

## **Standing in Awe in the Day of God: A Meditation on God's Wonders and God's Plans**

*Put a new song in our mouth,  
a song of praise to our God;  
many shall see, and stand in awe,  
and put their trust in the Holy One.*

*May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all our hearts, be  
always acceptable to you, O God, our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen.*

It's no small thing to mount a pulpit and preach into a congregation of God's beloved. Every single time in my life I have ever done this thing, I have been humbled by the enterprise and filled with gratitude for the call that led me up a pulpit's stairs. Today is no exception. Or if it is exceptional today, it's because the idea of climbing into a pulpit and preaching into the weekend and toward the day when we remember the life and prophetic witness of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. is hugely humbling.

First of all, what can possibly be said that hasn't already been said? And second, if there is something to say, how to say it while being true both to the spirit of God alive in our scripture today and to the calling that got me to this particular pulpit, a pulpit where great preaching has gone on for generations?

To the first question, there is always this answer: every single minute of our lives speaks new truths and unfolds new revelations into our present time. We have only to attend, to listen. If we do that, God always has new things to say. To the second, whenever we are faithful to the newness of God's Word, that Word will speak its truth through us.

Will that Word always comfort us? Probably not, certainly not if the Psalmists and the Prophets--Isaiah we have today, or one of the Isaiah's--and the Apostle Paul are to be trusted. Probably not, if Dr. King is to be our guide.

Yesterday, writing in his blog/newsletter, New York Times columnist Jamelle Bouie wrote that "...The way most Americans talk about the Rev. Dr. Martin

Luther King Jr., more than 50 years after his assassination, you might think that he gave exactly one speech — on Aug. 28, 1963, in Washington — and spoke exclusively about racial harmony and his oft-mentioned dream of integration.” He then goes on to talk at some length about the complexity and depth of King’s thinking and writing and preaching, all of which is aimed toward somehow wrenching us out of a fractured world toward the world of that dream he talked about.

That journey, out of brokenness into wholeness, out of fracture into healing, is, if anything, more urgent today than it was when Dr. King was preaching justice and love all those years ago. That journey, too, is very much the same one the prophets were always preaching and prophesying toward. And the same one Paul is beginning to write about to the nascent Corinthian church in our reading today. And the same journey that Jesus, the Word Incarnate, calls his first disciples into.

So what do we know about that journey and about how to walk it faithfully, as people called by that same Incarnate Word into ministry?

For me, the Psalmists, both the one we hear from in today’s lectionary in Psalm 40 and the one, who writes in Psalm 77, the psalm appointed to be read on Dr. King’s Feast Day, April 4, have something to say about what we know. Listen to those words from Psalm 77, and try to let them land in your present moment, in this present community, and in our world, as it is, right now. This is the Psalmist talking about God:

*14 You are the God who works wonders \*  
and have declared your power among the peoples.*

*16 The waters saw you, O God;  
the waters saw you and trembled; \*  
the very depths were shaken.*

*17 The clouds poured out water;  
the skies thundered; \*  
your arrows flashed to and fro;*

*18 The sound of your thunder was in the whirlwind;  
your lightnings lit up the world; \*  
the earth trembled and shook.*

*19 Your way was in the sea,  
and your paths in the great waters, \**

*yet your footsteps were not seen.  
20 You led your people like a flock \*  
by the hand of Moses and Aaron.*

How does that sound to you? Is this God a God you know? Is this a God you recognize? Is this a God that, here, in this place, in this time, in this world, in this cosmos--is this a God that might call you anew into the journey toward the God's justice and love, into a community learning better to love one another and all creation? Most of all, is this a God whose voice you are willing to know, and to heed--this God who works wonders and trembles waters and shakes depths and thunders in the whirlwind and makes paths in the great waters, and yet whose footsteps are not seen?

