

The Reverend Patricia Phaneuf Alexander
The Sunday after the Ascension (C) ~ 3 June 2025
St. Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Bethesda
Acts 1:1-11
Psalm 47
Ephesians 1:15-23
Luke 24:44-53

Let us pray:

Heavenly God, in you we live and move and have our being: We humbly pray you so to guide and govern us by your Holy Spirit, that in all the cares and occupations of our life we may not forget you, but may remember that we are ever walking in your sight; through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.¹

I.

When was the last time you were awed?

Spelling may be in order here: I don't mean "o-d-d," as in, "strange," or "peculiar." That's between you and those who know and love you best. I'm talking about "a-w-e-d," as in, "filled with wonder," or "inspired to reverence."

When were you last awed by something – or someone?

We tend to use the word "awesome" a lot in our everyday speech – so much so that it probably has lost some of its power. We've domesticated the term so much that it no longer carries its intended meaning. A quick survey of the birthday card section of the local CVS proves the point: There you can expect to find such mass-produced greetings as

"I went looking for a card for a friend as awesome as you...but this is as close as I could get!"

Or

¹ Adapted from *BCP*, 100

“Birthdays are for being extra...Extra happy, extra awesome, extra-ordinary... Like you!”

You might want to pop by after Church to stock up on some of that awesomeness; you never know when you might need to pull it out of the drawer on a moment’s notice.

The irony is that truly to be “awesome” is precisely *not* to be everyday or common or mass-produced.

To be “awesome” is to be overwhelming, perhaps even to the point of inducing fear. When we come into the presence of the “awesome,” we are overcome by something so much vaster and more mysterious than ourselves – what philosophers and poets refer to as the “sublime.”²

My husband recently returned from a hiking trip out to Yosemite and Redwood National Parks, and from his photos I caught just a glimpse of the awesome, the sublime inherent in God’s Creation. No two-dimensional image can possibly do it justice, of course, but the scope, the magnificence, the beauty of the natural world just takes one’s breath away.

It puts us mere mortals in our place: We are reminded that we really aren’t all that – certainly not when compared with the majesty of God.

And that’s not a bad thing. The human ego being what it is, we probably all could stand to be de-throned from the center of our own lives from time-to-time.

Insert shameless plug for worship here: When we come together as a community of faith to praise and pray to God, we are – God-willing (literally) – re-oriented, drawn out of ourselves, if only for a while.

In the words of one of the Canticles recited during Morning Prayer,

² Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757), as referenced in [The Poetry Foundation, Glossary of Poetic Terms](#)

*Splendor and honor and kingly power *
are yours by right, O Lord our God...*³

Or, in the *Sursum Corda*, the dialogue between Presider and People at the beginning of the Great Thanksgiving, we say

Lift up your hearts.

*We lift them to the Lord.*⁴

We lift our hearts – outward and upward – and with them our very souls (our “life-force,” or *nephesh*, in Hebrew) to God.

Worship is intended to help us transcend the finite boundaries of our mortality and tap into the infinite, connecting us to the Divine and to one another at the deepest possible level.

The prayers we say, the music we sing and hear, the architecture that surrounds us (witness the absolutely glorious, stunning window behind me) all are meant to re-direct us toward God.

Lift up your hearts.

The ancient Celts called these moments of connection with the transcendent “thin places,” spaces and times “where God and humanity meet in a mysterious way.”⁵

As a contemporary Irish author writes,

The Celtic imagination considers sacred places to be ‘thin,’ or places where the veil between the worlds of heaven and earth seems especially

³ Canticle 18, “A Song to the Lamb,” *BCP*, 93.

⁴ *BCP*, 367.

⁵ Julianne Stanz, *Braving the Thin Places* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2022), ix.

permeable, and the worlds discernibly close to each other. Thin spaces exist between the now and the not-yet.⁶

Thin places can lead to “time[s] of spiritual displacement,”⁷ times when what we *thought* we knew about God and the universe tilts on its axis, expanding our understanding in altogether new ways.

I encourage you to remember and reflect on those “thin-place” moments of awe, or beauty, or even holy fear in your own life:

Witnessing the birth of a child...

Keeping vigil as a loved one slipped from this world seamlessly into the next...

Experiencing the Spirit palpably present within you as you receive Communion...

Feeling the laying on of hands at Confirmation – or, as Melissa will this Wednesday (God-willing), Ordination.

