

**April 30, 2023**  
**“Awe and Abundance”**  
**John 10:1-10 / Acts 2:42-47a**  
**Pastor Tim Emmett-Rardin**

Awe and abundance. That's the title of my mini-ish sermon this morning. And also the two words that stood out for me in this morning's scripture texts. Awe and abundance.

Awe, we know, is basically defined as “a feeling of reverential respect mixed with fear or wonder.” Or an experience of mystery so vast that it “transcends our understanding of the world.”

Awe can have negative or positive impact, depending on whether it's marked by fear OR wonder – though as Terry Tempest Williams has said, “the difference between fear and awe is a matter of our eyes adjusting.”

The podcast, *On Being with Krista Tippett*, recently featured an interview with Dacher Keltner, a professor of psychology at the University of California, Berkeley and founding director of the Greater Good Science Center. Who knew there was such a place?!

Keltner is also the author of the new book, *Awe: The New Science of Everyday Wonder and How It Can Transform Your Life*.

In the interview he talks about the power of awe, awe that we might experience through the vastness and beauty of nature, or through a felt presence of the divine in our lives. But his research suggests that what people tend to find most awe-inspiring, and more commonly awe-inspiring, is other people. Ordinary people doing extraordinary things. Meaningful connection with ordinary people like us.

And his research into the neuroscience and neurophysiology of awe confirms that, no matter its source, awe is literally health-giving, immunity-boosting. Awe promotes clear thinking. Awe brings our nervous systems and heartbeats and breath into sync within our bodies, and sometimes in sync with other bodies around us. Awe can bring us closer to each other and more deeply into an awareness of our inherent interconnectedness with the world around us.

Keltner says that the purpose of awe is “to recognize what’s life-giving.” Awe and abundance.

In our reading from the book of Acts, the Lectionary fast forwards a bit – beyond post-Easter accounts to a post-Pentecost account and the birth of the early community of Jesus’ followers. Peter is leading the charge, trying faithfully to carry out Jesus’ teaching and example and way of life. His way of love.

He and other apostles, we’re told, were performing many “wonders and signs” – and as a result, “awe came upon everyone.” The awe they experienced in Jesus they are now experiencing without him in the flesh. And within that shared sense of awe and wonder, they share everything in common. They sell their possessions and make the proceeds available for the common good. They were, as described elsewhere in Acts, “of one heart and soul ...”

“Day by day, ... they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people.”

That, friends, is a description of awe leading to abundance – the kind of abundant life Jesus says he came to unlock.

From Proverbs we get the reminder that “fear of the Holy One is the beginning of wisdom” – fear better translated here as awe. And it was Socrates who said that “wonder is the beginning of wisdom.”

Wonder and awe lead us to wisdom – which we might define as deep awareness of what matters, what’s life-giving. Think about anyone in your life you consider or considered wise, and why? I suspect it comes back to an ability to push past all the weeds to the root of what matters and what is truly and ultimately life-giving.

Wonder and awe point us back to awareness of and gratitude for what matters and what is life-giving. In a world increasingly marked by isolation and loneliness, by disconnection and distraction, where life is so much harder than it has to be for so

many, wonder and awe point us back to each other. To love and life. To generosity and abundance.

John's gospel includes that famous verse from Jesus: "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." A verse preceded by the metaphor of a sheepfold, where Jesus initially claims to be the gate through which the sheep enter the fold. And then later claims to be the shepherd.

The good shepherd, one of the seven so-called "I am statements" that Jesus makes about himself, found only in the gospel of John. I am the bread of life; the light of the world; the door; the resurrection and the life; the way, the truth and the life; the true vine; the good shepherd.

These statements contribute to the fact that John is so profoundly different from the other gospels, with characters and events that the others do not include. And WITHOUT stories that are prominent in Matthew, Mark and Luke.

These "I am" statements also contribute to the opinion of many biblical scholars that much of what John has Jesus saying, including about himself, were not words of the historical Jesus but more likely words put into his mouth by the early (and heavily persecuted) early Christian community; John being the latest gospel written.

Jesus does not make such claims about himself anywhere else. In the other gospels, Jesus primarily points to God, not to himself.

That said, I want to take a minute to engage the metaphor, the sheepfold – as close as John comes to a parable, which we know is a feature of the other gospels and the primary way by which Jesus spoke and taught. Jesus did not tell people what to believe; he taught and showed them how to live.

Our reading this morning begins with a verse that is often used to draw and justify a line in the sand between believers and non-believers, Christians and non-Christians. According to John, this is Jesus speaking – and Jesus speaking specifically to the Pharisees, to the Jewish keepers of Mosaic law.

“Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit.” If Jesus is the gate, anyone who doesn't believe in Jesus or believe certain things about Jesus must thereby be a thief and a bandit.

But the Way that Jesus taught and embodied was and is not about believing in Jesus or believing certain things about Jesus. It's about love. Love is the way to the sheepfold, to good pasture, to safety and community.

If you enter by a way other than love, by fear or by hatred say, you are a thief and a bandit because you are taking what does not belong to you. Love can only belong to those who love allow themselves to be loved.

As Jesus asserts through the parable of the lost sheep, found in Matthew and Luke, remember that love is the shepherd who leaves the flock of 99 sheep to find the one that's lost.

If Jesus is the gate or the shepherd in the metaphor, it's because he wants – as God does – for everyone to be found. Saved, if you will. To be held. To belong. To be loved and to love.

Steve Garnaas-Holmes (that guy again), writes poetically of this truth:

*He says he's a gate but we make him a wall.  
An obstacle. A closure. A restriction  
that limits access to God to the right people.  
Baloney.*

*Jesus is here to let people in, not to keep them out.  
He's not a wall, but a door. Not a fence but a gateway.  
An opening.  
Jesus is for those who are searching for God,  
sheep searching for good pasture,  
who keep coming up against walls.  
Fear is a wall.  
Doubt and distrust is a wall.  
People's judgment and expectations are a wall.  
Religion can be a wall.  
But Jesus is an opening.*

*Through all the walls of right religion and being good enough  
Jesus holds an opening. A gateway.  
He says, "I am your opening.  
Come in and go out, and find good pasture.  
Let me love you. That is the gateway to everything."*

Which isn't to say, of course, that Jesus is the only gateway. The point is, whether Jesus actually spoke these words or not, the voice we are called to follow is marked by its consistent and compelling invitation to love and therefore life. Abundant life, in fact. Unlike the voices of thieves and bandits who come "only to steal and kill and destroy."

The point is to pay attention to the voices you follow. There are a lot of voices in this world calling for our attention, but most ultimately lead us away from the sheepfold, away from good pasture, away from safety and community, away from connection and love. Don't listen to them, Jesus says. Deep down within themselves, the sheep know the shepherd's voice when they hear it.

The point, then, is to listen for that still, small voice that you know deep down and that knows you more deeply than you know yourself. The one that calls you by name. And then follow it where it leads you, back to love and life.

As even social scientists are now acknowledging and confirming, experiences of wonder and awe open us up – again and again – to love and life. To connection and re-connection, with each other and with the whole of creation.

Wonder and awe open us up to glad and generous hearts. To concern for and commitment to the common good. To abundance experienced and abundance shared. To love and life. That's the metaphor of the sheepfold to which we are all invited. The one we can only enter with love. By love.

Wonder and awe put things in appropriate and life-giving perspective, places us in broader context. So be on the lookout, friends, for everyday wonder. Slow down and pay close attention because awe and abundance are everywhere. And listen deeply for the voice of abundant love and life within and around you.

May it be so.