

In the Presence of the Lord

Luke 9:28-36

If I were to tell you that there is a lion loose in the church, how would you feel? You would know that you are in physical danger, and you would feel fear.¹

If I told you that there is a ghost in this building, and you believed it, you would feel something similar to, but not the same thing as, the fear you felt over the presence of a lion in the building. The fear of ghosts is not generally about physical danger as much as it is about the possibility that one may simply be there; that the spirit of a human being who has died may be present. The word for this kind of fear is usually referred to as dread.

Now suppose I told you that a spirit is present here. Not the ghost of a dead person, but a citizen of the heavenly realm – I would say “angel,” but that evokes the wrong picture in most of our minds. I’m not talking cute little creatures in white robes with harps and wings, but the biblical idea of angels: the heavenly host, God’s workers and warriors who carry his messages, battle Satan’s demons, surround the throne of heaven. If I were to tell you that one of those spiritual beings is right here in this room, and you believed it, what would you feel? The word most commonly used is awe. There is fear involved, but even less like the fear of danger than you would feel towards a lion. Awe is a combination of wonder, and, as C.S. Lewis put it, “a certain shrinking” feeling... excited, fascinated, yet, not completely comfortable because you are in the presence of something far greater and mysterious than the everyday stuff and people of our lives.

That awe would reach its peak if I was to tell you, and you were to believe, that God himself is in this very room. A man named Rudolf Otto² originally came up with a term for this feeling, that C.S. Lewis and others picked up later. He called it “numinous awe.” “Numinous” has to do with the holy, with the presence of God. If you were to truly believe that God is right here in this room, your sense of numinous awe would be overwhelming.

You would understand what a fisherman named Simon felt when he and his brother had been fishing all night and had caught nothing. They had just returned to the shore to call it a night when a man comes to them and asks to get in their boat. He is a rabbi and such a crowd has gathered that he needs some space to speak to them all, so he asks Simon and Andrew to push out a little ways from the shore.

When he is done teaching, this rabbi tells Simon to go out deeper and put down his nets. Simon says, “Master, we’ve been fishing all night and caught nothing; we’re not going to catch anything, but we’ll do it out of respect for you.” They bring in so many fish the boat begins to capsize, and Simon begins to realize something extraordinary is happening, someone holy and powerful is sitting in his boat. Simon experiences this numinous awe and his reaction is, “Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!”

If I told you God is in this room, and you really believed it, you would understand how Isaiah felt when he was given a vision of the presence of God, sitting on a throne high and lifted up, with six-winged seraphs singing, “Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of Hosts; the whole earth is full of your glory.” Smoke fills the temple, the foundations shake at the thunder of the seraphs’ singing, and Isaiah experiences that numinous awe, that “certain shrinking feeling.” The Message translation gives you a good feel for Isaiah’s numinous awe: “Doomed! I’m as good as dead. Every word I’ve ever spoken is tainted...and here I’ve looked God in the face!”

You would understand why one of Isaac’s favorite names for God was “the fear.”

You would understand why, when Moses came off the mountain and his face was glowing from his encounters with God, the Israelites made him cover his face, it frightened them so.

And you would understand why, when Peter sees Jesus speaking with Moses and Elijah, all of them glowing supernaturally, Peter is not exactly cool as a cucumber. Luke says Peter and his friends are having a hard time staying awake as Jesus prays, but when Jesus is transfigured, glowing, talking with Moses and Elijah about his departure, which, by the way, is the word “exodus” in the Greek – Jesus’ death is a second exodus that frees his people from slavery to sin and death; when Peter sees this, he isn’t sleepy anymore. Matthew says Peter and his friends fell to the ground, overcome with fear. Mark says they were terrified.

¹ This illustration is adapted from C.S. Lewis’ The Problem of Pain, Collier Books, 1962, p. 17.

² Otto, Rudolf, The Idea of the Holy, Oxford University Press, 1958.

When Peter says, "Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah," Luke explains that he didn't know what he was saying, but Luke doesn't have to explain. If we truly believed God was here in this room, we wouldn't know what we were saying, either.

This is not a teaching moment when rabbi instructs disciple. It is not a miracle moment when the healer makes whole one who is suffering. Nor is it a biographical moment in which we hear of Jesus' life. This is an *epiphany*, a moment unlike any other. A moment in which the veil is pulled away and we see something of the other side. We see what humans are rarely allowed to see – the holy. And we hear the very voice of God. There are only two such epiphanies in the gospels: when Jesus is baptized and God says, "This is my son with whom I am well pleased," and here on the Mount of Transfiguration, when God says, "This is my son, my Chosen. Listen to him."

No, you can't blame Peter for talking nonsense, for being so overwhelmed with numinous awe that the words coming from his mouth have no connection with logic or reason, because when you are fully aware that you are in the presence of the Lord, that's what happens.

Rudolf Otto said that numinous awe has two parts. He used two Latin phrases for these parts: *mysterium tremendum* and *mysterium fascinans*. *Mysterium tremendum* refers to the fear aspect. Peter, James and John are scared, terrified; they fall to the ground in fear. When Isaiah sees the Lord, he cries, "I'm doomed...as good as dead." Isaac calls God "the Fear," and the people made Moses hide his face. After the huge catch of fish, Simon cries, "Go away from me, Lord." *Mysterium tremendum* is that fear that makes us shrink back, fall on our faces, talk nonsense.

But there is another part to this numinous awe, the part Otto called *mysterium fascinans*. In spite of our fear, that desire to get the heck out of there, we are also fascinated. We are drawn to this God whose light blinds, whose voice makes us shake, whose presence causes the hair on our necks to stand on end. We want to get away, shrink back, but we also want to draw closer, come nearer to the One who has come near to us. And so Isaac called God "the fear," but he kept following the Fear, trusting him and the promises the Fear made. The people made Moses put a veil over his face, but, every time he came down the mountain from talking with God, they were there, asking, "What did he say? What did he say?" Isaiah cried out, "I'm a dead man," but he carried the message God gave him, and we look back on Isaiah today as one of the prophets whose message was truly fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Simon, sitting in the boat, surrounded by so many fish his boat was capsizing, cried, "Go away from me, Lord!" But that same morning, when this man he wanted to get away from invited Simon to follow him, Simon couldn't help himself – he followed, and was given the nickname *Petros* in Greek, Peter, the Rock.

Fear – *tremendum* fear – tremendous, trembling, shaking in your shoes fear; talking nonsense fear.

Yet, fascination, too. Peter, James and John followed Jesus back down the mountain; followed him to Jerusalem; followed him to the cross; followed him even to their own martyred deaths.

Friends, you and I are in the presence of the Lord. God *is* in this room. We, too, have come to the mountain top. We see Jesus suddenly glowing a blinding white, speaking with Moses and Elijah of his coming departure, *his* exodus for *our* freedom. And then God speaks to you and me: "*This is my Son, my Chosen. Listen to him.*" If we truly believe God is in this room and has said these things, not only to Peter, James and John, but also to us, we, too, feel numinous awe; that amazing combination of boot-shaking, nonsense-talking, get-me-out-of-here fear, and the fascination that draws us closer. If we truly believe God is here and speaking to us, we, too, will follow Jesus down the mountain and on to Jerusalem, to his death, his departure, his exodus that will free us from our slavery to sin and death.

Shall we go?