

Wonder and Awe in God's Presence

June 3, 2018

Sometime when I was a youth, mainline Protestant churches changed their translation of a key phrase in the Bible. In the 1970s, what for close to 500 years had been translated as “fear of the LORD” came to be translated as “wonder and awe in God’s presence.” To quote George Bush, it was a kinder, gentler translation.

You see, “fear of the LORD” was never meant to mean “cowering in the corner of the closet, afraid God was going to come after you.” It meant having a healthy dose of humility and honesty to understand that we are creatures, with faults and failings, and that God is truly magnificent, wise, and benevolent beyond our wildest imagination. It meant knowing our role. It means being conscious enough of our existence here on earth to be bowled over by the divine. It means acknowledging that there is a God, and it is not me.

Some years ago, I interned in a Memory Care facility. By the end of my internship, I wasn't eager to visit the Memory Center to see my patients with dementia each week. I'd learned that it takes a very, very special person who is called to that work, because most often, your communication is wildly limited. Don't get me wrong; it was valuable, but it was hard.

One day, Bill was sitting in his wheelchair when I arrived, gazing through the glass doors into the garden. He smiled and introduced himself, as he always does. He doesn't remember me from visit to visit, but at least he remembers himself. Some of the residents could no longer recall their own name.

As always, Bill and I quickly ran out of things to talk about, which happens early when one partner in the conversation cannot form a sentence. “It's a beautiful day,” I announced. Would you like to take a stroll through the garden?”

Beaming, he nodded vigorously and replied, “Sure!”

It was hot when we emerged into the sunlight, hot and humid following the brief spring shower 30 minutes past. Bill, clad in a sweatshirt and sweatpants, didn't seem to mind. We paused before a plant on the verge of flowering. Long, spindly stems with tiny, violet blooms offered a hint of things to come. He was immediately enthralled, but had no words even to begin to describe what he was seeing or feeling. Instead, reverting to his only trustworthy vocabulary, he began to count: first the stems, then the nearby plants. Whatever he counted, the total always ended at nine. I wondered what meaning the number nine held in his hidden past.

We moved further down the walkway, heading for some red roses, which were certain to catch his attention. Bill suddenly slammed his heels into the concrete path, and we came to a teeth-jarring halt before a Japanese maple. A young sapling, barely six feet tall, its leaves glistening with the diamonds of leftover raindrops, held Bill captive. His mouth fell open, and he almost forgot to breathe.

He pointed a crooked finger on his right hand. “That!” he exclaimed. Then he pointed with his left hand. “That! That!” We were not going to move another inch down the path. He began to smile broadly as his eyes filled with liquid appreciation.

I decided if Bill couldn’t verbally describe the beauty that had taken his heart into custody, I might use my own words to chronicle the elements of what we saw. “Look, Bill. The trunk near its roots is gray, but the branches are bright red.”

“That!” agreed Bill, nodding until his chin struck his throat.

Not knowing if I were committing a capital offense, I discreetly plucked a single tiny leaf from the tree and handed it to my partner in crime.

“The leaves are light green, but they have a rose-colored ring around the edges.”

“Yes, that.”

“The points are so sharp they look like thorns, but, actually, they are very soft.”

Bill tested the theory with his forefinger. “Yes. That.” Then he held the leaf aloft to view the underside. “Look!” he instructed as we gazed. In fact, this view exposed tiny capillaries of red reaching from the stem to each individual leaf point.

“Bill, the underside that no one sees is as beautiful as the top. You’ve made quite a discovery.”

“Yes. That.” This time softly, with a whisper of reverence and pride.

“It’s getting warm, Bill. Perhaps we should go back inside.”

“Okay,” he agreed, with reluctance filling his voice. Clearly, he complied simply to be polite.

I had passed a Japanese maple a hundred times on my walk to school, but never gave it a second look. A man whose greatest mental capacity was the ability to remember his name taught me that afternoon to open my eyes and experience wonder and awe in God’s presence.

All of this comes to mind when I read today’s scriptures, both the prescription for the Sabbath from Deuteronomy and Jesus’ challenge to the Sabbath in Mark. First, the Gospel: Mark tells us a story of Jesus’ friends plucking grain on the Sabbath, and being critiqued for therefore doing work on the Sabbath. In the second vignette, Jesus himself heals a man’s withered hand on the Sabbath, again ostensibly doing work. When critiqued, Jesus explains that the Sabbath is made for human beings’ benefit, not the other way around. He encourages us to follow the spirit of the law rather than the strict, rule-based interpretation of the law which the Pharisees were advocating. Jesus doesn’t say there is no need for Sabbath; he just says that we need to be reasonable about it, that we cannot allow ourselves to be so rigid that we become mastered by our rules.

The difficulty here is we have swung the pendulum waaaaay too far in the opposite direction. When is the last time you had a full day of Sabbath? No laundry or yard work or chores, no running errands? For many of us, keeping the Sabbath has been diluted into coming to church for an hour, two to three times a month. And why? Because we're busy. Because we have so much on our calendars, so much on our plates.

Our Deuteronomy passage gives us an important corrective to the way we have come to live this gospel. If you listened closely, you would hear that in this version of the 10 Commandments, the justification for keeping the Sabbath isn't because God rested on the 7th day and therefore we should, too, as it says in Exodus. No, in this version, it says that we are to keep the Sabbath because we were once slaves in Egypt, and because God delivered us from that slavery we are never to allow ourselves to slip back into slave behavior. We are never to allow anything to enslave us again.

Friends, I would like to suggest that our overstuffed calendars, our inability to Sabbath, is a bondage. I have a wonderful young woman who is coming to me for spiritual direction. She's a real go-getter, working long hours, going to school for an advanced degree, and finding it hard to fit church in. After we unpacked that for a while, I gave her the assignment of finding four hours in the next three months to Sabbath. The assignment was to find four hours IN A ROW (I had to clarify) in which she will not do anything for work or school or scratch anything off of her to-do list; four hours to read or sing or go for walks or do something creative; four hours of not being productive.

As we worship here in the park today, in the midst of God's brilliant creation, I give you the same assignment. Take a page from the 1970s translation of the Bible, as well as from Bill my Memory Care patient, and revel in wonder and awe in God's presence. Find a four-hour block of time this summer to be unproductive, to remind yourself that God freed us so that we would never be enslaved again. Then, once you've done that, do it again, and again, until it becomes a habit, until Sabbath is a regular part of your cycle of life. In doing so, you will undoubtedly experience that wonder and awe in God's presence.

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Deuteronomy 5:12-15, Mark 2:23-3:6
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