

The Reverend Patricia Phaneuf Alexander
Proper 22 (A) ~ 4 October 2026
Creation Sunday
St. Dunstan's, Bethesda
Philippians 3:7-14
Psalm 19:1-7
Matthew 21:33-46

Radical Amazement

I am betting that many of you have seen this cartoon that circulates fairly regularly on social media: A man and woman are out for a walk in the city, and she says,

My desire to be well-informed is currently at odds with my desire to remain sane.

Sounds about right, doesn't it? It captures so well the state of things these days.

I always assumed that the cartoon was fairly recent, but it turns out that it dates back to the 1990s, in the midst of the Bosnian War during the Clinton Administration. The cartoonist, David Sipress, doesn't even remember where it was first published.¹

Such timeless truth.

I hear all the time, both from folks here in the parish and from friends and colleagues around the country, that they can't watch or read the news these days, because it is just too distressing. They feel that their sense of well-being is in peril, and so they have to turn away.

Too much.

¹ <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/how-to-stay-sane-as-a-cartoonist-in-trumpland>

I get it: For much of my life I have been a news junkie, and I, too, find myself averting my gaze.

Sometimes our health depends upon it.

Nevertheless, as the cartoonist suggests, we also have a duty to be informed, and there's the rub.

Because when we do dare to look, we are confronted with noise and image that remind us how great is the human capacity for inflicting harm on one another.

Some recent revelations:

Gang assault on a university campus in New York

A botched execution in Tennessee

A brutal murder that led to that death penalty sentence thirty years ago

And the years of violent abuse behind that murder

These are but a few snippets from the past couple of weeks – not to mention the wars that continue to rage around us.

It is little wonder that our souls are weary.

There is so much pain pressing in on us from every side.

As the old Holy Week hymn puts it,

*Sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble.*²

That seems an appropriate response.

² "Were you there when they crucified my Lord?" *Hymnal* 1982, 172.

We begin with lament.

And, for the sake of the healing of the world and of our own sanity, we cannot stay there. We must reorient ourselves to something bigger: toward God, toward divine Mystery, toward the Holy.

This is what I want to explore together today.

We are *not* the center of the universe, but we have fallen victim to the misguided assumption that we are.

That is the source of so much of our suffering.

You may be familiar with Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, who was not only a prominent twentieth-century Jewish theologian and prophet, but also a noted civil rights activist; he was with Dr. King on the march from Selma to Montgomery in 1965.

Rabbi Heschel, like others before him, argued that we have a responsibility to one another by virtue of our common humanity.

That sounds a lot like language from our own baptismal covenant in the Episcopal Church.

Heschel also insisted that we need to achieve a state of what he called “radical amazement,” or the capacity to experience awe. Only then can we begin to perceive the holy within, around, and among us. Heschel wrote:

*We manipulate what is available on the surface of the world; we must also stand in awe before the mystery of the world...All we have is a sense of awe and radical amazement in the face of a mystery that staggers our ability to sense it.*³

³ Abraham J. Heschel, *Who Is Man?* (Stanford University Press, 1965), 88.

When was the last time your senses were staggered by mystery?

If you have ever stood at the rim of the Grand Canyon, or marveled at the gushing waters of Niagara Falls, or gazed up in wonder at the Rocky Mountains, then you no doubt have tasted something of staggering mystery. It is an overwhelming sense of being confronted by something so much vaster than the mind can comprehend.

I experienced that radical amazement when I held each of my children for the first time. I burst into tears – ugly, nose-running, body-convulsing tears. I couldn't help myself.

In the face of mystery, we are pulled out of ourselves, out of our own heads and egos, and drawn toward something infinitely larger than we are. That is a Very Good Thing. I pray that you have had a similar sensation in your own life, because there's nothing quite like that feeling of surrendering, of giving oneself over to the incomprehensible.

I begin with this meditation on mystery and amazement this morning because today we are celebrating Creation Sunday, part of the larger Season of Creation observed by Christians around the world “as a time for renewing, repairing and restoring our relationship to God, one another, and all of creation.”⁴ The Season of Creation coincides with the Feast of St. Francis of Assisi, whom the Church honors today.

St. Francis is known for his love of all that God has made – most notably, but not exclusively, animals. This is why we will ask God's blessing on our beloved animals later today, in his honor.

