

Glimpses of Godliness from the Psalms—

"Awe"
Psalm 29

CEFC 8/29/18; 1/11/04; 8/10/86 p.m

They called it "shock and awe"--
the massive and overwhelming bombardment of Baghdad
that began on the pre-dawn hours of Mar. 21, 2003.

Hundreds of cruise missiles and laser-guided bombs
rained down on the city
in a spectacle more spectacular than any Fourth of July fireworks display.
More bombs were dropped in the first two days of the war in Iraq
than in the entire six weeks of the first Gulf War.

"Shock and awe"--
Shock was surely appropriate.
The sudden blast of ten-ton bombs and cruise missiles
would be shocking to anyone.

But what about the word "awe"?
Why "awe"?

I might have thought the word "fear" would have been good enough,
or even "dread."
The American military, or, more properly, the "coalition forces,"
certainly wanted to scare the pants off the Iraqi Republican Guard
and diminish their will to fight.
This onslaught from the sky was surely a form of terror,
designed to shorten the war
and ultimately to save lives on both sides.
This initial bombardment was terrifying, and deliberately so.

But why was the word "awe," rather than "fear" or "dread,"
chosen to describe this campaign.

The word "awe" has a particular connotation.
One dictionary defines "awe" as "a feeling of reverential respect
mixed with fear and wonder."¹

It has a kind of transcendent sense to it--
it suggests something outside our ordinary experience,
something beyond our imagination.

The military planners were consciously building on the 1996 book
by retired General Harlan Ullman, entitled

¹Oxford American Dictionary.

*Shock and Awe: Achieving Rapid Dominance.*²

Their strategy involved deliberate psychological warfare
aiming at a dramatic display of power and strength
unleashed with technological sophistication,
able to target a particular room on a particular floor of a particular building,
with weaponry of irresistible force,
coming out of nowhere without warning.

It was to be so overwhelming in its power
that the enemy would understand just who they were up against
and lay down their arms in surrender.

Did it work?

Were the Iraqis "shocked and awed" enough
to make a difference in the outcome of the war?

I'll leave that to the military analysts.

I mentioned this episode,
because it is what comes to my mind
upon reading our Scripture passage this morning.

The psalmist David wants us to know who we're up against.

He wants us to understand who the Lord is
in a way that I can only be described with the phrase "Shock and Awe." //

David begins Psalm 29 with a **call to worship**,
addressed to the heavenly host, the angelic company--

- 1 **"Ascribe to the LORD, O mighty ones,
ascribe to the LORD glory and strength.**
- 2 **Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name;
worship the LORD in the splendor of his holiness."**

Ascribe to the Lord God the greatness that is his--
his glory, his strength.

Declare it to be true,
and humble yourself,
bow down before this majestic and holy God.

This is a call that comes also to us,
as we gather in this place each week.

We are to recognize who God is—
we are to rehearse once again the great things he has done
as our Creator and as our Redeemer.

We are to be reminded of his glorious attributes as the all-powerful ruler of this world,
and as the Holy One who always does what is right and good.

Each week as we gather,
we are to **ascribe to the LORD glory and strength.**

²*Shock and Awe: Achieving Rapid Dominance.* with a co-author.

we are to **ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name;**
we are to **worship the LORD in the splendor of his holiness.** /

Do you ever think about our gathering for worship in those terms—
when you are driving into the parking lot
or coming into this sanctuary from Sunday School?

Do you say to yourself—
“I want to acknowledge the greatness of God today.
I want that to be my main purpose.”
For that’s the main reason we’ve come together—
to consciously bow in worship in the presence of the glory of our holy God.

We are called to worship him—
We are called, in the words of the letter to the Hebrews,
to “**worship God acceptably with reverence and awe**” (12:28).
Awe--"a feeling of reverential respect
mixed with fear and wonder."

That’s the message of the first two verses of this psalm.

Then in vv. 3-9, the psalmist wants to help us experience that reverential awe
by painting a picture before our eyes.
He describes the awesome glory and power of the Lord
using vivid imagery from the natural world
to express something of the nature of our God.
It was a picture common to his world--
and it was perhaps the most powerful natural force known in his experience--
the awesome power of a thunderstorm.

Psalm 29 has been called “The Thunderstorm Psalm,”
because the power of the thunderstorm defines its central message.
It is almost as if the psalmist was watching an actual storm
as it began to brew out over the waters of the Mediterranean.
Imagine yourself standing on mountainside in Israel, looking toward the west.

3 The voice of the LORD is over the waters;
the God of glory thunders,
the LORD thunders over the mighty waters.

It was as if he could hear it--
as its thunder began to rumble in the distance.

