

# It Is Good That We Are Here

## Sermon 172 | Greystone Baptist Church | February 19, 2023

### Matthew 16:24 - 17:8

Can you remember the last time you felt awe? Like, when you knew that something bigger than you was happening, like the Holy Spirit was closer than usual?

Sometimes we feel awe when we are in nature. There was one time, a few years ago, when I was driving into the mountains outside of Phoenix, Arizona. The sun was breaking through the clouds with such beauty that I had to stop and take a picture, again and again. It was an exquisite display of nature; neither my words nor this photo do it justice. It made me want to pray and give God thanks not only for the beauty itself, but for the privilege to see it.

Sometimes we feel awe in the presence of others... like a few weeks ago during the children's sermon. April was talking about prayer and then she prayed, when she did, the children spontaneously repeated after her their prayer. That was church for me! A moment of awe and wonder... A *thin space* as some like to call it, where human and holy were not so far apart.

When was the last time you felt it?

Happiness researcher, Dacher Keltner, defines awe as the "emotion we experience when we encounter vast mysteries that we don't understand."

We encounter awe in nature, in art, in music. We experience it with and through other people in moments like weddings and graduations; when a baby is born or someone peacefully passes away after a good, long life.

We can find awe in large and small moments. Sometimes there is a realization and sometimes just a wave of chills that pass through with a word, a touch, a comforting presence. Whenever it comes, "Awe reveals that our current knowledge is not up to the task of making sense of what we have encountered."

These experiences of awe punctuate the stories of the Bible, beginning with the Garden of Eden as the first human beings wrestle with so much that they do not understand.

Then there was: the bush that burned before the eyes of Moses without being consumed, the walls of water that stood up and parted clearing the ground so that Hebrew feet could march on toward freedom, the cave that held Elijah protecting him from the overwhelming magnitude of God as God passed by, and now the effervescent glow of Jesus standing on the mount of transfiguration - these are all certainly moments of awe and wonder.

Experiences of which our minds cannot make sense, and yet experiences that change us forever, shaping us into a different kind of people.

In his research, Keltner finds that opportunities of awe and wonder “are all around us, if we only pause for a moment and open our minds.” There are moments in our everyday lives that can overwhelm us with awe, remind us of the closeness of God and the proximity of wonder.

In his podcast called the *Science of Happiness*, Keltner’s guest, Natalie, tells the story of being on a walk. She was an addict and this was one of her first memories of sobriety. She walked on the sidewalk in her neighborhood and all of a sudden she looked up and saw a garden her neighbor had been cultivating. She was stunned by the beauty of the garden and could hardly fathom how it was possible that she’s walked this sidewalk many times before and never seen it. Beholding its beauty for the first time and realizing she’d somehow missed it a thousand times before, she was overcome with awe and she wept right there on the sidewalk.

These kinds of moments can transform our lives, because as Natalie learned, they can “[quiet] the nagging self-critical, overbearing, status-conscious voice of our self, or ego, and [in so doing, they empower] us to collaborate, [to] open our minds to wonders, and to see the deep patterns of life,” dancing all around us.

When we do awaken to these extraordinary happenings, when the truly transcendent experiences come, we want to linger there as long as possible.

Like when Natalie first saw the beauty of her neighbor’s garden - she didn’t want to speed on by. Like when the kids were praying, I didn’t want that prayer to end. Or when I was driving through the Arizona mountains, I could have kept on forever, if not for the conference I was supposed to attend or the knowledge that eventually I would run out of gas.

Sometimes when we gaze upon our growing children, or aging parents, or changing friendships, we want time to stand still so that we can cherish the good moments just a little bit longer. ...and yet we know that life must go on.

This must have been what was going through the minds of Peter, James and John as their eyes beheld the miracle of the transfiguration. Right before their eyes Jesus - who just moments before was probably wearing a brown tunic, nothing special, something ordinary and probably similar to what they themselves were wearing... Just moments before Jesus probably looked and smelled like the dust from the path, like sweat from the work and travel that preceded this miraculous event; Just moments before Jesus was just a wise friend, one of them leading the hike, until all of a sudden he wasn’t.

In a moment of interrupting awe, Jesus’ face began to shine like the sun and his clothes were white as the light. And not just that, but the journey was interrupted by two new figures: Moses the father of the law and Elijah the father of the prophets.

There, standing between the law and the prophets, the two guiding forces of the relationship between God and God's people, there, standing between the two Jesus begins to shine and a voice - much like the voice we heard in the baptism scene just a few chapters earlier - issues the same, familiar blessing, "This is my Son, with whom I am well pleased." And then an additional imperative: "Listen to him!" These words uttered from on high in this awe-some moment remind us of the centrality, urgency, and importance of Jesus' message.