When Paul began to write his letter to the new church of Corinthian Christians, he knew he was writing--indeed preaching--into a querulous and quarrelsome community. Yet that is not how he begins. Instead, he says to them that they are a sanctified people. They are called to be saints, he tells them. (Later, he will get into some detail about how far from sainthood they have strayed, before coming back to place them squarely in the arms of the great God who is Love.) Then he says this:

*"I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, who has enriched you in every way, in speech and knowledge of every kind-- just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you-- so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of Jesus Christ. Christ, he says, will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of Jesus Christ. God is faithful. And God has called you into the fellowship of Jesus Christ."*

Now that is truth. That is God's truth. And that is God's call to us, here all together in this community, and to each of one of us exactly as we are. We are called into that fellowship with Jesus just as surely as were those long ago disciples, in Corinth and by the Galilean Sea.

What are the hallmarks of that call?

Well, we know that, too, from the Psalmists, from the Prophets, and from Jesus. Jesus' true followers, above all, looked at one another--at every single one another--and see the good in the other person. We who follow Jesus must do the same. Though we may be angry about the course of human history and the acts of human beings, our primary call is to see, and to act as though we see, that good. It is that good that glues us together into what Howard Thurman and Dr. King called "beloved community."

In the Gospel that directly follows Psalm 77 in the readings for Dr. King's Feast Day, Jesus says this hard hard thing:

"I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. Do to others as you would have them do to you."

That right there is the mark of those who walk in the way of our awesome God, who are members of Christ's fellowship in this place, in this time, in our moment.

I just learned recently, because I am a faithful reader of the New York Times's Science Section, that there is new brain, new neurological, science about awe. A couple of times recently my new colleague, Laura Palmer, has talked about people in our Christmas and Epiphany story having been awestruck. It turns out that awe is a real thing, a real emotion, separate from though connected with all our other emotions. Awe deactivates the part of our brain that, if yours is like mine, is pretty incessantly criticizing me, and too often, others. At the same time, it activates the vagal nerves in our spine, slows our heart rate, "relieves digestion," and deepens our breathing. All this has a huge impact on our well-being, and not only on our individual well-being but on the well-being of everyone we come across, and if we practice awe, of our entire community and world.

There are many routes into awe, and you know what? Our community--this community into which we are called by God to live as faithful followers of Jesus--has not only always known but has always preached and enacted

many of those ways. By prayer and meditation, by reading and contemplation, by enacting together the Holy Meal we are about to share, by the rituals of this sacred time we share together--by these and many more, we may find our way into awe.

But one practice in particular speaks powerfully to us on this Sunday when we think of the sacrificial witness of Dr. King, and in fact, it might be a practice taken directly from Dr. King's sermons. One scientist of awe, Dacher Keltner, advises that we "...focus on the 'moral beauty' of others....One of the most reliable ways to experience awe, [he] found, was in the simple act of witnessing the good of others." (NYT, 1/3/23)

That community of witness to the good in one another is the one we are called into. It is to that practice and to that path that we are summoned. With that in mind, listen again to the Psalmist from whom we heard this morning:

*God put a new song in my mouth,  
a song of praise to our God;  
many shall see, and stand in awe,  
and put their trust in the Holy One.  
Happy are they who trust in God!  
they do not resort to evil spirits or turn to false gods.  
Great things are they that you have done, O God, my God!  
how great your wonders and your plans for us!  
there is none who can be compared with you.  
Oh, that I could make them known and tell them!*

Well, we can make them known, and we can tell them. We, who are Christ's people, in this time and place, are called to tell out the wonders of God beginning with the commandment under which we live: To love one another. To love our enemies. To love all our neighbors, and by loving them, learn to love ourselves.

In the words of the great hymn that sang me out of seminary long ago, our most urgent call today is to "...claim the high calling angels cannot share; to young and old, the gospel gladness bear. Redeem the time; its hours too swiftly fly. The night draws nigh."

Let's redeem the time, beloved of God. Great are God's wonders and God's plans for us!

Amen.