

Awestruck
January 11, 2015
Mary R. Brownlow

The film industry has found ways to show us the most amazing things, like planets exploding, time travel, and cosmic wormholes. I think that creative depictions of the greater universe took a huge leap when our spacecraft were able to photograph earth from space, and our astronauts were able to describe the feelings of awe they felt out there. So now, building on actual experience, we have film artists who take our breath away in movies like 2001:A Space Odyssey and, more recently, Interstellar. We, too, can be gripped by awe when we get a vision of the vastness and beauty of the universe, and the fragility and finitude of human beings.

We don't need to go to the movies to feel this way, of course. Just climb a mountain, or watch the sky just after sunset, with its Maxfield Parrish colors, or see the "green flash" over the ocean at sunset, or stand near a tall waterfall or listen to the wind howl during a storm. The natural world gives us so many opportunities for wonder.

This ability to feel overwhelmed by the very fact that creation exists seems to be common to all humans, as does the wondering. We know that we are neither gods nor angels, but human in all our bewildering particularity. So we ask, where did it all come from? Why are we here? How do we relate to the power we sense all around us? And, by the way scientific advances cannot do away with all this wondering. Many religions try to answer these questions, either explicitly or poetically. And so we get some of the creation stories from Genesis, like the image of God breathing and brooding over chaotic waters until light and land and life come forth. We get poems, like the Psalms, describing the voice of God as thunder and water and flame. And we get teachings about how to appease or align oneself with that power and that voice. And we get lots of arguments about what is true, and who is right.

Recently, Phil Zuckerman wrote a book, "Living the Secular Life: New Answers to Old Questions." It is one of that genre of books that offers a non-religious way to live good lives and to raise children to know right from wrong. Zuckerman describes the intangible glue he believes connects nonbelievers to the universe and to each other. It is something he calls "aweism." He writes, "Aweism ... though steeped in existential wonder and soulful appreciation, is still very much grounded in this world." He calls it a "profound, overflowing feeling" that he knows only in fleeting moments: playing on the beach with his young daughter, eating grapes from his grandparents' backyard, sledding in the dark of a January night, dancing with abandon at a favorite concert. It is ironic that Zuckerman gets flack from all directions from this book. To some atheists, it smacks of a kind of superstitious spirituality. To some believers, it seems like a contortion to avoid using the G word – God. I have to admit to being more in the latter camp. But reading about Zuckerman's new book sparked some thinking.

The ancient Hebrews experienced divine power in natural events, like stormy weather, wind, earthquakes, and flooding rivers. Hence Psalm 29, which calls all these things "the voice of God." They had no geologists talking about tectonic plates, or meteorologists talking about the Jet Stream,

or astronomers to explain the positions of the sun and moon during an eclipse, to mitigate their wonder at these events. This was pure, unadulterated awe, mingled with fear. The Hebrews shared these profound, overwhelming feelings with their neighbors, but asserted that it was **their** God (not Ba'al or Hadad of the Canaanites) who ruled the storm. **Their** God, with whom they had a covenant of loyalty and devotion, had a voice that was bigger than anything else they could imagine. No wonder that the exclamation "Glory!" bursts from the lips of all who worship in the Temple.

As I said earlier, the urge to say "Glory!", or something like it, is common to all humans when confronted with beauty and power in the natural world. But we are more than nature-worshippers, aren't we? Awe may begin something, but it is not an end in itself. That is my objection to the concept of "aweism." All of Scripture, all of our traditions, leads us into relationship with God and one another. And for us, those relationships are rooted in that primal insight of God in the first nanosecond of creation: God saw that the light was good. Goodness.

Which bring us to the Gospel reading today, Mark's story of Jesus' baptism in the Jordan River. There is no thunder or lightning, no mountaintop view. Just a muddy river, a milling crowd, a strangely dressed prophet, and an ancient ritual. Then the creative voice of God is heard by Jesus, as though the barrier between heaven and earth had split open. And the voice said "Goodness." It said, "You are my beloved child. With you I am well pleased." Heaven opens and God's good will pours down, like a bird in flight, like glory, like a shower of blessing, giving Jesus affirmation and purpose. I think that he was awestruck by the power of God's love, at work down here within messy humanity, not just in the heavens.

We still baptize in the church these days – we just baptized two little girls last week – based on the story we read about the river and the prophet and Jesus and a voice. We do it in our own way, with our own language. But maybe every Baptism is like that of Jesus; there is a sign, the heavens crack open, and a voice declares, to the child and to the worshipping community, "You are my beloved." All we need is our hearts open so our eyes are adjusted and our ears attuned to discern the callings of the awesome spirit. We need to remind ourselves that Jesus had not yet earned that affirmation of God, or proved himself as a teacher or leader or Messiah. He was just fully present to the voice.

What takes my breath away is the thought that each one of us is a beloved and cherished child of God, a sacred and particular vessel, a unique carrier of the holy. When we baptize, we name what is already an eternal truth: we receive divine love not as gods or angels or messiahs, but as human beings, waiting and willing to grow. Just like Jesus, we carry the stamp, the gifts and burdens of humanity: things like race, nationality, class, gender, DNA, and the social prejudices in which we are brought up. We, like Jesus, are called to discover in our particular lives the seeds of the spirit, the common good that desires to be born in our particular place and time. We are called to move beyond the moments of awe to the rediscovery of goodness. It is not really surprising that the fuel and power behind this search is the voice of God ringing in our ears, "You are beloved. I am pleased with you. I will for the good through you."

What sometimes takes my breath away is that God would work for the good through us. Through us. "Isn't there a better tool?" I sometimes wonder. We get so stuck. We may be sacred and particular vessels, but the world pours into us all its tragedy and joy, truth and lies, failure and triumph, compassion and cruelty. We end up limiting the scope of goodness, limiting God by

definitions of blasphemy and morality, setting up the battle lines of us and them. I am awed by the idea of God working in human life at all.

And then, every once in a while, there it is. There is the blinding wonder of goodness. In the care a wife gives to a dying husband. In the care a child gives to a grieving parent. In the bravery of a teacher defending her students from gunfire. In the compassion of a rabbi to an outcast leper. In the steady mentoring of at-risk youth. There are no brilliant colors, there is no green flash, no violent wind. Just the echo of the echo of a voice over the waters, the love and grace of God perpetually and eternally extended towards us. A quiet awe.

The next time someone tells me that they don't worship in community because they experience God alone while hiking in the woods and gazing at the sky, I'll say, "Good! I find God out there too. All the time." But when I want to understand my identity as one who has been baptized, as one who is a beloved child of God, in whom God is pleased, and in whom God wants to work for the good, I need more. I need to be with people who sing "Glory!" together. I need to be in a community of praise and caring and witness. I need to walk in the company of those whose breath is taken away by acts of goodness. I need to be with you, when we are awestruck by the love of God. Amen.