

## Awe and Eternal Life

Lent 2 (A)

Written by Penny Duffy

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*"... so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."*

One night about 30 years ago, shortly after we'd built our house in a new neighborhood in southwest Rochester, we found ourselves with our kids out in the backyard staring up at the night sky, mouths open. Pretty soon, others — people we'd yet to meet, who didn't know each other — were in their yards, doing the same thing. And slowly, without speaking, we started gravitating toward one another, kind of stumbling, still looking skyward, until we formed a loose circle. The only sound was the occasional sharp intake of breath and the slow letting out of a whispered "Oooo" and "Ohhhh!"

There, directly overhead, was what appeared to be a dark, starless circle or dome spread out over our yards. From it, random streaks of pink, green, and lavender shot straight out laterally across the sky. In all directions. At random. Over here. Over there. We were waiting for piped musical notes to erupt from it. Wondering if we had a musical instrument to answer it. From time to time, we'd look at each other, eyes wide, souls on tiptoe, shaking our heads. "Northern lights, right?" someone said tentatively. "But, uh, aren't they usually along the horizon?" another answered. But there was nothing on the horizon — just this giant, black, color-shooting disc above us. Absolutely mesmerizing. When the sky-show finally faded and stars reappeared overhead, we were too awestruck to even introduce ourselves. We didn't need to. For we had experienced something that took us out of ourselves, out of our separate identities, and lifted us into something greater, united in our common humanity.

That is what awe does — imparts a sense of something vast that transcends our limited selves and our limited understanding of the world. Close your eyes for a second and consider a time you felt speechless with wonder — maybe it was watching a slow-motion video of a hummingbird flapping its iridescent wings. Maybe it was witnessing a birth or a death. Maybe an eclipse or meteor shower or seeing that very first snowdrop inching up out of a crust of snow, about to unfurl its petals. Maybe it was that image of a soldier saving a dog from bombed-out rubble and tucking him into his coat. Or some other random act of courage or kindness. Or maybe it was right here, saying the Lord's Prayer in unison, our collective voices an incantation, tapping into something beyond words. "Our Father who art in heaven . . ." Something *eternal*.

As you probably know, awe, as an emotion, has lately been under study by neurologists, neuropsychologists, sociologists and various other "ologists." Dacher Keltner from UC Berkeley, a social psychologist with a book out on the topic, cites research that suggests that unlike other emotions, awe can be considered a collective emotion, binding us to one another. It tends to suppress self-preoccupation and entitlement. It has been shown to affect unique parts of the brain and to release oxytocin, the "love" hormone. And in controlled experiments, awe has actually been found to *generate* post-awe acts of generosity and kindness.

I think the tendency of awe to inspire selflessness may explain a lot about the power and the nature of the movement that became Christianity in its pure and early form. On a regular basis, those who were in the presence of a man called Jesus from a town called Nazareth witnessed extraordinary acts of wonder. As Nicodemus says in today's Gospel, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God."

In explaining the concept of what is born of the Spirit versus "earthly things," Jesus reminds Nicodemus of one of the simple wonders of everyday life — wind. We experience it but have no idea where it comes from or where it goes, he says. So it is with everyone born of the spirit. In other words, we can experience but not fully comprehend it. It's like looking over the Grand Canyon. We can explain it geologically, but we cannot put into words the wonder of it.

Now imagine being there with him as Jesus goes on to say, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."

*Eternal life? What? Excuse me?* his followers might have thought. No one has ever promised eternal life! And not one of them, nor a single one of us these 2,000 years later, can explain it. And yet, we, like those early followers, believe in it. Because they then and we now believe in something else — that Jesus was the son of God come to heal a broken world, sent to open or actually *to be* a portal between this world and the next.

Why did they believe that? Why do we? Maybe in part it was because time and again, Jesus inspired the emotion we call awe at his acts of humanity, generosity, and selflessness, his authenticity, and yes, his acts of wonder. Jesus was not a magician doing magic tricks. He was not a politician or superpower sent to overthrow an evil empire. He was not a moral philosopher. He was a miracle worker, transforming those who followed him by his actions, stories and "signs." You don't have to believe he actually changed water to wine to understand he was channeling God's benevolence, or believe he walked on water to understand his followers were learning to trust God in the face of fear.

But how ever these acts were experienced or later interpreted — as actual miracles or as altered experience — the *true miracle* was the transformation of those who were with him. Time and again, they must have felt awestruck. Today, we understand that awe inspires acts for the greater good. It humbles us. Connects us to something larger. No matter how briefly. Every one of us has at some time experienced just that — being speechless with wonder, filled with light, boundless in our sense of goodwill.

That night out in our yard, no matter how we tried to rationalize what we saw, intellectualization paled in comparison to what we *felt* — a brush with the divine, a sense of the eternal. Sure, it was probably some unique presentation of northern lights. So what? For those 40 minutes we were not observing it, we were *of* it. Let me say that again. We were *of it*.

So here were these followers having a near daily experience of those emotions of awe, perhaps inspiring their own acts of altruism, reinforced by a desire to promote the greater good, a sense of their common humanity with friends and foes. Sure, they had doubts, failed, and on occasion wanted proof from Jesus, but time and again his words and actions must have struck them in a way that lifted them beyond narrow self-interest into what? Into *life*.

And so it went, a great begetting of awe into action that grew and grew because why? Because it was life-sustaining — a state of being that was *of life*, for death is about stillness, stasis, and inertia. But life? Life is about growth and change, about transformation, about ever-becoming.

Eternal life? It's not out there in some next world. We're already in it. Right here. Right now. For if we truly believe in Jesus, it means navigating this polarized, extremist, upended world with compassion, with forgiveness, with kindness and humility, and with the faith that *everything* we know may fall away, and I mean *everything*, yet still we are in it, ever transforming, ever becoming. Because that kind of faith, that awe-

inspired, generous, lift-you-out-of-yourself faith, comes with a profound sense of being a part of the great collective that *is* God, that *is life everlasting*, the unending all of all that is, all that was, and all that is to come. Amen.

--*Penny Duffy*