

AWE-FULL EXPERIENCES

Isaiah 6:1-8

Luke 5:1-11

Nathan is a “preacher’s kid,” also known as a PK. At age nine, he was like most PK’s, growing immune to God. He went to church school and worship every Sunday. It was like brushing his teeth, something mom and dad required him to do. God was a mildly interesting idea, but not a real presence in his life. Then their family took a trip to Niagara Falls and bought a ride on The Maid of the Mist. It’s the boat that requires riders to put on yellow rain slickers and it sails deep into the horseshoe of the Falls. The waters thunder about in an awesome display of power; the boat bobs like a cork; and you get wet, slicker or no slicker. Right in the middle of this family adventure, with the noise of the crashing falls making normal conversation impossible, Nathan exclaimed, “I think I am finally getting this God stuff!” He was awestruck.

In the Bible, when people enter the presence of the holy God, they fill with awe. Both Isaiah and Peter demonstrate that. God’s holiness causes it. Look what happened to them. While in the temple worshipping, Isaiah was overwhelmed by the presence of God. He saw God sitting on a lofty throne. God’s robe flowed majestically from the throne to fill the temple. Seraphim, angelic creatures, attended God and sang of God’s holiness. The temple shook and filled with smoke. Isaiah, awestruck, fell on his face, confessed his sin, and lamented his fate. God, however, purged his sin and called him to service.

Peter was fishing or, rather, finishing a night of unproductive fishing. Jesus told him to try again. Only because Jesus had earlier healed Peter’s mother-in-law and

was such a respected teacher did Peter comply. In a flash, Peter was awestruck too. His nets were filled to the breaking point and he had to summon help. Another boat hurried to aid and both boats filled with fish so quickly, they started to sink from the load. Like Isaiah, Peter realized he was in the presence of God's holiness. He fell on his knees, confessed his sin, and begged Jesus to leave him. He feared being consumed by God's holy fire. Jesus calmed him and called him into the service of the gospel.

Isaiah and Peter were correct to do what they did.

When one enters the presence of the holy God, the correct posture is on our knees and the correct speech is confession. Their experience is as John Calvin indicates, the common way in which scripture "represents the saints as stricken and overcome whenever they felt the presence of God." (1)

Holiness is God's essence in the Bible. If the Bible says God is *holy*, it means holiness is one characteristic among others. If it says God is *holy, holy, holy*, it means holiness is God's essence. (2)

Early in the 20th century, Rudolph Otto, a German scholar, made a study of the holy. (3) He noted how people from different cultures behave when they encounter the holy. He said they struggled to describe it. It seems to defy explanation. It's not irrational but super-rational, beyond the limits of our minds. Otto coined a word for the holy; he called it "the *mysterium tremendum*" or "the awful mystery." Here's how he described it:

The feeling of it may at times come sweeping like a gentle tide, pervading the mind with a tranquil mood of deepest worship. It may pass over into a more lasting

and set attitude of the soul, continuing, as it were, thrilling vibrant and resonant, until at last it dies away and the soul resumes its “profane,” non-religious mood of everyday experience. It may burst in sudden eruption up from the depths of the soul with spasms and convulsions, or lead to the strangest excitements, to intoxicated frenzy, to transport, and to ecstasy. It has its wild forms and can sink to an almost grizzly horror and shuddering...It may become the hushed, trembling, and speechless humility of the creature in the presence of – whom or what? In the presence of that which is a mystery, inexpressible and above all creatures.

It reminds us of the words of the spiritual, “Were You There When They Crucified My Lord?” The refrain sings, “Sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble...”

Holy means separate and other-than. When the Bible says God is holy, it means God is unique, in a class by himself, apart from any human categories. God is not our pal. God is not someone with whom we can be flippant or casual. God is the holy one in whose presence we must offer adoration and confession.

