

## BOWING IN AWE BEFORE MYSTERY

(09/24/2023)

Scripture Readings: Psalm 100  
Acts 17:16-29  
1 Corinthians 4:01

*“Worship the Lord with gladness.”* (Ps. 100:2)

*“Think of us in this way, as servants of Christ and stewards of God’s mysteries.”* (1 Cor. 4:01)

This past Tuesday, in our Spiritual Study & Growth Group, we had a lively discussion of the experience of awe. We talked about what kind of experiences evoke in us a feeling of awe. Many of us mentioned moments where we felt a deep relatedness to nature, to a little flower, a spider’s intricate web, or a starry sky. The birth of a child, the mystery of this little human being coming into the world with all his/her/their parts working strikes us as miraculous. Certain types of music evoke the kinds of feelings that the psychologist Abraham Maslow described as peak experiences. After we ended the meeting, as so often happens with me, I thought of another example—an example of what it means to bow in awe before Mystery.

The other impetus for us to explore the religious experience of awe in the face of Mystery was an insight I came to while attending the 2023 Parliament of the World’s Religions in Chicago. Attendant to the realization that, much too often, institutional religion has been and continues to be a cause of the world’s problems rather than a solution to them, I came to the conclusion that our response to the complexity of life in the twenty-first century should not be fundamentalism, which seems to be the predominant response to the rapid and unsettling changes that are taking place all around us; it should be bowing in awe before Mystery (with a capital “M”)—and then building a relationship with it!

I will be saying more about this when I figure out what I would like to say.

After our study group, I recalled that early in the last century, in a cave nestled high in the Swiss Alps, explorers found a little shrine made of the skull and the long bones of cave bears. From the positioning of the bones, with the long bones sticking through the eye sockets of the skull, from the remains of a fire in front of it, and from the drawings on the cave walls, it was clear that this little area had a religious significance and function.

We don’t know what the early humans or humanoids who inhabited this cave and constructed this shrine thought and felt. We can only guess. We do know they were hunters. It seems a not unrealistic assumption that these early humans, these members of a hunting and gathering community, were witnessing to their experience of the mystery of life through the establishment of this shrine and probably a corresponding religious ritual.

These early humans knew that the cave bear provided them with the food and clothing that were necessary for life. Through a primitive religious act, they expressed their gratitude to the cave bear for sacrificing, for giving its life for them. They felt a deep and powerful relatedness to the animal that they had to kill to survive.

In our own religious tradition, we thank God for providing us with the bread of life, both material and spiritual, when we say grace before meals. In the prayer of thanksgiving in our Eucharistic service, we thank God for sending us the Christ who gave his life for us and whose body and blood we receive in the Sacrament of Holy Communion. What I find so amazing is that these early humans, living so long ago, had the same sense of the spiritual dimension of life, the same realization that this mysterious life comes from somewhere else and that it does not end with death. Through this ritual, they were asking the spirit of the cave bear to return in a new form, to give them once again what they needed in order to live. They promised that, if the cave bear would return, they would continue to honor its spirit in their little rituals and shrines.

Joseph Campbell, the eminent mythologist, has suggested that this shrine had to have been set up before the last glacial period in Europe, for during that period, the entrance to the cave was entirely covered by ice. It could not have been set up after the last glacial period, for after the last glacier, there were no longer any cave bears in the world. Campbell reasons that, in light of these factors, this little shrine had to have been constructed approximately two hundred thousand years ago. Two hundred thousand years ago! This was a long time before Abraham, a long time before Moses and David. Long before the advent of Islam, which is 1500 years old, before Christianity, which is 2000 years old, before Buddhism and Taoism, which are 2500 years old, before Judaism, which is 4500 years old, and even before Hinduism, which is 8000 years old, people were bowing before the sacredness and the mystery of life.

What were these early humans or humanoids thinking and feeling? What possessed them to construct a little shrine and bow before it? Jane Goodall has observed that chimpanzees react with what looks like a mixture of fear and awe in a thunder-and-lightning storm, but the response of chimpanzees to thunder and lightning is still a long way from consciously constructing a shrine and creating a ritual that not only witnesses to the human awareness of the great mystery of life, but actually seeks to build a deeper relationship with it.

This dimension of religious faith, this dimension of awe in the presence of mystery, is unique to human beings. Goethe says that this sense of awe in the presence of mystery is the greatest and most noble of all human emotions. From this sense of awe, we humans feel the need to connect with this source of mystery, to invoke its presence, to bow before it, and to build or deepen our relationship with it.

