

transforming generosity

An Awestruck Act of Thanksgiving

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What motivates generosity? Many things — commitment to a cause, support of a treasured community, gratitude. What about awe?

Webster's dictionary defines awe as “great fear,” “terror,” “the power to inspire dread.” “Awe” is not a word or experience we hear or talk about much these days. There is an unspoken notion that all mysteries are ultimately knowable. And, indeed, science and technology have given us a remarkable ability to control many of the conditions of our lives, at least in the western part of the world. Perhaps, for us, what inspires dread or terror is a natural phenomenon — a wildfire, a volcanic eruption, a major hurricane. The power of these phenomena overcome our self-confidence.

But our Lessons this Sunday are about awe, and describe and honor One who inspires awe or confronts us with mind-boggling authority. Yet, we do not talk about or dwell upon the awesomeness of God. We talk more about God's love and mercy. Our Lessons, however, describe God as Creator and Ruler of all that is, including the destructive force of a volcano and the terror of pestilence, One who cherishes and feeds our predators — lions. Even Psalm 104, a paean to the beauty and energies of creation, is unrelenting in evoking the abundance of God's creative fury.

Nevertheless, such fierce abundance and creative exuberance may inspire both reverence and gratitude, a combination that can invoke generosity. In supporting a community we love, we may join in God's creative will. In fearing God's power, we may be persuaded to offer a sacrifice, beseeching God to bless our enterprise, an effort that helps to bring life, justice, beauty, and joy into being. Generosity is not simply a kind gesture of an autonomous person, but an awestruck thanksgiving in response to the One who gives us ourselves and all that is. It is partaking of God's creative will in company with others, a shared response of thanksgiving and praise:

Bless the Lord, O my soul. O Lord, my God, you are very great....

You make the winds your messengers, fire and flame your ministers.

And we, too, are God's ministers. Our generosity is more than writing a check: It is participating with our fellows in the work of One who has “laid the foundations of the earth” and “put wisdom in the inward parts or given understanding to the mind.”

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For reflection ...

- ❖ In today's readings, God's authority is posed against the presumptions and expectations of humankind. How can this lead to awe and to the gratitude that responds generously?
- ❖ The Lesson from Hebrews tells us that Jesus is the great high priest whose offering of self is the ultimate sacrifice for our sins. Divine generosity and our response of gratitude are easily discerned. Where is the awesomeness and how is it related to our gratitude and generosity?