

2nd Sunday of Lent

Sermon 3.1.15

Scripture: Genesis

Mark 9:2-9

Phil Zuckerman is a sociologist aiming to give awe its due.

I don't imagine we here would have it any other way. I don't imagine any here would prefer that awe be ignored or discounted. "It's just a chemical blip in the brain." "It's a dopamine burst." No, I imagine we're all fans of awe, appreciators of its reality and hold on us.

As fundamental to the human experience—to human creativity and curiosity; as perhaps one of the qualities and capabilities that makes us human: awe. Who wouldn't uphold this as an experience worthy of further exploration and appreciation?

Come to think of it, one of my favorite characters in one of my favorite pieces of contemporary literature, or theater, or performance art, or whatever it is, is Trudy, a homeless woman in Lily Tomlin's one-woman show *The Search for Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe*, written by Tomlin's now-wife Jane Wagner. Trudy wanders New York, speaking to what she calls her "space chums," showing them around while they visit from another planet or plane.

One night, under the dim stars of the city sky, she suddenly finds herself in awe.

But it doesn't stop there: it goes on: "Then I became even more awestruck at the thought that I was, in some small way, a part of that which I was in awe about. And this feeling went on and on and on... My space chums got a word for it: awe-infinity. Because at the point you can comprehend how incomprehensible it all is, you're about as smart as you need to be... And I felt so good inside and my heart so full, I decided I would set aside time each day to do awe-robics. Because at the moment you are most in awe of all there is about life that you don't understand, you are closer to understanding it all than at any other time."

Right? Awe as gateway to insight, to wisdom: what calls us to worship (quite literally this morning, in the Call to Worship): I'm not about to call that into question.

But Zuckerman's intention around his experiences of awe goes astray, to my mind, when he speaks of "aweism." He does so in his recent book *Living the Secular*

Life: New Answers to Old Questions, a book I haven't read and (to be honest) don't intend to. I learned of it, and a bit of its contents, from an article on Religious News Service by religion reporter Kimberly Winston. She seems to give it a fair hearing.

According to her, Zuckerman, who counts himself among “secularists”—these being, as he lists them, atheists, humanists, agnostics, and other self-described “nones”—aims to explain how such people “raise their children, decide right from wrong, and build communities without the benefit of religion.” I'm not sure to whom he means to explain it. To religious people who perhaps assume the irreligious are without moral orientation? Or to more hardline secularists who reject any talk or thought of transcendence? I don't know who his audience is, and perhaps he doesn't either. This is a sort of scholarly memoir.

Whatever. According to Zuckerman, secularists might live and socialize and decide by this guiding experience: awe, which Winston summarizes, perhaps quoting Zuckerman, as a “nonreligious impulse you can't explain.”

Frankly, this is a description I think so vague it's nearly meaningless. A nonreligious impulse you can't explain. But pressing the issue, I wonder what's meant by “can't.” Is it that you aren't able to explain it or that you aren't allowed to?

Remember: hardline ideologues come from all camps.

And consider: the editor of *Free Inquiry*, Tom Flynn, rejects awe almost altogether, criticizing Zuckerman's project because awe has a referent, a source back to which awe is offered. He writes in rejection of such a thing: “To the degree that reverence is understood transitively — as denoting awe, veneration, or respect toward something beyond”— to that same degree it must be rejected. “The domain of everyday experience can't be transcended,” he claims. “There is nothing above it, nothing beyond or over it, nothing to revere ... only reality.” Of course, what qualifies in his mind as reality he doesn't say.

And again, I wonder what's meant by “can't” here—because, of course, everyday experience *can* be transcended. People do it all the time: in prayer and meditation; with music—listening to it, performing it; in relationships—marriages, parenthood, life-long commitments come what may; in physical activity and challenges. A hiker reaches the top of Mount Washington: I doubt he'd merely explain

the experience as a long series of footsteps, though that certainly is the “real” “everyday experience” just embarked upon. So, by saying that “everyday experience *can’t* be transcended,” our “freely inquiring” Flynn must mean that he won’t allow for such a thing.

So much for free inquiry.

I remember once a little boy at a playground took some woodchips and threw them toward other children playing. His mother, meaning to discipline him, told him, “You can’t do that.” Looking puzzled at her, he glanced down to the wood chips lining the playground, picked up another handful, threw them, and then looked at her as if to show, “Yes, I can! And you could, too, if you tried.”

“You can’t explain this impulse, awe.”

“Well, maybe you could if you tried.”

But back Zuckerman. As for how he describes this impulse: it’s a “profound, overflowing feeling,” which he knows best in fleeting moments: “playing on the beach with his young daughter, eating grapes from his grandparents’ backyard, sledding in the dark of a January night, dancing with abandon at a favorite concert.”