On our driving tour of this great country twenty-five years ago, Darlene, Kristen and I were not specifically embarking upon a pilgrimage to sacred places. We did, however, see some beautiful churches. There was a little Roman Catholic chapel nestled into the hills of Sedona, a quiet, meditative chapel dedicated to St. Francis, that felt like a sacred space. In the beauties of nature, the sense of mystery that was palpable in the Badlands of South Dakota, Bryce Canyon in Utah, and Mesa Verde in Colorado, we could see why ancient people regarded these areas as sacred spaces. In the cave drawings of Canyon de Chelly in New Mexico, the symbolic depictions of the sun, the moon, the wheel of life, and the Navaho fertility God, Kokopelli, we saw how ancient people depicted and bowed before the great mystery of life.

The Trappist monk, Thomas Merton, has said that it is easy to be a monk if you live in a monastery. It is easy to be a scholar if you live in a library. The trick is to live the core elements of the monastic life, the contemplative life, while living in the real world. The challenge, at least my challenge, is to continue to read, to study, to grow while shouldering all the family and professional demands of a very busy life.

It is easy to have a sense of the sacred if we are standing in the midst of a beautiful and mysterious canyon, or if we are meditating in the sanctuary of the cathedral at Chartres. It is more difficult to experience a sense of the sacred while we are living our normal, everyday life in the real world, to see the spiritual dimension of life which infuses the material world, to see the blending of the sacred and the profane, and, with all our knowledge and technology, to bow, as those primitive cave dwellers bowed, before the great mystery of life whom we call God.

If we lose a sense of the mystery of life, if we lose a sense of the sacredness of life, if we lose a sense of the spiritual dimension of life and of ourselves, we have lost something precious. Without this, our daily life becomes absorbed with the mechanics of survival, survival oriented toward and accompanied by the pleasures of a nice house, car, and good food, but survival, nonetheless. When this happens, the meaning of life becomes distorted. Darlene, Kristen, and I found it sad to see people in Reno, Las Vegas, and Native American reservations leaving their little children in the casino restaurant while they bowed before slot machines, praying that the goddess of luck would bestow endless riches upon them. Nature abhors a vacuum. When we do not place God at the center of our life, the center will be filled with something else.

The core of the universe, the core of life, the core of our own being is shrouded in the great mystery we call God. We cannot fully understand this mystery, but we need to try in our own limited way with our own little brains and our own limited language. It is presumptuous to even name this mystery, but we are told by Jesus that we not only are allowed to do this; we are encouraged to do it. We can call this mystery "Abba." We know that this mystery is impersonal,

that it fills the entire universe, that it has created and continues to create all that is, but we are also told by Jesus that it is personal, that it cares about us in the same way that a mother cares for her child, that it is more intimately connected to us than we are to ourselves.

Heinrich Zimmer, the great historian of religions, has said that the most important things in life cannot be put into words and cannot be understood. The second most important things in life can be put into words, but the words are misunderstood. The least important things in life are what we can put into words and understand clearly. I believe God falls into the first of these categories, though some of my colleagues in ministry not only disagree, but even reverse the three options. When we lose touch with the great mystery that is at the core of life and of our life, we have made a grave mistake. We do need to give this mystery a name. We do need to try to understand it. We do need to build and deepen our relationship with it. On a deeper, more fundamental level, we need to bow before it. We need to bow before the great mystery of God.

I like the following quote from Chuang Tzu, one of the disciples of Lao Tzu, the Chinese mystic whose pithy 81 reflections form the basis of Taoism. Chuang Tzu says,

*The purpose of a fish net is to catch fish.  
When the fish are caught, the net is forgotten.  
The purpose of a rabbit snare is to catch rabbits.  
When the rabbits are caught, the snare is forgotten.  
The purpose of words is to convey ideas.  
When the ideas are grasped, the words are forgotten.  
Where is the person who has forgotten words?  
That is the person with whom I would like to talk.*

It also echoes Lao Tzu who, in the first poem of the Tao te Ching, says,

*The tao that can be told  
is not the eternal Tao.  
The name that can be named  
is not the eternal Name.*

In poem fifty-six, he says,

*Those who know don't talk.  
Those who talk don't know.*

Don't worry—I do grasp the irony of my efforts to communicate these profound spiritual truths in words, in a sermon. I confess that I don't know any other way to share them! The basic point is that I think that spiritual giants like Lao Tzu, like Chuang Tzu, like the apostle Paul, grasped the true meaning of awe, the true meaning of Mystery (with a capital “M”).

