

The Power of Awe

Scriptures: Genesis 28: 10-17; Matthew 17: 1-8

January 10, 2016

Rev. Dr. Charles A. Parker

I. Introduction

Some of you may have seen in the *Post* this past Wednesday that there was an article about some archeologists that had found the remains of some sunken whaling ships off the coast of Alaska. These whalers back in the 1870s had gone up to Alaska in hunting the whales that were so important to the economy and they had had a good season. And even though they knew winter was approaching, they were very reluctant to leave the hunting grounds because they were being so successful in their enterprise. They stayed just a little bit too long, and the ice came a little bit faster than they were expecting and they ended up having to flee their boats, the small essentially whaling canoes that they used. They left the 32 ships there to be crushed by the incoming ice.

Whale hunting was always a dangerous enterprise and yet human beings for the last 5000 years have been hunting whales for the rich resources that they bring. In the 19th Century, which was the height of the whaling industry in this country and around the world, the primary resource that whales were hunted for was oil, oil that resulted from boiling their blubber their down, and it was the resource that essentially lit the streets of cities across the world before oil was discovered underground.

Whale hunting, of course, is also the subject of what many consider to be America's greatest novel, *Moby Dick*. Herman Melville, the author of *Moby Dick* actually spent some time on a whaling ship and so understood the life of whaling firsthand and he crafted a story that is as much about the whaling life as it is about the plotline, which is Captain Ahab's obsessive desire to kill this huge white sperm whale named Moby Dick.

Every January here at Metropolitan, we spend the month looking at theology through a different lens. And while the scriptural witness continues to be a huge part of our theologizing, we also try to bring a different element that may be a little bit more contemporary and you may be saying to yourself, "Well, *Moby Dick* was written in 1850, that's not exactly contemporary," but the reason that we picked that this year is because last month Ron Howard came out with this wonderful movie called *In the Heart of the Sea*. It's a movie that's a dramatization of a book by that same name which tells a story of the whale ship Essex that in 1820 left Nantucket on a whaling voyage and was sunk in the Pacific by an 85-foot sperm whale that attacked the ship. It's a pretty dramatic story and was one of two historic events that was the basis on which Herman Melville built this amazing story.

The author of the book *In the Heart of the Sea* is a historian by the name of Nathaniel Philbrick, who's also a huge *Moby Dick* fan and lives in Nantucket, and he writes that *Moby Dick*, like all great works of art, grows on you. Instead of being a page-turner -- and in fairness, it's not until you get towards the end that it really picks up the

pace, but it's the kind of book that you live into. So, he says, "Instead of being a page-turner, the book is a repository not only of American history and culture but also of the essentials of all Western literature." And what he means by that is Melville has this amazing ability to bring in the rich cadences of Shakespeare and the allusions of Milton and the beautiful language of the King James Bible, and all of this shapes this wondrous work of literature.

It also captures in some very profound ways a lot of the key social issues that were part of 19th Century America. There's a very strong undercurrent of dialogue about slavery. Of course, published in 1851, this was a huge matter of national discourse. There are powerful themes around the exploitation of the environment. There are some very powerful and interesting reflections on leadership and what makes powerful, good leaders and what makes demagogues.

And so, as we enter into an election season, that also felt like rich fodder for us to talk about. So, we're going to be moving through those themes over the course of the next several weeks, and while I didn't mention it at the beginning, let me just say real quickly, the intent again is to create a sermon series that's maybe a little bit more accessible to people who aren't regular churchgoers. So, if you have friends that may not have a faith community that they call home, this is a great opportunity to invite them to come and just see what church life is like and hopefully discover it's not quite as intimidating as sometimes it looks to be from the outside.

II. Our first topic will be the Power of Awe

The place I thought that we'd start our conversation this morning is talking about awe, which is not so much a theme of *Moby Dick* as the sort of, if you'll pardon the pun, the water in which it swims. It permeates the whole story, there's a very powerful and compelling sense of awe. Now when I talk about awe, I'm talking about a sense of reverence that carries with it elements of both wonder and fear. Awesome is a word that gets frankly dramatically overused in our current culture but its companion word is awful, which again carries a sense of being full of awe but with a sense that highlights the fear piece. There's something about awe that reinforces the greatness of the world and of God and helps us understand ourselves in a somewhat better perspective.

We all have these experiences of awe, of course, as we sit at night on a lonely beach and look at the vast galaxies in front of us, or when we look at the wonders of a place like the Grand Canyon, or through a microscope at the wonders of the cell of a leaf. It's this very compelling sense of what a wondrous place the world is and how big and beyond our comprehension it is. And *Moby Dick* is a novel about awe. It's a novel, of course, that takes place on the sea. So, like the feeling of being on a beach at night, the constant presence of this vast unknown world beneath the ship's decks permeates all of the story. It's also a story about the most awesome creature of the sea which is the wondrous, beautiful, great whales, and this one particular great whale that appears to have a greater level of intelligence and, frankly, willingness to use violence than most.

I would suggest that Ahab's madness and Ahab's obsessiveness about Moby Dick are actually very much related to awe because in many ways it is Ahab's reaction against the feeling that the cosmos is a little bit beyond his control. See, we all build around ourselves a worldview that allows us to feel as though we have some measure of control over our lives, right? And whether it's through the accumulation of wealth, whether it's the security of a good job, we cocoon ourselves in this sense that the world is understandable and, on some level, controllable. And when that veneer gets stripped away, which it does in the feeling of awe, we've got to figure out how to deal with that. Ahab's madness is his unhealthy way of dealing with the sense that life is not as controlled or controllable as he had thought it was, and this is his violent reaction against that.