There is a shift, a cracking-open, in those “thin place” moments that allows us to see and hear and smell and feel and touch the Divine in a wholly other way.

Did you catch that? It isn’t God who changes; it is we ourselves who experience God afresh and anew.

In the words of the groovy 1970’s musical *Godspell*,

Day by day
Day by day

⁶ *Ibid*, x.

⁷ *Ibid*, xiii.

*Oh Dear Lord
Three things I pray
To see thee more clearly
Love thee more dearly
Follow thee more nearly
Day by day.*⁸

II.

This morning we are observing the Ascension, the feast – 40 days after Easter, so this year last Thursday, May 29 – when the Risen Christ “slipped the surly bonds of Earth... and touched the face of God.”⁹

I’ve always felt sorry for the disciples on Ascension:

They had Jesus with them for three years – they ate, walked with, talked with, and were touched by Him.

They “lost” Him, seemingly forever, on Good Friday.

They got Him back on Easter Sunday and then, for forty days (which we know in the Bible means “a really long time”), He appeared to them as the wounded-and-resurrected Christ... The Christ Whose hands and side they can touch for themselves...

Only to “lose” Him again now.

In a truly “awesome,” thin-place moment, the disciples watch as His body is lifted up – and their hearts are broken...all over again.

Remember what He said to Mary Magdalene in the Garden on Easter Morning:

Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, “I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God” (John 20:17).

⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bV3fQTpvZBg>

⁹ John Gillespie McGee, Jr., “High Flight,” cited by President Ronald Reagan, January 28, 1986 .

It's not as though He hasn't prepared them.

The problem, of course, is that when He assured the disciples, "I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:20), they probably assumed – understandably – that they would continue to see Him as they had all along: Walking and talking and eating with them.

Even after the Resurrection, for these past 40 days, it still does not seem as though they have fully grasped the magnificence and majesty of the One they have called Teacher, Friend, and Lord.

How could they? Their joy at seeing Jesus as He once was...more or less...has prevented them from seeing Him in the fullness of His glory.

Of course it has.

And so – unwittingly, I believe – the disciples have domesticated the cosmic Christ-ness of Jesus, confining Him within the finite boundaries of His humanity.

He is too "awesome," too sublime, too overwhelming for them to comprehend all at once, so He has revealed His true Self to them gradually – in His Transfiguration, in His Resurrection, and now, in His Ascension.

Could this be the "new thing" that God has promised all-along? To help us come to understand God's own abiding power and glory and majesty – even in the darkest, most desolate of times?

III.

At the end of the Great Thanksgiving, at the point in the liturgy called the “Fraction,” the consecrated Bread is elevated and broken — hopefully with a satisfying “crack,” if it’s not too humid a day. You will notice, if you’re following along in your service bulletin, an italicized note that says

A period of silence is kept.

This is not optional, what we call a “may rubric.” Rather, it is a “must rubric”: We are to pause, “all mortal flesh” is to “keep silence” (Hymn 324) — ideally for longer than is collectively comfortable.

This is the ultimate “thin place” moment in worship, where with the breaking, the cracking open, of the Bread, we catch a glimpse of Who Christ really is.

And in that moment, we are cracked open, too:

We are reminded anew of the awesomeness, of the glory, of the majesty of the Divine right here in our midst, and we are called to lift up our hearts and minds and souls, our very life-force, to God.

God-willing, we understand — if only momentarily, before we forget again — that Christ is, in fact, with us always, to the end of the age.

It isn’t God who changes; it is we ourselves who experience God afresh and anew.

IV.

I think it’s safe to say that, in all our humanity, you and I domesticate the awesome, domesticate the sublime, all the time. Focused as we are on the daily “cares and occupations of our life,” we are unable to experience the beauty and the majesty of the Divine surrounding us on every side.

We struggle to perceive Who Christ has been, is now, and will be, always. So let us ask God now — and, might I suggest — every day, for “spiritual displacement,” a thin-place re-orientation of our souls, our very life-force. If you’d like to

follow along, I invite you to turn to page 832 of the red *Book of Common Prayer* in your pew.

Let us pray:

Almighty and eternal God, so draw our hearts to you, so guide our minds, so fill our imaginations, so control our wills, that we may be wholly yours, utterly dedicated unto you; and then use us, we pray you, as you will, and always to your glory and the welfare of your people; through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, *Amen*.