

Singing our own Songs of Hope

A message shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church

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In Luke's story of the Birth of Jesus there are numerous moments where people said the Gospel is amazing:

The neighbors of the Judean hill country at John's birth (Luke 1:63);

Everyone in Bethlehem who hears the shepherds' good news (Luke 2:18);

Mary and Joseph after they receive Simeon's blessing in the temple (Luke 2:33);

Additionally, there are many instances in these opening chapters when we presume that characters are filled with wonder and awe, including when Zechariah discovers he can speak again.

This is an opportunity for us to take a moment to ask: When do we, you and I, when do we practice feeling awe and amazement? I have to confess that preparing worship has always been daunting for me. It is a real saga, filtering the week's events into a service, and particularly the Message, the Word, that I try to convey.

My amazement comes on the weeks, far too many than I want to admit, when I feel like I have landed on a real dud of a sermon. But then, I'm stunned by someone who somehow, miraculously it sometimes seems to me, connected with it.

Serendipity. Startling moments of intersection of realities. Thin Places, to use a Celtic word. A moment when it feels like the division between heaven and earth is so thin that we can sense the divine more readily in that time or that place. Exclamations we might hear ourselves say at moments like these: "I really feel God here!" Or, "I feel goosepimples on my arms!" Or, simply, "Wow!"

In verse 58 of the first chapter of Luke's Gospel Story, when Elizabeth gives birth to baby John, the Greek word used is *sunchairo* – which means to rejoice – where the people rejoice with Elizabeth. There is a sharing of Grace.¹

Now I need to say, I tend to be a person who experiences my moments of awe and amazement quietly. I have these moments often, but I'm pretty quiet about them. I'm wondering if I should take a page from the book of Ebenezer Scrooge, who upon being shown by the ghosts of Christmas past, present and future – moments of beauty and horror – he openly rejoices, first by directing the stunned boy walking by to buy a turkey and promising him a shilling. Singing our Songs of Hope is not always natural.

An article recently appeared in the New York Times that focuses on "awe research". Who knew that scientific research focused on awe and amazement. The article in the Times is entitled "How a Bit of Awe Can Improve Your Health".² In it, Dr. Dacher Keltner, a psychologist at the University of California, defines awe as "...the feeling of being in the presence of something vast that transcends your understanding of the world."

¹ Much of the exegetical work here is thanks to Rev. Lisle Gwynn Garrity in the "Guiding Questions" for Sunday December 17, 2023, Sanctified Art.

² "How a Bit of Awe Can Improve Your Health: Experts say wonder is an essential human emotion—and a salve for a turbulent mind" by Hope Reese. The New York Times. January 3, 2023. [nytimes.com/2023/01/03/well/live/awe-wonder-dacher-keltner.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2023/01/03/well/live/awe-wonder-dacher-keltner.html)

Often we, and I'll include myself in this number, think that awe is evoked from dramatic, life-changing events. The truth is, awe can be part of everyday life. We can actually practice it. Some personalities, though, tend to be more open to experiences of awe. Dr. Keltner teamed up with researchers in other countries and they asked subjects to keep journals to track their experiences of awe. Some had experiences of awe several times a week, others rarely.

Research did suggest that, as we practice being open to awe, so we all can experience it more often. You may ask, what is the effect that awe has, physically, on us? Research indicates that an experience of awe or amazement will trigger "...clusters of neurons in the spinal cord that regulate various bodily functions, and slows our heart rate, relieves digestion and deepens breathing." Psychologically, researchers say that an experience of awe will quiet the "inner critic... [thus] helping us to get out of our own heads and 'realize our place in the larger context, our communities.'"³

A practical way to practice being open to awe and amazement is regular Mindfulness. We can be mindful in the mundane things we do in a typical day, like walking along the street, eating, sleeping. Even better, we might intentionally change our usual routines – walk a different route one day, go to a different restaurant, listen to music we would never normally listen to.

Even better, we can celebrate those moments of awe by sharing the experience with friends, loved ones, the stranger on the bus who is looking gloomy. Well, maybe not that! Luke, by telling the various stories of awe and amazement in the opening of the Gospel Story, is inviting us to experience wonder too. Not just amazement that we feel when we hear this wonderful, ancient, story, but it is an invitation to each of us to expectantly go into our modern, often stressful lives, to experience our own awe. Being open at every encounter, at every situation we might witness, perhaps there is awe and amazement at any encounter in our ordinary days. When can we practice feeling awe and amazement, starting right now? Amen.

³ Ibid