As for aweism, this is “is the belief that existence is ultimately a beautiful mystery” and has the capacity to “inspire deep feelings of joy, poignancy and sublime awe.” Our friend Trudy, homeless, hearing voices, wandering New York City, might say the same; and, since I go with her, I would agree.

Zuckerman continues, though, and now defensively, as if anticipating the attack from his harder-line secularists: “Aweism ... though steeped in existential wonder and soulful appreciation, is still very much grounded in this world. It is akin to what philosopher Robert Solomon dubs a ‘naturalized’ spirituality: a non-religious, non-theological, non-doctrinal orientation that is ‘right here, in our lives and in our world, not elsewhere.’”

As to aweism’s end, it’s goal, Zuckerman explains, “An aweist just feels awe from time to time, appreciates it, owns it, relishes it, and then carries on.”

And concluding about aweism, Zuckerman assures any who would worry about a religious agenda being set upon them: “My awe stops there.” He’s not trying to *do*

anything with his awe. He's not trying to get anyone to join him in awe. He just feels it, notices it, keeps it to himself, stops there.

Huh.

Trudy might call it, "Awe interruptus."

Peter might say, "It is good for us to be here. Let us make three dwellings."

Peter, Jesus' near constant companion; Peter, the disciple who, only verses earlier, confessed that Jesus isn't merely a reiteration of the ancient prophet Elijah or John the Baptizer redux, but is the Christ, something unique and one-time in the world, the anointed one of God; Peter, the rock on whom Jesus would establish his Church, which is to say the foundation upon which would be built up a beloved community and community of belovedness: Peter, right here on this mountaintop, amidst this private, awesome experience, did in effect say, "Let's stay here, build three little temples, and never go anywhere else, never go down the mountain, back to the people, back to work. It's good for us to be here. Let's stay here."

And, why not? He'd been personally invited to this experience, after all. Jesus had taken him, and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves; and Jesus was transfigured before them, his clothes becoming dazzling white like no laundress could make them; and there appeared also Elijah and Moses, which is to say representatives of the Prophets and the Law. Jesus had allowed these three disciples in and no others, as if Peter and James and John were special somehow, uniquely qualified to witness this.

What qualifications Peter had, he perhaps demonstrated, or even developed, six days prior to this, when Jesus was walking with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi. On the way, Jesus asked them, "Who do people say that I am?" and they answered what they must have heard: "Elijah or John the Baptizer or one of the prophets." Jesus then asked, "But who do you say that I am?" and Peter answered, "You are the Messiah."

Of course, what he might have meant by this is an open question. To say someone is the Messiah is to say that one is the anointed one of God. But what is meant by that is hardly more clear. Really, it just begs questions: anointed for what? anointed as what? Speaking very concretely, to be anointed is to have one's head

smear with oil, which has the aim or effect of setting one apart from others, setting one to some special status and task. So, clearly, to be anointed is to be special; and so, clearly, to be the anointed one of God is to be super-special. But what does this specialness lead to? What does it mean?

Peter assumed it meant this: getting stay on the mountaintop, getting to glimmer and glow, getting to pass time with the superstars of their tradition. It's a vaulted position, this being the Messiah of God.

But God had something else in mind, which Jesus also had in mind, these two being of the same mind. This is what God said, following the Transfiguration and following Peter's assertion that they should stay on that mountaintop, in effect, "No."

"This is my Son the Beloved. Listen to him."

I have to say, I love this command: "Listen to him." It's something I've said to the children when they're running roughshod over their father, and something he's said when they're running roughshod over me. "Listen to your mother!" "Listen to your father!" It's by way of saying, we stand together. It's by way of affirming someone's authority by lending them yours. God saying of Jesus to Peter, "Listen to him," calls Peter back from running roughshod over Jesus.

But what, we might wonder, was Peter exactly to listen to? What, Peter might have wondered, had Jesus said that he was to listen to?

As it happens, the last thing Jesus is said to have said is that the Son of Man, must undergo great suffering, and must be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes, and must be killed, and three days later will rise again.

Perhaps it's this that Peter was to listen to, to hear.

He didn't at first. He didn't when Jesus first said this, six days earlier, while walking among the villages of Caesarea Philippi. An exchange that came just following Peter's confession that Jesus is the Christ, the anointed one of God; an exchange just following Peter's having got it right, now Peter got it terribly wrong.

Jesus said he must undergo great suffering, he must be rejected by the elders, and must be killed; and three days later he will rise again. And Peter rebuked Jesus,

in the other synoptic gospels remembered even to have said to Jesus, “God forbid it, Lord. This must never happen to you!”

Because, really, why suffering? Why submission to death? Why not resistance of this, refusal, avoidance? Why not fight the powers-that-be so to preserve his life? Yeah, why *not* self-preservation? Why *not* self-defense? He had so much work yet to do. He had so much good still to do. He could hardly do that while hanging from a cross, right?

