

SECOND PRESBYTERIAN

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“Awe”

Genesis 1:26, Mark 3:1-6
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Spring has arrived. It has been many years since a spring has pulled at me like this one. Containment-to-avoid-Contagion has been wearing and it's wonderful to have more time outdoors.

Spring is a beckoning season anyway. Warmer temperatures and colors of greening and flowering call to those who have lived mostly indoors through the cold months. Some with severe allergies ignore the call and stay indoors, but others widen their living spaces beyond the climate-controlled rooms of houses and workspaces.

For most of us, welcoming weather expands the spirit as well. For those of us who like warmer weather, winter can make us feel caught in nature's cycle, fueling the survival instinct of counting days until the porch, deck or patio becomes a living space again. My guess is that if you were able to do a statistical analysis of daydreams of someone my age and with my preference for warmer temperatures, there would be found in the winter a higher percentage of retirement fantasies. I'm not saying the majority of daydreams, just more than the normal quota.

But spring hits, and daydreams tilt dramatically to broader thoughts and hopes for the future. As a minister who loves the church I serve, my thoughts tilt to the grand possibilities of ministry we can accomplish together—a hospital opening in the Dominican Republic, the A/O house renovated for mission use, a building where classes and meals take place again, and all the other ways I imagine that we emerge from the pandemic as a church—a church

that fills the Intersection House with youth,
that gathers again for a family retreat,
that can fill a sanctuary

while still having people join us for worship from places far afield.

And of course,

I'm going to lose weight,



get in better shape,
and begin thinking not only of this summer's beach trip
but that trip in some future summer when Millie and I will finally see the Grand
Canyon.

For people like me, spring increases our appetite for awe.

Awe is what I want us to consider today. Without awe, I'm not sure we really know how to live in God's world. Think about that as I read our passages from Genesis and Mark.

Genesis 1:26

²⁶ Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth."

Mark 3:1-6

Again he entered the synagogue, and a man was there who had a withered hand. ² They watched him to see whether he would cure him on the sabbath, so that they might accuse him. ³ And he said to the man who had the withered hand, "Come forward." ⁴ Then he said to them, "Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to kill?" But they were silent. ⁵ He looked around at them with anger; he was grieved at their hardness of heart and said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and his hand was restored. ⁶ The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him.

Awe is surrender. There is in the moment of awe, the surrender of one's rights. It is to forget, for a moment anyway, the tally of accomplishments and grievances.

Think of wide-eyes, jaw-dropped Job, his list of grievances dropped to the ground. On that list is the stark evidence of the raw deal dealt to him in life. He lost most of his land, his health and, most terribly, his children... and for no good cause. He could blame fate but as a devout man he takes his case to God. "Why," he asks, "[should all this have happened to me,](#)

[as someone who is as compassionate as I have been,](#)

[as someone who has led a good life—](#)

[and by good life, I don't mean the](#)

[high on the hog,](#)

[rolling in dough,](#)

[being able to do what most people cannot afford to do](#)

[kind of good life—](#)

[but the **morally** good life?](#)

[I have followed the guidance of Moses](#)

[and lived in a way where others are helped and not harmed.](#)

[Why have I suffered the kind of loss that one would hope for the Hitlers and](#)



Jeffrey Dahmers of the world...

...if that is the kind of thing good people are allowed to hope for?

Why?"

Job is not given an answer but rather a tour of God's creation. It is a sort of slide show of the wonders of creation, a vision of a world that has beauty even with Job's pain... and a world that would have beauty even if Job were not in it. Job in that moment is filled with awe and for a while forgets not only his troubles but himself. When he emerges from the vision, he realizes that the God that created all that is, also chose to create him... to have a conversation *with him*. He now has one desire: to worship God.

"**Though He slay me, yet will I trust in Him,**" is what he says. And from that moment on, Job lives toward that which is ahead instead of staying stuck in what he had lost.

Did you hear what Job said, "**Though he slay me, I will trust in him.**"

That makes no sense given what many hear in their churches. Avoiding God slaying us is supposed to be what motivates us to obey God. "**Fear of the Lord**" is said to be the beginning of wisdom and even of faith. But that is not how it is with Job now. Now life is more precious than his life, and trusting God has now made bargaining with God seem ridiculous.

Let's go back to that expression, "**the fear of the Lord.**" The word for "fear" is *yirah*. It can also mean "awe." The two meanings, "fear" and "awe", are far apart. Fear makes us afraid of what might happen. Awe beckons us into the future. It is

comparable to joy,

because we want more of it;

or love,

because we want to go near who it is we love.

I imagine that if Millie and I ever do make that trip to the Grand Canyon, I will have both experiences of *yirah*. Put me at the railing of one of those viewing platforms looking out over the chasm and I bet I will feel the fear of falling to my death. But, after calming myself and possibly holding Millie's hand, I imagine that when I take in the handiwork of the Colorado River where a swath has been cut through stone as much as 6000 feet deep, I imagine I'll be in awe as well. It will be like seeing just one slide in the slide show God allowed Job to see, and maybe I will have Job's reaction of caring more that the canyon exists than I do; and caring that there is one who created it.

Of course, awe does not require a canyon. If you were to work your way through the slide show in Job, you would see the canyons and the storehouses of hail, but also you would see marvels of the work ethic of ants, the armor of the crocodile, and the intricacies of a hummingbird's wings and a spider's web.

