**Awe, and then Some**

**Text: Luke 7:16**

**Preached by Bruce D. Ervin**

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A pastor who shall remain nameless – although she serves a church just up the road – a pastor and her husband were standing in a medieval cathedral in Europe. The pastor was looking around at the vaulted ceiling and the incredible artwork and the amazing beauty of that space. Just looking around with her mouth open, and all she could say was, “Oh my goodness!” Her husband looked around a little bit, checked his watch and said, “Okay, what’s next?”

The pastor was awestruck. Her husband? Well, not so much. What inspires awe in one person may not inspire awe in another. But we all have moments when we are awestruck.

As were the people who witnessed the raising of the widow’s son. It’s another miracle for Jesus; another “act of great power,” to use a more literal meaning of the Greek. He’s been doing many such acts. As Jesus makes his way across the Galilean countryside before heading south toward Jerusalem, the great power of God has been evident in all that Jesus is saying and doing. And he’s gathered quite a crowd. People are following him, wondering what he’ll do next.

He’s come as far south as the village of Nain, which is just a bit northeast of the border between Galilee and Samaria. Beyond Samaria lies Judea, and its primary city, Jerusalem. Just outside of Nain, Jesus and his disciples encounter a funeral procession. The body of a young man is being carried out on a stretcher for burial. It turns out that he was the only son of a widow. This is really bad news for the widow. Not only has she lost her son; she’s lost as well her only means of financial support. Because, you see, a Jewish woman would not be working outside of the home in 1st century Palestine. It just wasn’t done. She has to have an adult male in her household to have a source of income. So this is a double catastrophe for the poor woman. It is both an emotional crisis and a financial crisis. And we are not surprised that Jesus has compassion for her.

Jesus steps forward. He touches the stretcher on which the body of the dead man is lying. He doesn’t touch the body because it would make Jesus ritually unclean. That’s an interesting sidebar to this story. It reminds us that Jesus – who was, of course, a good Jew – Jesus had more respect for Jewish tradition than we sometimes think when we read the New Testament. Jesus touches the stretcher, and he says, “Young man, I say to you, get up.” And the dead man sits up! The dead man starts to speak!! And the people are awestruck!!! Well, yeah, I guess so. I mean, Jesus just raised the dead! The scripture says, “Awestruck, everyone praised God.”

Awestruck. The people had witnessed a mighty act of God.

Awestruck. The people had witnessed Jesus’ authority over death.

Awestruck. It has happened to each and every one of us.

You’re driving out west, and suddenly before you there is a beautiful mountain vista…and you’re filled with awe.

You gaze into the face of a newborn baby…and you’re filled with awe.

You look up at the star-filled sky on a summer night…and you’re filled with awe.

Every moment of our lives is potentially a moment of awe.

I want you all to take a minute and remember a time when you were filled with awe.

Where were you?... What did you see?... What did you feel?...

Awe. It is one of the great human emotions. Ah, but it is so much more than an emotion. It is an awareness – an experience – of the presence of the Holy One.

Think back again to that moment when you were awestruck. My guess is that you were so caught-up in the moment that you weren’t aware of time, you weren’t thinking about what you had to do that day, you were temporarily freed from whatever anxieties you were carrying, whatever burdens you were bearing, and you certainly weren’t thinking about yourself.

That’s one of the key characteristics of awe: it draws us outside of ourselves. It projects our awareness to the much larger Reality of which we are a part. In that moment we are embraced by that Reality which is so much bigger, so much more magnificent, so much more amazing that anything that we can image. It is, in a word, awesome!

There are many words for that greater Reality which is far beyond us and yet, at the same time, embraces us. In the Bible, of course, that Reality is called God. Awe is what happens to us when we are embraced by the presence of God. So it is not surprising that some form of the word awe appears 87 times in the Common English Bible, which is the translation from which we read this morning. 87 times. That’s not nearly as many as love, joy and peace, but it’s moving into the neighborhood of compassion and forgive.

The Greek word is *phobos*. It is used 6 times in Luke, more than any of the other gospels; and 6 more times in Luke’s sequel, Acts. 12 references in the two-volume work of Luke-Acts. Half of those 12 times, *phobos* is associated with positive feelings of reverence and wonder. The other half of those 12 times it is associated with negative feelings of reverence and terror. When associated with negative feelings, *phobos* is translated as fear. When associated with positive feelings, it is translated as awe.

This is important, because in some other translations, *phobos* or its parallel term in Hebrew is always translated as fear. So a lot of us have grown up with the sense that God is to be feared; that God is some kind of mean ogre that we have to appease by being good; and doing good works. And yes, there are some passages of the Bible that certainly give us that impression. But when we read that phrase “fear of God” in our English Bibles, it’s not always fear in the sense of someone that we need to be afraid of. Here, in Luke 7, as in many of the places that *phobos* is used, it is clear that we’re dealing not with fear, but with that positive sense of reverence and wonder. In that moment of awe, when Jesus raised the young man, everyone praised God. “A great prophet has appeared among us,” they said. “God has come to help his people.” These folks are happy! They are filled with joy. They have witnessed a mighty act of God, and with reverence and wonder, drawn outside of themselves and embraced by the amazing reality of the Holy One, they are awestruck.