Peter - struck by the wonder of it all - wanted to linger in the miracle taking place right in front of him, he wanted to stay there on the mountain forever, basking in the glory of Jesus' transfiguration. "It is good that we are here!" He cried out, "Let us build a shelter for you, and one for Moses, and one for Elijah," (implied) so y'all can stay right here, just like this forever.

And though it may be tempting, we can't blame Peter for his question, in fact we ought to applaud his courage in saying the thing we all ultimately say - even if we're not saying it so much with our words as with our actions.

Why don't you stay right over here, God, high on this mountain where I can come and visit you when I want to, when I mean to, when I need a little pick me up? Why don't you stay right over here, Jesus, so that I can keep you separate from the complicated situations that govern my everyday life? Why don't you stay right over here, and keep the law and the prophets with you - nice and tidy - so that I might call on you when I want to?

It is so good that we are here, to bask in your glory, to bear witness to that which is so beautiful and so real that my brain can hardly contain it. It is good that we are here, it feels so good to be this close to you God... why don't you just stay here, and stay the same, so that when we need this experience again we know exactly where to find it?

Sometimes we look at the disciples and wonder how they don't get it. How they could be so dense and yet more often than not, they act the same way and they ask the same questions that we do.

I love that Peter is the one leading the charge in this story because remember, Peter is the rock upon which the church is built. And here, Peter couldn't possibly be more like the church for whom he will become the foundation.

*This is good, this worked that one time, can't we just put our stake in the ground here, can't we just stay here? Why do we have to change that? I like it just the way it is.*

I love that Peter is the one asking the questions because in this moment, Peter couldn't be more human... and it is only human to want to linger in the good times. Like Peter, we want to build a shelter, a shrine, a sanctuary around our most holy and transcendent moments, the moments when we felt God was right here in our midst, but here's the thing... the Holy Spirit is on the move, beckoning us forward (Just like Jesus with the disciples in this beautiful story) and if we stay still too long, we're going to miss everything that is about to happen.

Like a child looking out the back window of an old station wagon we are going to fix our gaze on where we have been and miss the beauty, the mystery... the awe and wonder... that is unfolding just up ahead.

Here's the other thing, in the Bible, when these moments of awe and wonder arrive, they bring with them a new or re-newed call. The people who experience the wonder of God's proximity are transformed by that overwhelming awesome presence; they are fundamentally different than they were before; they are changed and given a renewed purpose.

When Moses stood before the burning bush he was called to become the liberator for the Hebrew people. He didn't want the responsibility, didn't think he was especially gifted for the job, and yet he was called by God and in that moment of awe and wonder, the motherless child adopted by Pharaoh's own daughter became the one who would free his people from that same Pharaoh's slave quarters.

When Elijah sought shelter in a mountain cave after running away from the people God called him to serve, God passed by, renewed his call and sent him right back to those very people with a new sense of courage, commitment, and confidence so that he could deliver the prophetic words God gave him to speak.

And when James, John, and Peter saw Jesus transfigured, when they stood face to face with God's holy presence they saw that Jesus stood in the authority and lineage of the law and the prophets, In these holy moments, they had their doubts, their hesitations, *they wanted to stay!* But Jesus said, "Get up! ...Do not be afraid."

Recognizing all of this - recognizing that it seems to be in God's nature to transcend, to interrupt, to overwhelm us with beauty and awe and wonder AND recognizing that these experiences of God's overwhelming presence so often lead us to a new or renewed call, it makes me wonder...

What is our awe calling us toward? If we meet awe in this sanctuary, in this community, is God calling us to give more generously so that we can sustain this gift and pass it on to our children and grandchildren? If we meet awe in the beauty of creation, in nature, is God calling us to become better stewards and caretakers of this earth? If we meet awe in the presence of others, is God calling us to become better neighbors- perhaps giving of our time, standing up for justice, and advocating with those whose voices have been quieted?

Where is our awe calling us? What kind of people, what kind of church are we becoming in light of our awe and wonder?

Dacher Keltner is right, the moments of awe and wonder are all around us, we just have to quiet the noise, the distraction, and perhaps even our own egos long enough to see God's handiwork on display all around us.

God is near.

But God will not be contained by our shelters and sanctuaries.

So where is our awe calling us?

And how will we be transformed and renewed by it?

I don't know yet.

But I can't wait to find out.