We live in an age where we are not awed by much, and we take for granted wonders at which previous generations marveled. Paul Piff and Dacher Keltner wrote in a *New York Times* article:

“You could make the case that our culture today is awe-deprived. Adults spend more and more time working and commuting and less time outdoors and with other people. Camping trips, picnics and midnight skies are forgone in favor of working weekends and late at night. Attendance at arts events — live music, theater, museums, and galleries — has dropped over the years. This goes for children, too: Arts and music programs in schools are being dismantled in lieu of programs better suited to standardized testing; time outdoors and for novel, unbounded exploration is sacrificed for résumé-building activities.

We believe that awe deprivation has had a hand in a broad societal shift that has been widely observed over the past 50 years: People have become more individualistic, more self-focused, more materialistic and less connected to others. To reverse this trend, we suggest that people insist on experiencing more everyday awe, to actively seek out what gives them goose bumps, be it in looking at trees, night skies, patterns of wind on water or the quotidian [commonplace; ordinary] nobility of others.”

In other words, awe still happens, and we need to expect it. We also need to recognize what awe is telling us when it occurs. Theologian Frederick Buechner illustrates awe by telling of seeing a forest of giant redwoods for the first time. “There were some small children nearby,” Buechner said, “giggling and chattering and pushing each other around. Nobody had to tell them to quiet down as we entered. They quieted down all by themselves. Everybody did. You couldn’t hear a sound of any kind. It was like coming into a vast, empty room.” Buechner described a paradigm shift: “Two or three hundred feet high the redwoods stood,” he said. “They made you realize that all your life you had been mistaken. Oaks and ashes, maples and chestnuts and elms you had seen for as long as you could remember, but never until this moment had you so much as dreamed what a tree really was.”

The kids probably did not have the life experience to identify this feeling as awe, but that emotion was there, and it struck them quiet. It would not be surprising if, in that moment, one of those kids had an awakening to think about God, about a career in ecology or nature, or simply fell in love with the outdoors, a love that would influence other choices he or she made in the future. Awe can set a direction for life and even move a person toward God.

**It is often the case that a sense of awe accompanies the sense that** something spiritual is unfolding. When we are awed, there is a paradigm shift, and we move from “the world is all about me” to “the world is larger than me” or even to “this is God’s world.”

Abraham Lincoln apparently had that experience. He is quoted as saying “I never behold the heavens filled with stars that I do not feel I am looking in the face of God. I can see how it might be possible for a man to look down upon the earth and be an atheist, but I cannot conceive how he could lie looking up into the heavens and say there is no God.” The Psalmist is similarly awed when he says: “When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is humankind that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them?” (Psalm 8:3-4).

Albert Einstein once remarked: “The most beautiful experience we can have is the mysterious. It is the fundamental emotion that stands at the cradle of true art and true science. Whoever does not know it and can no longer wonder, no longer marvel, is as good as dead, and his eyes are dimmed. It was the experience of mystery — even if mixed with fear — that engendered religion. A knowledge of the existence of something we cannot penetrate, our perceptions of the profoundest reason and the most radiant beauty, which only in their most primitive forms are accessible to our minds: it is this knowledge and this emotion that constitute true religiosity. In this sense, and only this sense, I am a deeply religious man.”

God uses various entry points to come into our lives, and awe is one such gateways. Awe enables us to sense possibilities previously unimagined, which is very useful in scientific research, and can enable us to grasp a deeper sense of God. We may stand in awe when we see the beauty around us, or hear the surge and thunder of the ocean, or sense the quiet of a late summer evening. We may experience awe through poetry and music, or the smell of wood smoke in the crisp autumn air. We might even be awed by the intricacy and efficiency of the human body, as was the author of Psalm 139, who wrote, “For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made” (vv. 13-14).

Awe says to us, “this is life beyond what I have known,” and it is a glimpse of God. A sense of awe is where the impulse of faith often starts. Or, as De Cruz says, awe is where we need to make “a mental accommodation to vastness.”

De Cruz’s point is that “awe is required not only for the day-to-day working of science but is also crucial to help reorient scientists’ thinking in times of paradigm change.” But she also acknowledged that the emotional drive of awe is what matters in other fields as well, and that it might be “our only path to knowledge and wisdom.” I would add that it can also be a pathway to God. When we are awestruck, it is a good idea to consider what God may be saying to us through that emotion and to be aware that a paradigm shift may be forthcoming in our life.