Abraham Heschel, perhaps the greatest rabbinic thinker of the 20th century, says that this sense of awe is essential to faith.¹ Without awe, we remain stuck in the delusion that life begins and ends with us. We begin to think that the world and others are available to us for our own use,

¹ Reflections taken from his book, *Man is Not Alone*, and his article, *Does God Want Us to Fear Him?*



our own mastery and domination; that places and people are to be mined for whatever valuable minerals we can claim for ourselves.

The difference between awe and ownership can clearly be seen in how a single verse of scripture has been interpreted over the centuries.

“Then God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.’”

Listen to that verse without awe, and it is easy to conclude what has been said too many times in American churches: “[We’ve been placed here to be in charge.](#)”

All fish of the sea and birds of the air,

all those animals that can be tamed and those that cannot,

all the resources of the earth and all airspace over what we build and buy,

it all belongs to us...

or to whatever ones of us can claim title and defend it.

In a shocking misunderstanding of this passage, this awe-less reading of the verse has been used as a mandate for abuse of creation. Shocking, when any translator of Hebrew could tell us that the Hebrew word for dominion does not mean “to dominate” or “exploit,” but rather to take responsibility for something and look out for its well-being. It is to be partners with the earth in the same kind of life-enhancing way that Adam is meant to partner with Eve.

This verse, like all the verses of the Genesis story of creation, has no meaning except in light of the final command to observe the Sabbath. On the seventh day, we pause to remember that the earth is the Lord’s and all that dwells therein. “[There is no room,](#)” Heschel says, “[for self-assertion. Within our awe we only know that all we own we owe.](#)”

Out of the stillness of awe then comes the movement of our lives as we go back into the world that is created and live.

That’s true worship—when

to stop is then to stir,

to wonder is then to work,

to forget is then to find,

to rest is then to restore,

to be still is to begin something new.

With Sabbath perspective, we then go back to each of the other six days of creation and realize a question is being asked of us each day.

There are days and there are nights,

how will we spend them?

There are creatures of the air and of the ground,

what is our relationship to them?



There are others like us who are given to us,
how do we treat them?

Yes, we get the Creation story so wrong when it becomes about our ownership and control rather than the wonder of God's realm and what a privilege and responsibility it is to live in it.

I would suggest that we get the Sabbath wrong when it also is treated without awe.

Consider our passage from Mark.

You'll remember that the story ends with Pharisees plotting with Herodians to have Jesus killed. They don't get to this point all in a moment. As with the day-by-day creation of the world in Genesis 1, there is a step-by-step creation of their desire to have the son of God killed. Not with awe, but with suspicion and rising anger they and some scribes have been watching Jesus grow in popularity in preaching and demonstrating a spirituality that is not according to their script, is out of their control and, thus, is beyond their ability to manage.

Jesus has the audacity not only to heal a man's body but also his soul in forgiving him of his sins. "Why?" the Scribes and Pharisees ask themselves.

They then see Jesus having table fellowship with Roman collaborators and others whose sins are just as bad in their eyes. "Why?" they ask Jesus' disciples.

They then see Jesus and his disciples forgo fasting, which for them is no longer a spiritual practice of giving one's body a rest but a test of one's piety. "Why?" they ask Jesus himself.

Then they see Jesus and his disciples reaping grain on the Sabbath. Again, "Why?"

Finally comes the moment of our passage. Jesus and his questioners are standing in the moment of Sabbath. There is a man with a withered hand, and the Scribes and Pharisees—completely without awe over the miracle of body and soul healing, and lacking compassion for those who hunger—watch to see if Jesus dishonors the Sabbath by working on it. Jesus knows what they are doing and he brings the man front and center.

Jesus becomes the questioner. "**Is it Lawful to heal on the Sabbath or not?**" And because for these Scribes and Pharisees, faith is something they control rather than their practice of surrender, they refuse to speak. Jesus heals the man and this story of the creation of their opposition ends on the seventh day as they do the work they think will honor the Sabbath: plot to have Jesus killed.

As a rabbi, Heschel was not in the habit of commenting on New Testament passages, but I think he would say that at the root of their murderous desire is the absence of awe.

They have no good answer for Jesus' question, "**For what purpose is the Sabbath?**"

Do we? How will we honor the Sabbath?

Care of the earth is just one way in which we can answer that Sabbath question, but because Earth Day was this past week, I think it appropriate that I conclude at least with a nod in that direction.

Winter is as important a season as any, so I ask the season to forgive me for going back to the perspective of those who are like me and long for the expansive world and outlook of spring. I would hope that we not have what I am only for today calling the "Winter view of creation," where we take what we can in order to survive while we are alive. I hope we have instead the "Spring



view,” where our hopes and desires stretch into a future beyond our own lives where future generations can thrive. I would like us to imagine Jesus standing here on a Sabbath Sunday and putting at the front and center of our chancel area the children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren not yet born and ask us if it is lawful that we look out for their well-being or not.

Pushing aside the plotting types like the scribes and pharisees who only want to ask their questions in order to win an argument or be in control, I hope any answer we come up with begins with awe. I hope a desire to do what we can to care for the earth on behalf of those who are yet to live might come from a primal realization of Awe:

All that we own we owe.

