

Amazement

Stephen Van Kuiken
North Congregational U.C.C.
Columbus, OH
June 23, 2024

Ancient Witness: Exodus 3:2-6

This passage of Moses going up the mountain, perhaps searching for a word, a whisper from God, is one of my favorite passages. It represents the spiritual quest, seeking meaning and purpose, opening to the sacred, listening for the eternal wisdom.

We all know the story about how the Egyptians enslaved the Israelites, how brutal and ruthless they were. Then the king of Egypt declared that all the baby boys born to the Hebrews should be killed by throwing them into the Nile river.

When Moses was born, his mother put him in a basket and floated it in the river in a desperate attempt to save him. The infant was discovered by the Pharaoh's daughter who took care of and adopted him.

One day after he had grown up, the text says "he went out to his people and saw their forced labor. He saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his kinfolk." (So even though he was raised as Egyptian royalty, he knew his true heritage.) The text continues: "He looked this way and that, and seeing no one he killed the Egyptian and hid him in the sand."

When Pharaoh heard about it, he sought to kill him. So, Moses fled to the land of Midian. Eventually, he married the daughter of Jethro, the priest of Midian, and they had a child. Meanwhile, the Hebrew people were still held in brutal slavery in Egypt.

This is the context for today's part of the story. Moses was watching Jethro's flock, and he found himself on Mount Horeb, which means "the mountain of God." Now, of course, *every* mountain is a "mountain of God" in the truest sense, and *all* land is holy ground. This is not a story about geography, but one of where Moses comes to an awareness.

And Moses sees this bush, and it appeared to him that it was on fire. And he says to himself, "I need to stop and look at this great sight." He is amazed and filled with awe. Then after this experience, we read of Moses' newfound commitment for justice and the liberation of his people. These two things are connected.

The famous Jewish theologian and 20th century prophet for justice, Abraham Joshua Heschel, wrote,

The roots of ultimate insight are found... on the level of wonder and radical amazement, in the depth of awe, in our sensitivity to mystery.

The idea here is that amazement and awe are the foundational spiritual experiences. Amazement is the starting point. It precedes and is the precursor to faith. It is the root of faith. And so, struck by awe, Moses takes off his shoes, and the very earth beneath his feet becomes “holy ground.”

Again, Heschel says it so well. “Awe is more than emotion; it is a way of understanding, insight into a meaning greater than ourselves.” In Proverbs it says, “Fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.” But a better translation of the Hebrew is “awe.” The awe of God, awe of the holy, is the beginning of wisdom.

So here’s the thing—it’s not about the bush, or the ground, or the angel, or a disembodied voice. It’s about an internal change in Moses that allowed him to see things in a different way. As Richard Rohr writes, what we are able to see in the outer world is a mirror reflection of our own inner world and state of consciousness at the time.

Listen to what Elizabeth Barrett Browning beautifully wrote:

*Earth’s crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with God,
But only he who sees takes off his shoes;
The rest sit round and pluck blackberries.*

The one who sees takes off their shoes. It’s about seeing what others do not. Every bush is burning.

Amazement is a way of seeing, a way of understanding in which we behold the Sacred Presence in all things. It is an insight for the dignity of all things. It is to sense the Mystery, the Beyond, the Beauty—everywhere. It is to embrace the truth at the heart of reality: we are one. And it fills us with a reverence toward all things. And we take off our shoes. We see the reflection of the Divine in the human, in the animal, in the entire natural world. Everything is holy.

There’s another great story by Heschel (*Quest for God*). There was this Jewish school of young children. One day in the middle of the lesson, a squadron of Roman soldiers, in chariots and marching in armor, went by the schoolhouse. Each regiment carried a statue of a different Roman god. And some would cry out, “Make way! Make way for Apollo. Make way! Make way for Aphrodite!”

The children were wide-eyed and the teacher could see it was making a powerful impression upon them. My dear children, said the teacher, don’t you know that in front of every human being there is also a parade of a thousand angels, and each angel cries out to all who pass by: “Make way! Make way for the image of God!”

And Heschel said that reverence for God is shown in our reverence for humankind.

Paul Woodruff in his book, *Reverence*, says that when we renew this forgotten virtue in our society, it will lead to a greater respect toward other human beings and toward our natural

environment. It will also lead to a deeper understanding of human limitations. “To forget that you are only human, to think you can act like a god,” he writes, “this is the opposite of reverence.” I think that he’s right. Without the sense of awe, amazement and reverence, things fall apart. He writes,

The voices that call in the name of God for aggressive war have lost sight of human limitations. They have lost reverence... So it is when a people believe that their god commands them to take land from others, or insists that they force others into their way of thinking.

We can see this today. We are living in an age of a lack of amazement, it seems to me. You can call it the spirituality of capitalism. Or the spirituality of mammon. We seem to know the price of everything but the value of nothing. In our society we commodify everything, seeing people and things only as utility for our small agendas. We’ve lost the ability to be amazed and yawn in boredom. As Richard Rohr says, “The Western mind almost refuses to be in awe anymore.” If there was more amazement there would be more outcry against bombing men, women and children into oblivion, and the thousands dying of hunger and thirst would not be ignored. And we wouldn’t so easily destroy the earth for comfort and financial gain.

Even Einstein, the brilliant physicist, said,

The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious... those who no longer pause to wonder and stand rapt in awe are as good as dead; their eyes are closed.

He could be talking about our current culture, including most of religion.

I like how Woodruff describes reverence as a universal human experience. He writes,

Reverence runs across religions and even outside them... We may be divided from one another by our beliefs, but never by reverence. If you desire peace in the world, do not pray that everyone share your beliefs. Pray instead that all may be reverent.

What, then, can we do if awe and reverence are so crucial to flourish and survive as a species? If amazement is the antidote to despair and hopelessness, how can we have it? Another writer Cole Arthur Riley describes being amazed as a spiritual practice. He said,

I think awe is an exercise, both a doing and a being. It is a spiritual muscle of our humanity that we can keep from atrophying if we exercise it habitually... When I speak of wonder, I mean the practice of beholding the beautiful. Beholding the majestic—the snow-capped Himalayas, the sun setting on the sea—but also the perfectly mundane—the soap bubble reflecting your kitchen, the oxidized underbelly of that stainless steel pan. More than the grand beauties of our lives, wonder is about having the presence to pay attention to the commonplace. It could be said that to find beauty in the ordinary is a deeper exercise than climbing to the mountaintop...

Riley continues:

Wonder includes the capacity to be in awe of humanity, even your own. It allows us to jettison the dangerous belief that things worthy of wonder can only be located on nature hikes and scenic overlooks. This can distract us from the beauty flowing through us daily. For every second that our organs and bones sustain us is a miracle... To be able to marvel at the face of our neighbor with the same awe we have for the mountaintop, the sunlight refracting—this manner of vision is what will keep us from destroying each other...

So friends yes, let us work for social justice, but may we daily and hourly
practice Radical Amazement,
practice sensing that which is Beyond,
practice beholding Beauty,
and practice standing rapt in the Mystery.

Amen.