

**Sermon: The Way of Awe and Wonder****Scripture: Matthew 2****Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans****Date: January 5, 2025**

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Last week I preached about praise, how praise gets us out of ourselves, is something we need to do in community, and how praise completes the experience of joy and appreciation. As our scriptures attest to, praising the Creator Spirit God is built into the very nature of creation which is therefore inherent in our nature too.

But what I want to lean into this morning, given that it's Epiphany, is what is often the precursor to the need to praise which is, the emotion, of awe of wonder.

Maybe you've heard of Dacher Keltner, the UC Berkeley professor who as a scientist is a researcher on the human experience of awe and wonder? His most recent book from 2024 is called "Awe: The Science of Everyday Wonder and How it Can Transform Your Life". And for us on this day of days on the Christian calendar called Epiphany, the consideration of awe should be held right at the center. It's what's at the very heart of the story of the Magi coming from a foreign land and encountering the Christ Child. They were people of awe who were open to the experience of wonder.

But first, let's be clear what we are talking about when we speak of awe. Dacher Keltner defines awe as "an emotion you feel when you encounter vast mysteries." What a great definition of awe. The Magi were among other things ancient scholars who studied the heavens, the cosmos, the sun, moon, and stars and sought to discern what they meant and how

they impacted our world. It wasn't simply superstitiousness, because they knew what later science has come to understand and that is just how intricately linked we are with the sun, the moon, and the stars. So the Magi are our guides for fostering in our own lives an openness to awe and wonder, which I personally think we could use more of in this day and age with a certain disenchantment that has accompanied the post-modern world.

Last week I gave you 5 points on praise so here are 5 more points on awe and wonder that often lead us to praise, this is the prequel to last week's sermon.

So first of all, the Magi were people who fostered awe and wonder in their lives and probably in the lives of others and what Keltner's studies have shown is that in fact awe and wonder can be developed in your life. Keltner's team studied people taking what they called "awe walks" where people over the age of 75 were asked to go out for daily walks for a few weeks and during the walk to intentionally find some things in that walk to be amazed by, something remarkable, and spend some time with it, be that a bird or a tree or a scene or a feeling. They said they found 3 striking things from this study from the people who did this and the first was that the more they were intentional about being open to awe and wonder, the more they encountered it. The Magi were in the business of encountering great mysteries and so they saw a star and they followed it. Like any other muscle in our bodies, we can develop through use and practice the experience and feeling of awe. Keltner says simply, "the more you look for it, the more you find it."

Secondly, the effect that awe has, similar to praise, is that it reminds us that we are not the center of the world. It gets us outside of our egos

and gives us a more accurate sense of our own importance and place in the order of things. Keltner's team asked the participants in the awe walks to take a photo of themselves each day and they found that as the days wore on the participants literally began to move themselves outside of the picture frame. It became less and less about themselves... or you could say that their sense of self was broadened in such a way that all that surrounded them was actually within their sense of self, which is a more accurate picture of the truth of the matter. We are more than we are separate individuals is how Bayo Acomlafe speaks of it. Opening ourselves to awe and wonder decenters us from the frame and that's often exactly what is needed.

Thirdly, with ourselves decentered, in the experience of awe, we get a better perspective on things. So for instance, when we encounter the vast mystery of the created world, when we are out for a walk or skiing down a mountain or in the surf of the ocean it's inevitable that our problems, our struggles, our sufferings, our anxieties, tend to recede. Don't you experience this. Our struggles are not solved by the encounter with mystery just placed into better perspective.

The Magi encounter the great and fearsome King Herod, the one who ruled the land of Judea with an iron fist. He'd be someone to fear and to bow down to, but Herod in relation to the mystery of the Christ Child? There was no comparison. The only reason Herod is remembered much at all in history at all is because of the mystery of Christ. This is particularly good to remember as we approach the soon-to-be inauguration of one who some see as practically a savior and King more than President but he is really very small potatoes compared to the one we worship. He can do some damage and hopefully will do some good in his tenure but he really is a

nothing-burger when it comes to who and what we should be in awe and wonder about. Wonder at the world around you and it'll put things into perspective.

Fourthly, awe and wonder levels the playing field and is a gift freely given and available to all - to rich and poor alike, to male and female and non-binary people alike, to documented no more than undocumented people, to Christians no more than atheists and Muslims. It's available to the most powerful man in the country and the most powerless pregnant teen mother living in a famished land, someone in a trench in Ukraine no less than a Russian oligarch in his pretty mansion. That which causes one to stop and be filled to overflowing inside with awe and wonder is available and accessible to all. And the only thing to do with it is to appreciate it and praise the source from whom it comes and maybe as the Magi did, to then return home by a different way, to allow yourself to be changed by it.

The fifth and final thing to note about awe and wonder is the effect it has on the beholder. Psalm 34 verse 5 says it beautifully and simply - "those who look to God are radiant." It was said that after Moses encountered God on mount Sinai he didn't even realize how radiant his face was. A gorgeous piece of music or art or the striking beauty and mystery of the natural world, or the wonder of human moral goodness in the face of evil or of a beautiful idea, the radiance of all that cause us to wonder and places us in a state of awe, reflects off of us as a result. We become radiant with the radiance of great mystery and awe. And the opposite is unfortunately true as well, that the absence of any sense of awe and wonder is reflected within the face, the eyes, the countenance of a person as well. Beholding radiance makes one radiant. That's why people who are newly in love are seen as radiant and mothers newly pregnant.

Have you seen lately someone return from an experience of awe and wonder and seen how that's reflected within them.

The Magi encountered found Mary and Joseph and the Christ Child and surely beheld their radiance in that cow stall. They had obviously found what they had come looking for and the awe of the world around them confirmed it. So they left their gifts for him and they returned home another way so as to avoid the grim countenance and hard presence of Herod whose ego and insecurities and power made him a violent and nasty man. Surely those they met along the road back home and those to whom they returned were struck by the radiance of the Magi. Maybe that glow accompanied them at some level for the rest of their lives.

So seek it out - the opportunities for awe and wonder around you and linger with those moments, it'll only lead you to more and more of them, it'll help place your stresses and sorrows in good and right perspective, it'll de-center yourself from the picture of your life which is a good thing, it'll put you in common cause with others totally unlike you, and finally the glow from those encounters will bless those around you as well.

May 2025 be a year of wonder for you, a year of awe. Amen.