe it as the cutest thing on the internet, and I just might agree, except by doing so invites you to send me your preferred favorite picture of squirrels kissing. (Actually, if you have such a photo, send it to me, my dear old neighbor in Hyde Park would love it.) Something about those pictures are universally popular; they prompt a collective response. You see them and you say: Awww.

I'm interested in a different kind of awe today, the awe that Isaiah felt, the awe described in the first reading. What Isaiah sees, way back in the year King Uzziah died—note the particularity—what Isaiah's sees includes animals, too, but they are not cute, they are strange animals called seraphs. They have six wings, a pair of which cover their eyes and another pair their feet. They hold not a piece of pasta, but a hot coal that touches Isaiah on the lips, and they call out with a mixture of fear and adoration, "Holy, Holy, Holy..."

Seeing all this prompts a response from Isaiah, a response which, like that song of the seraphs, includes both fear and adoration: "Woe is me," Isaiah says, "Woe is me, I am a person of unclean lips." That's the fear, but there's also this: "Here am I." These eight verses of Isaiah's encounter with God, this video clip, these brief words from our sponsor, as it were, would make for a strange commercial. It would be hard to figure out what it's selling. But it's not a commercial, it's a vision. And as a vision, it reveals something unseen, and still un-seeable. Visions are about, visions point to the bigger picture, but they give only a part of picture. They show the edge, but it fills up the entire screen. Or to use Isaiah's metaphor, the hem of God's robe fills the entire Temple.

Isaiah has a vision, and it is a strange vision—you have to wonder about the particular smell of all that smoke—and yet it is also a touchingly personal vision. Isaiah has an experience of the incomprehensible and the essential, the unknowable and the necessary. Isaiah encounters that something more, that is out there, that can be felt, in here, that something that gives sense and completion to what we know, but which we can only sense and know incompletely. Isaiah experiences awe, the awe that is missing from so much of our lives.

Seraphs may be short supply, here in the year 2015. Awe, elusive in description, may also be elusive in experience, so says an article I read recently about the brain and the experience of awe. A team of researchers, professors of psychology and social behavior, conducted a series of studies, asking people how much awe they experienced on a regular basis. The researchers examined people's self-reports, and then also explored correlations with behaviors and beliefs. The researches state that a case could be made that our culture is awe-deprived. Adults spend more and more time working and commuting and less time outdoors and with other people. Attendance at music concerts, live theater, and museums has dropped over the years, while schools, pressured by budgets and testing requirements, drop music and art. Children have less free time, less time outdoors, less opportunities for unbounded exploration, and more time on screens, no doubt watching cute animal videos with the rest of us...

This lack of awe is awful, the researchers say, awful for the good of society, of our world,

for awe, they term the “ultimate collective emotion.” They say it’s the feeling that motivates people to do things that enhance the greater good. The researchers note that in their studies, in addition to asking people about their experience of awe, they asked follow-up questions, or asked people to respond to certain situations, after having an awe-filled experience. It turns out that the greater a person’s experience of awe, the more likely they were to be generous, and helpful, and altruistic. They were more apt to be connected to, and caring of and for others. Awe, the article says, helps bind people together, motivates them to act in collaborative ways, shifts our focus from narrow self-interest to something bigger than ourselves.

That’s what Isaiah experienced. That’s what Isaiah saw. Isaiah’s vision shifts his attention from narrow self-interest, beginning with an awareness of his own narrowness, selfishness. “Woe is me!” he says, “I am a person of unclean lips.” Isaiah recognizes his smallness—his smallness, both in the sense of his pettiness, his unfitness, his sinfulness—and his smallness in the sense of his minuteness, his relative insignificance. Relative to that which is greater than anything, relative to that glimpse of the everything that cannot fit in the screen or Temple let alone in one’s mind, Isaiah knows that he’s just a speck. We’re all just specks.

Awe is to know that, and to also know that God knows you. God chooses to be revealed to you. God created you to know that, see that. God created you to experience awe. You don’t have to smoke anything. You may not see seraphs, but you can look up into the sky, see the clouds moving, the storm coming, the rain pouring, the lightning flashing, the trees shaking. You may not see seraphs, but you can look out upon the waters, whether at the great lake in this city of ours, or at a smaller body of water at a cabin or camp, or still yet at our continent’s edges, as you stand along an ocean shore, look out. Look out upon the waters; the voice of the Lord is upon them, moving, speaking. Listen for it, in the temple all are crying, Glory! You may not see seraphs, but you can still join them in song, as we do in this temple, at this table. We sing the seraph’s song, “Holy, Holy, Holy Lord,” and then we take a piece—not a piece of coal, but a piece of bread, and touch it to our lips, and we too are made clean.

As we share the Lord’s Supper, we get a glimpse of the vastness of God’s vision, and the honor of being part of it. At holy communion, there’s the awe of seeing someone come forward to the rail, when their life is a struggle. Still they come. There’s the awe of seeing a new face, or an old friend, or a prayed-for sister, or a prodigal son. There’s the awe of a child, head down for blessing, or hands out for bread. There’s the awe of being connected, in this holy sacrament, to God’s children of every time and place, of being connected to, becoming the body of Christ.

Awe is the awareness of that which is greater than you—and that that greater than you includes you, the particular person that you are. In Jesus, God became a particular person at a particular time, who wore a robe, the hem of which could be touched. There’s a gospel story about that, about how just touching the hem of Jesus’ robe granted healing. In Jesus, God became particular for the good of the entire world. There’s a gospel verse about that, about how God so loved the world, that he sent his beloved son...not to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

Awe is the ultimate collective emotion, because having known God, or rather, God having made himself known to us, we are invited into God’s vision. God asks us to be part of it. Awe prompts our response: “Here am I.” Awe allows, awe encourages, awe empowers us to love others, to love creation, and even to love ourselves, woeful creatures though we can be. God has a vision for us and for the world, a vision described in this way in another chapter of Isaiah. “The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together. And a little child shall lead them.” When the child was born unto us, there was no room in the inn, and they laid him in a manger, in a stable, the place of animals. They say the beasts gentled, in adoration, and awe. So also we.