On one of my first trips to Guatemala, we spent the night in a mountain village. There, away from the streetlights, I saw more stars than I had ever seen before! The vastness of space, and the thought of the God who created all of it (and me!), was more than I could comprehend. It brought to my mind the awe-filled words of Psalm 19 (which is similar in emotional tone to Psalm 29): “The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims God’s handiwork...There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard; yet their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world. In the heavens God has set a tent for the sun, which comes out like a bridegroom from his wedding canopy, and like a campion runs its course with joy” (19:1-5).

We need a sense of awe in our lives to help us think beyond our present circumstances and to put our trust in the God who “sits enthroned as King forever” and who “gives strength to his people” and “blesses his people with peace” (Psalm 29:10-11).

Prayer: Lord, You are awe-inspiring! I am in awe of Your grace, Your holiness, and Your care for me. But some days I forget the wonder of who You are; those days when trouble washes over me like a mighty wave and my vision is blurred by salty tears. I forget to look up. I forget to stand in awe of your glory, to walk in Your truth. And I forget what a miracle it is to know You and to be loved by You. Remind me who I am to You. Remind me who You are to me! Stir within me a hunger and thirst for Your Word, for the treasure of Your abiding presence. Awaken my heart to worship You in spirit and in truth, in complete wonder and awe. Turn my eyes on You, Lord, so that the things of earth may grow strangely dim and I become as a child once again held in your everlasting arms, filled with awe for who You are. In Jesus’s name I pray, Amen.

**Sources**

* Buechner, Frederick. “Awe,” www.frederickbuechner.com. Retrieved November 24, 2020.
* De Cruz, Helen. “The necessity of awe.” Aeon, July 10, 2020, https://aeon.co. Retrieved November 24, 2020.
* Einstein, Albert. The World As I See It (Samaira Publishers, 2018).

Quoted on www.homileticsonline.com/members/installment/93041306/illustrations . Retrieved May 27, 2021.

* Pajares, Frank, synopsis of The Structure of Scientific Revolutions by Thomas S. Kuhn, www.uky.edu. Retrieved November 24, 2020.
* Piff, Paul and Keltner, Dacher, “Why Do We Experience Awe?” *The New York Times*, May 22, 2015.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/24/opinion/sunday/why-do-we-experience-awe.html>. Retrieved December 16, 2020.

**Awestruck**

Trinity Sunday, May 30, 2021 Psalm 29

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Centuries ago, people believed the Earth was the center of the universe. They assumed that the sun, moon, stars, and planets all revolved around Earth. This geocentric understanding of the universe held sway until the mid-16th century, when Nicolaus Copernicus, Galileo Galilei, and Johannes Kepler insisted that the sun, not the Earth, was at the center. Gradually, the heliocentric model replaced the geocentric model. The paradigm shift from an Earth-centric universe to a sun-centric one was a major transition in the scientific understanding of the cosmos.

Now here is a question: When a long-accepted explanation of how the world works breaks down or is proven to be flawed, what emotion most helps scientists delve further and leap into the unknown? According to Helen De Cruz, professor of philosophy and humanities at Saint Louis University in Missouri, that emotion is awe. “Awe increases our tolerance for uncertainty and opens our receptivity to new and unusual ideas, which are crucial for paradigm change,” De Cruz said. Noting that awe is also a spiritual and moral emotion, De Cruz maintains that “all clear cases of awe” have two components: an experience of vastness and a need for a mental accommodation to that vastness.

De Cruz says, “Awe is a self-transcendent emotion because it focuses our attention away from ourselves and toward our environment.” She goes on to describe awe, along with curiosity and wonder, as emotions related to the search for knowledge and says that a person lacking such emotions “won’t have the drive to become a good scientist, who can change her mind on the basis of evidence.”

This brings us to Psalm 29, our Scripture for today. As we read the 11 verses of that psalm, it is clear the writer is awestruck before the Lord. Just listen as the psalmist says: “The voice of the Lord is over the waters; the God of glory thunders, the Lord, over mighty waters. The voice of the Lord is powerful; the voice of the Lord is full of majesty.” And the rest of the psalm sings in a similar tone.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, one of the leading Jewish theologians and philosophers of the 20th century, insisted that awe is critical if we are not to take the world for granted and thereby lose the ability to experience it with depth and reverence. That means awe is a pathway not only to knowledge, but also to wisdom and to God.