Everyone praised God. It doesn’t always happen that way. As we’ve said, what elicits awe in one person may not elicit awe in another. Like that story of the clergy couple in the cathedral: where she’s looking around with awe and he’s looking at his watch. Which, you may have guessed, is a story of Pastor Helen and me. But, for the record, I have my moments of awe as well. Like the time that I was hiking in the Canadian Rockies, and there before me was just a gorgeous ridge of mountain peaks. And all I could say was, “Great God almighty!”

Everyone experiences awe. Which is to say that everyone – even those who think of themselves as non-believers – have moments of worship. Awe is the experience of being drawn outside of ourselves; caught up in something marvelous beyond ourselves. That’s what awe is; and that’s what worship is.

When Helen was standing in that cathedral, she was caught-up in a moment of worship.

The young man was raised from the dead, and everyone praised God. That’s an act of worship.

We come before God in a moment of honesty, and we confess something that we’ve done for which we feel tremendous guilt. And then we feel that awesome sense of relief that comes when you know ourselves to be forgiven, as God’s grace washes over us, and that is a moment of worship.

And it happens here, in this Sanctuary, every Sunday. When you’re drawn outside of yourself by the beauty of this space, it’s a moment of awe; a moment of worship. When you sing a line in a hymn and you’re moved by the power of the music and the words – so moved that maybe there are tears in your eyes, so moved that maybe you’re raising your hand in praise – it’s a moment of awe; a moment of worship.

Indeed, it has been said that you can’t worship without awe. Hebrews 12:28 urges us to “offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe.”

You can’t worship without awe; but it’s been tried. Some churches design worship so that it’s layer upon layer of emotion. Other churches design worship around a highly intellectual sermon. And of course engaging both the emotions and the mind in worship is crucial. But if it doesn’t move from simply feeling and thinking to reverence, it’s not awe. It if doesn’t move beyond your own feelings, your own thoughts, then you haven’t allowed the Holy to draw you out of yourself so that you can be embraced by Mystery. Without that element of awe, it’s hard to call it worship.

Awe is often what we’re missing in North American, middle-class Christianity. That sense of Mystery, that experience of being caught-up in Something beyond ourselves: it is so often missing in our worship, our fellowship, our study and our service. And I don’t just mean “our” in the sense of we here at First Christian-Bedford; I don’t just mean “our” in the sense of we Disciples; it’s really a part of our middle class, church-going culture: going to church, yes out of a sense of commitment to God, yes out of a sense of gratitude to God, yes out of a sense of tradition but – in my experience, anyway – that sense of awe, that sense of mystery, that sense of being filled with wonder, is often missing. Of course, I’m the guy who didn’t experience awe in that gorgeous cathedral, so maybe I shouldn’t generalize too far beyond my limited experience!

But then I think of a group of mainstream churches in another city who shared an ecumenical homeless ministry. Between the four congregations they were providing shelter on winter nights and breakfast on Saturday mornings and meals in the evenings as well. But 2 years ago that ministry was shifted to a faith-based social service agency that can connect those homeless neighbors with recovery and employment services, and since then some of the members of those churches have lost their focus. They feel like they don’t have a mission anymore. Some of them have even left their church. That’s what happens when there’s a lack of awe on your faith journey and so much of your church life has gotten wrapped-up in doing stuff. When the stuff is no longer there to do, you’re lost. The doing has become the focus, rather than the Mystery, the wonder, the sense of awe that can inspire the doing.

So maybe it’s not just me. Maybe many of us are missing that sense of awe in our church life. But oh; when we do experience it, it is…there’s no better word…awesome! Sometimes it happens during the anthem. You all, in the Choir, you’ve brought tears to my eyes more times than you know. Sometimes it happens while gazing upon the stained glass; they serve – literally – as windows to the Transcendent One. Sometimes it happens during Good News, when someone shares a story of how God has been at work in their lives, or in the life of a loved one: bringing healing, bringing hope, bringing guidance. Sometimes it happens in a moment of prayer, when a sense of awe just washes over us. Sometimes it happens in the beautiful stillness at Camp, when you know that you are in the presence of the Holy One.

Jesus brought the dead man back to life. “Awestruck, everyone praised God.”

It’s okay to just let the wonder of God’s presence wash over you. You don’t need to be doing something all the time. And I say that as much to myself as I say it to all of you. We don’t need to be doing something all the time. In fact, as someone once said, “Don’t just do something; stand there.” Because sometimes you have to stand still for your heart is on its knees. And then you can experience…awe. Amen.