Novelist Anne Dillard has worshipped in many congregations. She notes how we think we can get cozy with God. She says we act as though God’s our pal – as comfy as an old shoe. She wonders, “Does anyone have any idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke?” (4) Isaiah and Peter got the idea. We do well to pay attention to their reactions. When confronted with the awesome, holy power of God, Isaiah and Peter both confessed their sinfulness and accepted God’s call to service. Isaiah exclaimed, “Woe is me! For I am a man of unclean lips...” God declared his

sin was blotted out, then called Isaiah to be his prophet. Peter exclaimed, “Go away from me Lord, for I am a sinful man!” Jesus told him not to fear and called him to join in his mission to the world.

What does this suggest for us? First, we need to know whom we are dealing with, when we deal with God. Both of these stories make it clear God is worthy of total respect. God is God and we are not. Moreover, God though gracious and merciful, is transcendent. God has absolute power over us. God is majestic, lifted up, separate and unique. We must know and keep our place.

It’s similar to what my friend, Randall Boggs, experienced in Rome. Randal worked for the World Council of Churches in Geneva, Switzerland, and was on assignment in Rome. He went to St. Peter’s Basilica for a service conducted by Pope John Paul II. He was in St. Peter’s standing behind a rope as the pope entered. Randal reached from the crowd and extended his hand toward John Paul. Then next thing he knew, he was on the floor, surrounded by Swiss Guards, the Pope’s personal security force. Randal had literally and figuratively stepped over the line. For security reasons one does not enter the Pope’s presence without invitation. Randall’s place was behind the ropes.

Likewise, presumptuousness is unwise in God’s presence. The best posture is on one’s knees, with head bowed. The best way to begin communication is to confess sin and seek forgiveness. We believe correctly that God has come to us in Jesus Christ to bridge the gap between us. We are reconciled to God and our sin has been defeated and forgiven through Christ. Truly God is love – holy love.

Though that love is accorded to us, we can never presume upon it. God's holiness should fill us with awe and cause us to tremble a bit. When we try to deal with God, we are out of our league. We are wise to remember that and act accordingly.

The second thing we learn from Isaiah's and Peter's experience is that God may come to us anytime,

anywhere. Where was Isaiah when God overwhelmed him? In the temple at worship. Where was Peter? On the seashore, exhausted after a night of unproductive fishing. God's holy power is not confined to any place and God's timing is entirely God's own. The common element of both of their encounters with God was neither man expected it. Both were surprised and awestruck by God's holy power and majesty. If God has a *modus operandi*, it is to be unpredictable.

Such was the experience of an acquaintance of mine, while a student at Westminster College in Pennsylvania.

He was asleep in his dorm room when, he says, "A deep undeniable summons disturbed my sleep; something holy called me." (5) At approximately 11:50 pm a voice told him to get out of bed and walk across the wintry, deserted campus to the chapel. He entered the narthex, let his eyes adjust to the darkness, walked down the center aisle, and dropped to his knees on the carpeted steps of the chancel. His first reaction was terror, but it passed and was replaced by a sense of peace. He lingered there for a while, basking in its presence. There was no voice, just the unmistakable presence of the holy. He says the moment was transforming, as it was for Isaiah and Peter. He went on to become a theologian of note.

We never know when God will confront us. My encounters haven't been as dramatic as Isaiah's or Peter's, or as my acquaintance, but they have been unexpected. It's like the theme to old TV show, Candid Camera, "When it's least expected, you're elected, it's your lucky day. Smile! You're on Candid Camera." If and when we encounter God, it will likely be when it's least expected.

Experiencing a sense of awe, does not necessarily mean we are in the presence of God. When we do enter God's presence, however, it will "awe-full." We will be filled with awe, with the "fear of God." So remember God is loving, merciful, and gracious, but it is holy love, holy mercy, holy grace. When it has to do with God, it is both transcendent and immanent, majestic and powerful. It is also completely unpredictable. God may confront anyone of us anytime and anywhere – maybe even here, today or tomorrow, or next week or next year. If and when it occurs, like Isaiah and Peter, we will be summoned for service.

Sources:

1. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1.1.3), Westminster
2. R.C. Sproul, *The Holiness of God*, Tyndale.
3. Rudolph Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, Oxford University Press.
4. Anne Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, Harper & Row.
5. Sproul, cited above