Pastor and professor Paul David Tripp writes in his book on awe that we are hardwired to experience awe because on some level that's the only way we can experience who God is. It's when we experience awe that we understand that the divine is breaking into our lives and we get a broader picture of what the world is like and who God is, and we understand the unfathomable mystery of God. That can be a wondrous experience but it can also be a scary, frightening experience, and awe captures both of those.

Perhaps for this reason, awe is also a recurring theme throughout scripture. And if you look at the phrase, "the fear of the Lord," you'll find it repeated hundreds of times throughout scripture and almost every single book of the Bible. In Proverbs we hear twice that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. Now what does that mean? It obviously doesn't mean that we are to be afraid of God, but it is an invitation for us to understand that our God is so much bigger than we can ever comprehend and that we have a tendency to try to make God smaller so that God can be more comfortable for us, right?

There's a wonderful medieval rabbi who says to one of his disciples, "God is not your grandmother. God is an earthquake." Now our God comforts us but if all we do is think about God as a comforting presence, we have limited God to a comfortable size for us. Most of us spend most of our lives feeling as though God is frankly very similar to the way we are but perhaps bigger and slightly better. Awe is the sense that as I stand before who God is, I can't even comprehend the divine. And that should teach me among other things what humility is about, that maybe I'm not the center of the play and that if I bring a different set of eyes, I may see other possibilities before me. To have a healthy fear of the Lord is to have a deep realization of the complete otherness and transcendence of who God is for us and the understanding that as big as I understand God to be and as grand as God's plans are, they are far beyond my ability to envision and understand. You also see in the scripture frequently, and our passage from Genesis is one of these, that there are locations in our earth that seem particularly likely to inspire awe.

In Celtic tradition, they're called thin places where the barrier between our perceptions of the world and the great mystery that is our world are a little thinner and we get a sense that there's more going on than we're aware of. And I love the story of Jacob who is traveling back to Haran, his family's city of origin, and he just finds a good place to sleep, that's all he's looking for. And he has this very compelling dream of this ladder that is ascending and angels ascending and descending to the throne of God, and he wakes up to realize that this location where he is is sacred space, that something different is happening here. It's that same sense of Moses approaching the burning bush and having God say, "Take your shoes off because this is sacred ground." And what he does there, it was a very natural response, was that he builds an altar. He wants to find a structure to remember this place, to remember what happened, to remember his feeling of awe as he encounters this gate to heaven.

III. Lessons from Awe

In our Gospel lesson this morning, we also get a chance to experience the awe of the disciples as they see Jesus for the first time revealed for who Jesus is. They believe that he is the Messiah. Peter had just said that in the passage immediately preceding this. But again, in their mind, a messiah was a human figure who was going to re-establish the throne of David, it was a military political figure. And they had been following Jesus around, they had been listening to him teach, they had been seeing him do miracles, but it was a great and powerful teacher that they had been following. And then they get up on Mount Horeb, another of those thin places where Moses received the tablets of the 10 Commandments, and all of a sudden this guy that they had been living with is stripped away and they see the glory of God revealed and they understand that their ministry is not about a wise teacher sharing how to know God better and how to live out of God's call. They understand that they have not been following a political military figure who was going to re-establish the throne of David. All of a sudden they realized that what their ministry was about is God being in our midst, and their whole perspective on the world has been altered.

A great German philosopher Immanuel Kant spent a lot of his life writing about how our minds structure our experience in a way that we can absorb and understand it. Kant argued that constructs like space and time may not actually be reflective of the way that the real world is, but it is the way our minds structure our experience so that we can understand it. And what awe is about is having those intellectual structures stripped away so that we can look into the wondrous and awful mystery of who God is.

So when the scriptures talk about the fear of the Lord, what they are suggesting is that to be healthy spiritually is to cultivate a sense of awe. It is to be aware of those places that we sense God moving. It is to pay attention to those moments when we look up into the stars and have an overwhelming sense of our smallness and the cosmos' greatness. And I suspect all of us know folks who actually actively avoid feelings of awe because they can be so unsettling. And what our scriptures invite us to do and what *Moby Dick* invites us to do is to cultivate a sense of awe and wonder at who God is and what God is doing in the world and what the world is about.

When the disciples experienced Jesus clothed in divine glory, their immediate response is, "Wow. This is great. We should stay here for a while." And Jesus immediately says, "No. This is essentially then a moment of revelation that now you've got to figure out how to carry into the world with you."

How do we go about cultivating a sense of awe in our lives? That's the invitation I want to leave you with this morning. How do we create the space or the reminders of those moments when we have experienced it like Jacob creating the altar, where we can bring those opened eyes to the world around us, when we can see in somebody else's face a divine spark, when we can look at our own lives and see the wondrous possibilities that are before us? How do we keep that sense of awe that allows us to be engaged in the dailyness of life but see it through different eyes?

IV. Conclusion

Moby Dick is a powerful story about the nature of awe and the impact it has on who we are. And in many ways, it is a story of contrasts between Captain Ahab and the narrator, who is a simple shipman by the name of Ishmael. Both of them are orphans. Both of them are sorting through a lot of their own emotional baggage. But in this place of awe that they find themselves on the sea, they react to that experience with very significant differences. Ahab responds by denying the sense of awe and trying to control with obsessive anger a world that feels out of control. Ishmael brings that sense of wonder that invites him to contemplate and try to understand himself and the world around him better. To feel awe is to acknowledge that I am not in control of even my own life, much less the lives around me or the world around me, and to start to learn to trust in a God whose power and whose vision and whose purpose for us and for the world is beyond our understanding and yet who chooses to engage and invite us into the process of helping that vision become reality, and we start to do that as we acknowledge the fear, the awesomeness of who God is.

Amen.