

14th Sunday After Pentecost Proper 17  
August 29, 2010  
the Rev. Ken Kroohs  
(Sirach 10:12-18; Ps. 112; Hebrews 13:1-8 & 15-16; Luke 14:7-14)

## **OUR AWESOME GOD**

St. Christopher's Episcopal Church, High Point, NC

MAY THE WORDS OF MY MOUTH ... AND THE MEDITATIONS OF ALL OUR  
HEARTS ... BE ALWAYS ACCEPTABLE TO YOU --- OUR STRENGTH AND OUR  
REDEEMER AMEN

"Hallelujah! Happy are they who fear the Lord!"

Strange statement don't you think? Why would  
anyone "Hallelujah! - I am afraid of you?"

Why thank God for all that happens and say they  
trust God if they are afraid of God? Can you trust  
someone you fear?

This is an interesting question because it  
illustrates a major difference between two  
understandings about God. Some people read the Bible  
as a threat. God threatening us. That if we don't do  
exactly what God wants God will punish us.

Other people focus on God as love, and as our  
leader.

The issue relates to a translation issue. The word

we typically translate as "fear" can also be understood as "awe". If you think about it you find that the two words are actually quite similar. If I play basketball with Michael Jordan I am afraid of the results! But I am also in awe of him. Both words are appropriate but suggest very different attitudes.

I submit to you that for this passage, and many others, "awe" is a better understanding.

"Happy are they who are in awe of the Lord!"

When was the last time you stood in awe of God? .... I don't mean intellectually but emotionally. Intellectually we are in awe of any power that can create the universe. Intellectually we are in awe of any power that can control our futures. But emotionally? When was the last time you stood in awe of God?

Funny thing is that some people who do not attend church may be in awe of God more often than people who do attend church. People who say they are "spiritual but not religious" often explain they experience God in the mountains, or at the ocean, or at the Grand Canyon. They express a sense of awe in the creator.

The cathedral design is intended to give us a sense of awe. When you enter a cathedral's narthex (lobby) it frequently is on the small side. And the doorway between the narthex and the nave - where the seating is - tends to be a tad lower than normal. Not a lot but just enough to get an emotional impression of being small.

THEN, as you go through the door the building just explodes before you. The walls are far away but most importantly the ceiling is so far above you any details are not easily visible.

This is symbolic of our God being so far above and beyond us that we cannot even fully comprehend him.

Large churches and cathedrals also tended to have a "high altar" far away from the congregation. Before sound systems the average person had little idea of what was being said - especially since it was in Latin!

Remember the descriptions of God's throne from Revelation and other scriptures? "Choirs of angels" near the throne singing ... hence the choir stalls between the congregation and the altar.

Only certain special angels were allowed close ...

behind the altar rail. Many Orthodox churches still have that strong division between the congregation's space and the clergy space. If you ever tour our neighbor, St. Seraphim, Archbishop Michael will explain the various symbolic divisions between the congregation and levels of ordained ministers.

The intention was to create a sense of separation, of awe between the congregation and God. Unfortunately it frequently resulted in a separation between the congregation and the clergy which is more difficult to defend.

Then the music .... in many large churches the organ's sound fills the space in an overwhelming manner. You can barely hear the person next to you! Again, the symbolism includes the sense of God filling even the largest spaces completely and overwhelmingly.

An interesting consequence is the "gospel procession" when the Bible is processed into the middle of the congregation to be read. The word of God is brought from 'on high' to the people. Notice the parallel with Jesus?

There are a couple reasons I do not use that to such an extent. First, I appreciate the symbolism of

the Gospel being brought to the people ... but what happens then? The Gospel is TAKEN from the people after it is read! You cannot claim symbolism in one direction but not in the other.

Secondly, not a big problem here because the aisle is short, but in large churches it results in a dead time between the reading of the Gospel and the sermon. Most churches violate the Prayer Book by singing a couple more verses of the hymn during that time ... but that is directly against the intention of the Prayer Book. The whole purpose of the service design was to place the sermon directly against the Gospel reading to 'strongly encourage' the clergy to stick with the scriptures! Using a couple verses of a hymn to separate the Gospel from the sermon makes it easier to avoid focusing on scripture.

Regarding the symbolic space and use of music, personally I don't like them because FOR ME ... and one of the wonderful aspects of our gracious God is that each of us is allowed a different way to approach and know God. .... I don't like the symbols of immensity and separation because they do ... TO ME ... suggest a God who is not only awe inspiring but also very distant.

Note ... I talk about this not to tell you what to think, but only to encourage you to think ... to reflect ... to consider what brings you closer to God.

Consider two images. One is watching Michael Jordan or a great musician from the top of the stadium. A second is sitting right down front, able to talk to them, learn from them, interact with them. Both can provide a sense of awe, but one does so in a distant and separated manner whereas the other is more interactive.

That is one reason many large churches no longer use the high altar but have moved an altar to a place between the choir and the congregation. They brought the altar closer to the people.

BUT ... even though I don't like the symbolism I do believe it is important for us to appreciate, and be in awe of God. It really is amazing and beyond explanation why God ... the creator of heaven and earth ... could care about you or me. God caring about us is more amazing than any of us caring about a single ant.

To hold both that image of awesome God ... in tension with the God who does care for us, and is with us every moment .. To hold those two in tension is

difficult. Probably impossible. But we should try because when we focus on the God who does care for us and is with us every moment we can very easily end up knowing God ONLY as a good friend. Maybe a powerful and helpful friend, but only a friend.

We can so easily miss the wonder of our great and literally unbelievable God caring for us if we take away the **awe**.

All that said about "awe" verses fear, there certainly is a thread in scripture about God at least taking blessings away from those who do not obey. In the discussions about "why is there suffering in the world?" we touch on this more including the issue of 'taking away blessings' verses 'punishment'.

For today we will just acknowledge there is such a thread in scripture, in some places a fairly strong theme, of God taking action against those who disobey. A theme of God doing things which would cause someone to be afraid rather than, or in addition to, being in awe.

What most people miss is that most of the time in the Old Testament when we read about God doing such things, the REASON God does them ... the disobedience

is about when the people fail to help those in need.

Even those cases when the scripture speaks about not obeying or worshiping properly when you read back, most of the time it is made clear that the issue was not caring for those in need. Notice for example the psalm today - the righteous are merciful and full of compassion ... generous in lending ... manage their affairs with justice ... give freely to the poor.

Or in the Hebrews reading ... do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers ... by the way, in Hebrew the word "strangers" does not include other Jews so it could be translated "immigrants" ... remember those in prison ... those who are tortured ... keep your lives free from the love of money ... do not neglect to do good and share what you have.

When we look at what our awesome, loving God asks of us it seldom has anything to do ... to the surprise of many people ... with what to wear, or how to eat, or what the church should look like.

The creator of the universe is concerned about the poor person down the street. The lonely person across town. The sick person in the hospital.

The creator of the universe who we are, and should be in awe of, is concerned about us .. And asking us to help show God's concern for other people.

I cannot think of a human parallel ... even a distant parallel. The gap between the awesome and wonderful God and the lowest, poorest person is so large that no human parallel is possible. Rather than asking PRIMARILY for down cast eyes and bended knees God, our God, asks for open eyes to see the needs and out stretched hands to serve.

Rather than asking us to focus exclusively on worship, our God asks us to focus largely on service ... maybe worship through service ... but service which causes us to turn our attention to other people. To, by necessity, turn a lot of our attention away from directly worshiping God to serving the least of these. Our God TELLS us to turn a lot of our attention to serving the least of these.

THAT attitude of God's may be even more awe inspiring than the creation of the universe.

AMEN

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