But St. Francis was so much more than the Dr. Doolittle of the Middle Ages. Francis understood awe; he understood mystery. Francis knew what it was to be overwhelmed with a mystical sense of God's presence. You may know the story that once while praying in the Church of San Damiano in Assisi, Francis had an

⁴ https://www.episcopalchurch.org/season-of-creation-and-st-francis-day-resources/?mc_cid=71f3ba9840&mc_eid=44448518d2

experience of the crucified Christ speaking to him, commanding him, “Francis, rebuild My House!” But you may not know that, while deep in prayer, Francis also was overcome by amazement at the beauty and majesty of Creation, and he was moved to respond.

Most high, all powerful, all good Lord, he wrote. All praise is yours, all glory, all honor, and all blessing...

Be praised, my Lord, through all your creatures...

*Praise and bless my Lord, and give thanks, and serve him with great humility.*⁵

Such is the power of radical amazement: In the face of the holy, we bow down in wonder and praise and humility.

A few minutes ago we recited these words from the Psalmist:

*The heavens declare your glory, O God,
and the firmament shows your handiwork.*

As one theologian writes,

*‘Glory’ is the translation of a Greek word that represents the essential characteristics or nature of a person or thing that makes them who they are. Thus the ‘glory’ of God is God’s very nature, the essence of who God is.*⁶

And those essential characteristics are honor, abundance, riches, splendor, and dignity.

In the face of God’s glory, it seems appropriate to feel overwhelmed and disoriented.

⁵ ["The Canticle of the Sun \(The Canticle of the Creatures\)"](#)

⁶ M. Robert Mulholland, *The Deeper Journey: The Spirituality of Discovering Your True Self* (Lisle, IL: IVP, 2006), 15.

And that is a Very Good Thing – because only then can we be re-oriented toward God.

Cultivating a healthy awe of God, allowing oneself to be overwhelmed by God’s holiness and glory, is the corrective to sin – *khaw-taw'* in Hebrew, which means, among other things, “miss[ing] the way.”⁷ We must be confronted by that which is bigger than we are ourselves, with the magnificence and might of God, and be moved to tears and humility and surrender, in response.

Which brings us back to Creation Sunday:

It is not only humans who are victimized by our capacity for violence. I do not need to enumerate all the ways in which Earth and her climate are suffering. The world which God has created, precious and beautiful, is crying out, and our proper response best be to bow down in reverence and repentance. We ought to be moved to tears and humility by the groaning of Creation.

But for too long and too often we have not been willing to submit to that which is vaster and more infinite than we. We have treated the Earth like an object to be “manipulated,” to borrow language from Rabbi Heschel, a thing for us to possess and exploit for our own ends. This is where, in our arrogance and blindness, we have “missed the way.”

Dr. Ellen Davis, Professor of Bible and Practical Theology at Duke Divinity School, is one of my intellectual and spiritual heroes. Ellen has written and preached and taught extensively about humans’ relationship with the land and with all of Creation. She says

from a biblical perspective, land is not an ‘it.’ It’s a partner. It comes first, because remember...in Genesis, the human being is formed – *adam* from *adamah*, human from humus. And so the land is kin.⁸

⁷ <https://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/hebrew/kjv/chata.html>

⁸ <https://www.theweightpodcast.com/episodes/creation-care-hope-for-creation-with-ellen-davis>

Adam from *adamah*, human from *humus*.

Ellen also argues that, for far too long, we have misread the Creation account in Genesis to mean we that humans are called to “dominate [the earth] and subdue it.”⁹ But the Hebrew actually means "to work or to serve" – and it is the same words that is used hundreds of times in the Bible for serving God.¹⁰

In other words, we are not the center of the universe. We are not the masters, owners, or rulers of Creation. We are its kin. We are its servants.

The call to love and respect and care for Creation is as central to Christianity as is the love of God, love of neighbor, and love of self. We are meant to surrender before the divine Mystery in awe and radical amazement, the One Who is so much vaster than our finite minds can comprehend.

May we tremble with awe.

May we serve God, one another, and all of Creation with humility and thanksgiving.

And may we not look away.

Amen.

⁹ <https://onbeing.org/programs/wendell-berry-ellen-davis-the-art-of-being-creatures/>

¹⁰ <https://www.theweighpodcast.com/episodes/creation-care-hope-for-creation-with-ellen-davis>