And, really, if anyone could self-preserve through the gauntlet of imperial power, and do it justified, it would surely be Jesus, the anointed one of God, the Son of Man, the beloved Son of God.

Right?

But at this, Jesus then rebuked Peter: “Get behind me, Satan (which is to say adversary or stumbling block)! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.” And at that he turned then to the crowd, perhaps speaking over the heads of the disciples or perhaps still also addressing the disciples (maybe he hadn’t given up on them entirely); and he said, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves, and take up their cross, and follow me;” and he explained, “For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake and for the sake of the gospel will save it.”

None of this apparently stayed with Peter. Most of this apparently slid right off him, for only days later he was right back to aweism—up the mountain, witness to this private revelation, privileged to be partying with the superstars of his tradition. Just days later, he was right back to proclaiming, “It’s good for us to be here. Let’s build private temples and stay right here.”

Forget that down the mountain are people in need.

Forget that those who’ve sought Jesus (the sick, the poor, the unclean, the disgusting) are still seeking Jesus (to be recognized, to be healed, to be saved, to be loved).

Let’s just stay here.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote from the cell in which Nazis had imprisoned him, while Germany beyond cannibalized itself and Europe descended into a nihilist frenzy: he wrote: “Only a suffering God can help.”

What he might have meant was, if not for a suffering God, then it’s just “Good for God, and to hell with everyone else.”

But God isn’t in this to make it out alive, everyone else be damned. God is in this to make of this old creation something new, to make of this old world enthralled to the power of death a new realm in which life is the fuel for life.

The cross assures us that death does not the ultimate power it seems.

The cross encourages us that true life is much more than self-preservation, survival.

The cross affirms the simple reality amidst the created order of suffering, the painful fact that suffering simply is and the hopeful assurance that it’s not all that is.

And a suffering God goads us past our own private experiences of awe into social self-giving in the hopeful faith that by such self-giving all can be made better, all can be awe, all is praise and glory, all the time—and not only for a privileged few (those who have big backwards in which to eat homegrown grapes, those who have healthy children and long stretches of clean beaches on which to watch them play) but for all, the rich and the poor, the sick and the well, the lonely and the closely held, the faithful and the frightened.

When the topic of aweism popped up on the daily Facebook post out of our denomination’s national office a couple months ago, I got worked up and so weighed in: “I get feeling spiritually moved when seeing something beautiful, when experiencing something lovely. But what can ‘aweism’ say or do in face of all the ugliness and injustice in the world? For that, I think you need a self-giving savior who says, ‘Take up your cross and follow me.’ The world needs fewer people of privilege enjoying awe and more people of all sorts who, once awestruck, then commit themselves to building up a beloved community that won’t quit even after the awesome feelings fade.” And maybe I laid it on a little thick, but I have increasing impatience for people keeping private what blessing God intends for all.

I will give Phil Zuckerman this, however. Ever since I became a pastor, which is to say ever since I staked my life on the reliability of God's presence, God's word (still speaking), and God's promises to us, I'll admit to being less and less frequently surprised by the awe that Zuckerman so appreciates. It hardly sneaks up on me anymore. It hardly arrests me anymore—stopped in my tracks for the beauty or mystery of something.

I trust it and rely on it, so it's no longer surprising to find.

There's a loss in this. There's also a gain.

On the last morning of rowing camp, which was truly awesome overall, I waited in the parking lot of our hotel, a good enough hotel on busy Route One in Juno Beach. I waited as one of my fellow rowers gathered her effects following my having to follow her to the emergency room, she in the ambulance and I in her rented car. Almost everyone else had already gone—back to California and Canada and Maryland and Massachusetts; only a few were left on this morning after the last day of rowing. And her illness had snuck up on me. She was a powerful rower, so I had no idea. (Tragedy does still take me by surprise.) And I stood over her rummaging through her things and noticed then, though not for the first time, a cross that loomed over the palm trees to the southeast. There was a Methodist church that wanted to make itself noticed, which might have struck me as aggressive at some other time. That morning, it was a witness.

Coming off the awesome experience of being on the water with these very talented rowers, I could now serve this one very talented rower who also had other things going on. What it cost me was one final morning of beach-combing and wave-jumping. There was a wildlife preserve I'd wanted to check out. But now there was this woman, this human being, who seemed to need some serious help in putting herself back together.

So, what could I do? All week long, I'd been awestruck, and I wasn't about to let that experience go unrecognized.

Trudy might call it awe-terminus or awe-perfectus.

Her tragedy continues, my friend from Florida; she's the only one in denial of that. And, should she ever rise from the tomb that holds her, I likely won't be there

to witness it. But I'm faithful that it could happen and I'm sure that this is where true awe is to be felt, in graveyards that, though built, have been left empty.

Thanks be to God.