

**Rev. Kevin V. Madigan**  
**Church of St. Thomas More, NYC**  
**February 10, 2019 5th Sunday of Year C Luke 5:1-11**

I don't know about you, but there are certain words that in recent years I have found used in ways that annoy me. One is the ever present, "No problem," which seems to have replaced the once customary, "You're welcome." I feel like saying, "Of course, it's no problem; it's your job." Another is the use of the word, "awesome." Now it is applied to anything mildly out of the ordinary, as when you order the daily special from the restaurant menu, and the waiter responds, "awesome." We have lost sight of what is truly awesome, of what can leave us awestruck. Perhaps that is because we live in a flattened world, emptied of the transcendent, wherein everything is evaluated by its usefulness, by the comfort it provides, or by the ease with which it gets some task done. In the words of the recently revived, Bohemian Rhapsody, "Nothing really matters to me." Yet it is this aspect of awe that is at the heart of the vision recorded in Isaiah and in the reaction of Peter in today's Gospel. In fact, it is the feeling of awe that is at the heart of religious experience. The sadness of the world today is that it has trivialized the very meaning of the word, and therein discounted the possibility either of its search or of its discovery.

In today's first reading we hear Isaiah declare, "I saw the Lord seated on a high and lofty throne...Seraphim were stationed above. They cried one to another, 'Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts. All the earth is filled with his glory. At the sound of that cry, the frame of the door shook and the house was filled with smoke. Then I said, 'Woe is me. I am doomed!'" The scene Isaiah describes is rather frightening, even terrifying, made especially so by the presence of the Seraphim, these angels who are the messengers of the Lord Almighty. Of course, when we imagine angels, we think of the pudgy, baby-faced cherubs with short puffy wings, or the older, more elegant variety of indeterminate gender, with layered, feathered wings. Nothing very scary here. But if we were to go to the Middle Eastern section of the Met and look at the sculpted angels on exhibit, we'd see eight-foot tall creatures, half-human, half-animal, designed to frighten the onlooker. Although the Jews were forbidden to have carved images, such were part of their religious imagination. Isaiah's description is not a comforting sight, but one designed to strike terror in people's hearts. Because the One whom Isaiah beholds is so Totally Other from anything he has ever experienced. He is awestruck. He shudders. He dares not approach. He feels as nothing, as but "dust and ashes" (Abraham, Gen18:27) in the presence of the Ineffable, of the Holy One.

How do we experience anything like this? Living so removed from nature, having lost contact with the earth, walking on streets of asphalt and sidewalks of concrete,

our opportunities to be awestruck become rather rare. We become so identified with the works of our own hands, with the products we have manufactured, that we can come to think that this is all there is. We have to get away. Get away to an empty desert or the middle of an ocean and look up at night into the canopy of the heavens to take in the immensity of the universe, and ponder how tiny I am in the midst of all this. Yet, in the words of Pascal, "Though all the universe conspire against me, yet I am superior to it all, because I am conscious of it." I reflect and open myself to the One who is the Creator and Sustainer of this marvelous universe; One whom I cannot grasp, whom I cannot neither imagine nor comprehend, but who fills me with awe.

It can be a moment of wonder. And as Plato once said, "Philosophy begins in wonder." I begin to ask questions, why is there something rather than nothing? I ponder the words of the psalmist, "When I consider the works of thy heavens, the moon and the stars which you set in place, what is man that you should care for him, or the son of man that you should be mindful of him?" How did an insignificant tribe of people in the Middle East, despite numerous attempts at enslavement and extermination, somehow survive to become the bearers of the message of the Creator's care for this creation?

Now let us turn to today's Gospel. After the tremendous catch of fish, Peter turns to Jesus and says to Him, "Depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man." By describing himself as "sinful," Peter is not saying he is a wicked person. Rather, he is aware of the "distance" between himself and Jesus. Jesus is so Totally Other than himself that he dare not approach. He recognizes in Jesus the presence of the Holy, of the Ineffable, much as did Isaiah in today's first reading, although not in quite such a threatening way. Peter, too, is struck with awe and amazement. But Jesus bridges that distance, that gap, by inviting Peter to have a share in His own work, and by commissioning him for that endeavor.

This element of awe is what should animate our own religious and spiritual life. The psalmist says, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." This does not mean that we should live in constant fear of God's judgment or of God's punishment--that God is out to get us if we step out of line. It is that we have a sense of reverence for life, for existence itself, aware that we live in two worlds, as it were—in the world of our everyday experience and in a world wherein we are aware of God's sustaining and supporting presence, an awareness that gives meaning, purpose and direction to all those everyday tasks. It is this awareness of God's presence that enables us to use wisely and well the good things God has given us. We worship God in gratitude and in humility, not just regarding God as our Cosmic Therapist whom we can call upon when we are down in the dumps, or as One we can summon as our Cosmic Butler to do for

us what we can't do or don't want to do for ourselves. In short, we don't reduce God to meet our needs, but try to become the kind of person God calls us to be.

In a few moments, as we enter into the Eucharist, we will echo the words in Isaiah, proclaiming God is "Holy, holy, holy." We enter into this sacred space with reverence, not with fear, but with confidence. Because Jesus has bridged that gap between ourselves and the Creator, enabling us to be children of God, a mystery so profound that as we ponder it, it seems impossible. But so we are, the children of God, Creator and Sustainer of the universe. Finally, let us do what Jesus asks of Peter, James and John in today's gospel, viz., "go out to deeper waters," to leave behind any shallow caricature of God and in meditation ponder the Ineffable, the Holy One. There we shall encounter the true and living God, and return to live in joy and gratitude.