Near the close of our worship service this morning, one of the members of the Diaconate will issue a Call to Communion, an invitation to partake in this sacrament next Sunday. In our church, we offer the Sacrament of Holy Communion to all who wish to partake. There is no requirement that you be a member of this church to receive, no requirement that you believe what we believe (especially since most of us don't really know what we believe—not because we are biblically illiterate, though many of us are at least relatively illiterate, but because our faith is constantly evolving).

Some churches will not serve communion to children because they believe that a pre-confirmation child does not fully understand the meaning of this sacrament. What a joke! If we only served communion to those who fully understand this sacrament, we would not need to prepare many pieces of bread or cups of grape juice! At the core of this sacrament is a mystery we can never fully understand. I hope, in the midst of all my teaching and preaching, we don't lose a sense of this mystery and our need, in the final analysis, to bow before it.

This is why we worship. Every once in a while, I hear people say that they feel no need to worship God, that the term “worship” is an outdated concept. I understand what they are saying. However, I think they fail to grasp a sense of the transcendent that is an integral part of our Sunday worship. The transcendent is that which is beyond or above the range of normal or merely physical experience. It refers to something so excellent that it is beyond the range of human understanding. Worship is an organized, symbolic, ritualized attempt to enter into the presence of the transcendent, to experience its great mystery and majesty, to bow before it.

Angelus Silesius, the 17<sup>th</sup> century German Catholic priest and physician who was really a mystical poet, once wrote:

*God cannot be grasped.  
God is pure nothing, untouched by now or here: the more you reach for him, the more he evades you.  
God is a spirit, a fire, a being and a light.  
And yet at the same time he is also none of these.  
God beyond creation.  
Go where you cannot go! Look where you cannot look!  
Hear where there is no sound or echo: then you will be where God speaks.  
Silent prayer.  
God is above everything, so that nothing can be spoken:  
Therefore, best of all, pray to him in silence, too.*

This is what we long to experience in worship. Worship and prayer are an experience of making the transcendent immanent. We long for a sense of what the desert father St. Anthony describes

when he says that “the prayer of the monk is not pure until he no longer knows who he is or that he is praying.” In those moments when we experience only a glimpse of what St. Anthony or Angelus Silesius are describing, I think we are bowing before mystery.

Next Sunday, as we partake in the Sacrament of Holy Communion, let us bow before mystery. Those early cave dwellers knew that something which they didn’t understand and which they couldn’t even name had sent them the cave bear for food and clothing. They bowed before this mystery in gratitude. We know God sent us Jesus who showed us what this mystery looks like in human form, who taught us how to live, and who then died to the body of Jesus, to the world of human existence, to live inside us as the Holy Spirit.

When we lose a sense of the transcendent dimension of life, of this great mystery that is at the core of our religion as well as our life, worship can become as mechanical as our daily life. When this happens, we have lost something very special. Next Sunday, when you hold that little piece of bread in your hand, when you hold that little cup of grape juice, open yourself to Christ’s guiding presence. Take Christ into you, literally as well as symbolically.

But above all, in worship, bow with a sense of awe before the mystery of this sacrament, the mystery of Christ, the mystery of God, and the great mystery of your own life, your own special life!

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson  
The First Community Church of Southborough  
[www.firstcommunitychurch.com](http://www.firstcommunitychurch.com)  
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An audio version of this sermon will be posted on our church website later this week.

## **RESPONSE TO THE WORD—A CALL TO STEWARDSHIP**

As far as we can determine, the primitive humans that constructed the little altar with the bones of the cave bear in a cave high in the Swiss Alps felt a deep sense of gratitude not only for the bear they had killed, for the bear that gave them both food and clothing; they felt a deep sense of gratitude to the bear. They thanked the bear for giving its life for them, much as, in our worship, we thank Jesus for giving his life for us.

Also, as far as we can determine, these primitive human beings shared what they had with each other. They felt a deep sense of connection, a deep sense of interrelatedness both with nature and with their fellow human beings. I think we could call this the first human expressions of what we now call stewardship, the care and proper use of that which has been given to us, that which has been entrusted to us.

At the heart of Christian stewardship is a deep sense of interconnectedness, a deep sense of interrelatedness, a deep sense of the oneness of all life. The realization that all we have has come from God, and that it is entrusted to us, gives rise to a profound sense of gratitude. And this gratitude finds expression in a desire to build up each other in any way we can.

It is in this spirit that we share our gifts with this church, with the missions we support each month, with each other, and with the world that has been entrusted to us by God.