

Let It Go, Let It Be, Let It Come—The Spirit Moves
...toward Awe
Psalm 100

I never actually expect you to remember my sermons from week to week. On the occasions that someone tells me on Wednesday or Thursday that they're still thinking about something that I said on Sunday, I am pleasantly but genuinely surprised. Often I have to go back and see if I actually said the thing that found a home in their head. And usually what they have remembered isn't exactly what I said—which seems just right. The best sermons—the ones that burrow into us until they actually make a difference in the way we think and act—are not the ones that come out of the preacher's mouth, but the ones that get re-written and re-shaped in that sweet spot where the words meet your life. The experience each of us brings with us into worship is different, and so what each of us hears is a slightly different version of truth.

Unless it hit you at a particularly open moment, you may not have thought much about last Sunday's sermon after you left this sanctuary. But *I* thought about it a lot this week...more than I usually think about a sermon after it has already been spoken. Here's why.

I preached about how much God loves each of us: the unconditional, unfailing love that would change our lives if we could actually absorb its dimensions, get our arms around it. I absolutely believe every word I said last Sunday morning. I would recommend the sermon to you again. But I was conscious, all week, of how little impact that thought has had on me most of my life, and how numb I can be to it even now. "God loves you" is a statement that can sound like Muzak to us, a kind of over-sweetened, unremarkable melody that deserves to play in elevators and shopping malls. There are no sharp edges to penetrate our consciousness. We have heard it so many times that it seems flat and uninteresting. It may be true that the Creator of the entire universe knows how many hairs are on your head, but somewhere along the way, we have lost our capacity to be impressed or unsettled by that possibility. It just doesn't move us.

I have a friend and colleague whose small church developed a ministry called Kaleidoscope, whose purpose is to stay with people during their treatments for cancer. The volunteers in that ministry would bring a basket of gifts to any stranger they heard had received a cancer diagnosis, and then they would just be there; drive people to chemotherapy and radiation treatments, stay with them through long hours of sitting and nausea, stand by the mirror as their hair fell out in clumps. It is really a wonderful ministry. But one day, my friend Dan said, a man wandered in to the church office, someone who was not part of their church. He had lived a hard life: lots of drinking; he had already lost most of the people he might have thought of as family. And now his doctor had given him a diagnosis of terminal cancer. Dan and a couple of the Kaleidoscope volunteers were there, and they tried to reassure this man with the things they had learned to say. "Remember that God will always love you," Dan said. And the man—maybe less polite than most people—shot back at him. "What the hell does that mean?" he shouted. "What good does it do me, that 'God loves me'?"

Everyone in the room was silent; they didn't know what to say. And then Dan said, "Well, I don't really know what it means. But I know this: *I* love you." Dan's voice punched right

through the wall the man had built around himself. It opened up a space that had a moment before been filled with cynicism and alienation. The vague promise of affection from a formless deity who lives far away meant nothing to him. But the offer of acceptance from a real person he might have just insulted broke his heart wide open. Open enough to accept the gifts Kaleidoscope had to offer. They stayed with him until the moment he died—gracefully, peacefully.

I too have spent a lot of years of my life being unimpressed by the promise of God's love. OK, I thought; great. God loves me, just like God loves every person, every thing. There's no discrimination there. I want to have the sense that I am loved for who I am, appreciated for what I have worked hard to make of myself. God's love, it seemed to me, was like candy someone was throwing off the back of a parade float; it had no value, because I had not earned it.

Richard Rohr says, "God doesn't love you because you're good. God loves you because God is good." That is true. It is true enough to save your life. "Salvation" is the old-fashioned word for it. But I think people who work hard at being "good"—people like me—have a hard time hearing this as good news.

I'm a little embarrassed to say that out loud. I tell you this not because I am proud of that feeling, but because it is true. I'm pretty sure this is the character issue of my life. But I would guess I am not alone in my tendency to make my life all about me—what I have accomplished, what I can do, or could do, or should do; what other people think of me. I cling to the approval I have earned in other people's eyes. I work for it, and sometimes I resent them for withholding it.

The value of faith for me, the way it makes me a better person, is that it installs in me the steady drumbeat of a different story. I hope you hear this when you come to church too: the regular reminder that we are not the center of the universe. That a focus elsewhere can make our lives better, our vision truer. That we are great and small both. That not everything that happens is a reaction to us. That there is a presence, a force at work in the world and in your life that is worth simply kneeling in front of.

We *need* those reminders that there is something bigger and grander than our own hopes and ambitions for ourselves. That there is a story that is larger than our own, and that we find ourselves, our best purpose, our wholdest life, our full humanity *in* a story that is not about us. We need a sense of awe.

Maya Angelou told a story about a dinner party she was invited to the first time she went to Senegal. The dinner was at the home a friend who was very wealthy, very sophisticated; and many of the guests also seemed very elegant. In the host's home, she noticed that all the guests were stepping very carefully around a beautiful, obviously expensive rug in the middle of the floor. Angelou was appalled that her hostess could be so shallow as to make her guests walk around the rug so that she could keep her things clean. And so Maya Angelou decided she was going to make a statement about this. She stepped right onto that rug, and walked back and forth across it several times. The other guests, she said, were "bunched up on the sidelines, [and they] smiled at her weakly." She smiled back. She felt good about her boldness, her lesson to everyone there to remember that rugs are things to be walked on, not honored.

A few minutes later, the servants came out and quietly picked up the rug. They laid another rug in the same place—one that was equally beautiful. And then they proceeded to set it—with

plates, glasses, wine, food. The hostess announced that dinner was ready; that they were honored to serve a special Senegalese meal for “our sister from America, Maya Angelou.” And Angelou realized that she had proudly dragged her dirty shoes all over her gracious hostess’s tablecloth. Maya Angelou had a sense of cultural humility. It was one of the things that made her great. But she learned it through someone else’s act of generosity--at a moment when she had acted clumsily.¹

Often, the things that lead us to find a true perspective, our right place in the universe, are not the things that make us bigger, but the things that remind us that there is something bigger than us. Moments that surprise us; that remind us, instinctively, that we are in the presence of something greater than ourselves, a creative power beyond our imagination.

What we see in nature can call us to reverence. A piece of music can move us out of the confined space of our heads, the smallness of our hearts. A poem can magically capture a feeling you had not been able to put into words. An idea can be big enough to sweep you up and carry you with it. And sometimes it is an act of unimaginable kindness that can stun you with gratitude.

Albert Einstein said, “There are two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as though everything is a miracle.” Awe is our name for the moments when we are transported out of ourselves, into knowing that we are in the presence of great—something we might call God. Look for those moments, every day; they are there. Let them stop you in your tracks. Let them pierce through the tough layers of insulation that accumulate and tamp down our sense of wonder.

“Know that the Lord is God,” the psalmist says. “It is God that made us, and we are his. We are God’s people. Give thanks to him, bless his name. For the Lord is good; his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations.” That is an astounding piece of good news. Let us be a people not too proud or too numb to drop to our knees with gratitude, and in awe.

¹ From the book *Letter to My Daughter*, retold in *Carry On, Warrior*, by Glennon Doyle Melton, p. 85-86.