4 The voice of the LORD is powerful;
the voice of the LORD is majestic.

5 The voice of the LORD breaks the cedars;
the LORD breaks in pieces the cedars of Lebanon.

The psalmist sees the power and majesty of the storm
 as it gathered force and made its way onto the land in Lebanon to the north.
 He observes the flashes of lightning strike with all their fury,
 and you can almost hear the crashing of the giant Lebanese cedars,
 split in two by these great bolts from the blue.
 These trees, which are so impressive
 were used by David to build his palace
 and by Solomon to build the temple of God--
 these trees which stood like the imposing redwood
 become like mere match sticks
 before the power of the storm,
 and they are shattered into little pieces.

He continues in v. 6--

**He makes Lebanon skip like a calf,
 Sirion like a young wild ox.**

7 The voice of the LORD strikes with flashes of lightning.

The rapid flashes of the lightning seem to make the hills dance,
 and even Sirion, the majestic Mt. Hermon,
 seems to shake at its foundations.

Nothing is stable, nothing is firm,
 in the face of the fury of the Lord as he advances across the countryside.

**8 The voice of the LORD shakes the desert;
 the LORD shakes the Desert of Kadesh.**

The storm moves through the land and finally into the desert,
 and there it has the same effect.

Nothing is safe in its path;
 nothing can withstand its awesome power. //

There is some question about the translation of v. 9,
 but the idea that the storm twists the oaks and leaves the forest bare
 by blowing great limbs from the trees fits well in the context.

I remember driving through Homestead, Florida, south of Miami,
 after Hurricane Andrew had passed through a couple of years before.

The scarred land was still desolate,
 except for what looked like wooden pillars sticking up out of the ground,
 supporting nothing.

I realized that they were the trunks of palm trees
 whose tops had been ripped off by the terrific winds of the storm.
 So it is here.

The Psalm of the Thunderstorm.

The psalmist has described the most powerful natural phenomenon in his experience,
 and, I would imagine, ours too.

Growing up in Florida, I've experienced my share of hurricanes.

The sheer power of those storms is overwhelming.

The folks in Hawaii have just experienced that in the last few days,
though not as fiercely as they feared.

But it doesn't have to be a hurricane to give us a scare.

Any summer thunderstorm will do.

All it takes is one bolt of lightning striking close enough
to put the "fear of God" in anyone! /

But the psalmist hasn't given us a science lesson--

the storm is not portrayed as some purely natural event,
described in terms of impersonal natural laws.

No, for David, the fury of the thunderstorm is the very "voice of the Lord."

Seven times we find this expression--

The voice of the LORD is over the waters;

the God of glory thunders,

the LORD thunders over the mighty waters.

The voice of the LORD is powerful;

the voice of the LORD is majestic.

The voice of the LORD breaks the cedars;

The voice of the LORD strikes with flashes of lightning.

The voice of the LORD shakes the desert;

The voice of the LORD twists the oaks and strips the forests bare.

The natural world we live in

is not simply the result of the meaningless and impersonal forces
of matter and time and chance.

It is the creation of a personal God,

and as such, it is his instrument of revelation

and a means by which his awesome nature is revealed.

The natural world declares the glory of God--

it speaks of his power and strength.

For those with ears to hear,

the voice of the Lord is heard in the power of the storm.

Didn't Paul say as much in his letter to the Romans--

Rom. 1:20 "**since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities --**

his eternal power and divine nature --have been clearly seen,

being understood from what has been made,

so that people are without excuse."

The heavens declare the glory of God

with a voice loud enough for everyone to hear. /

My son Cason told me of an experience he had recently.

He was traveling with his wife in Norway,
 and they hiked with a group of about twenty people
 up a mountain
 about 2000 feet above one of those beautiful fjords.
 And they camped up there overnight.
 It was a spectacular sight, he said.
 But what most impressed him,
 was when this group gathered around a campfire in the evening.
 Here they were, people from all over the world,
 chatting in different languages,
 but as the late summer sun began to set, probably near 10:00,
 suddenly everyone got quiet.
 For thirty minutes they were all absolutely silent as they observed the beauty
 of the sun setting over the shimmering blue waters of the fyord.
 They were awestruck by what they saw.

Whether they realized or not,
 they were witnessing the handiwork of God.

**"since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities --
 his eternal power and divine nature --have been clearly seen,
 being understood from what has been made,
 so that people are without excuse."**

And what is the proper response to this revelation?
 When one considers the natural world in all its power,
 in all its majesty and beauty,
 as a pointer to its Creator,
 how should we react?

We see it in v. 9--
"And in his temple all cry, "Glory!"

"Glory!"—just **"Glory!"**
 Glory is one of those words that is very difficult to define.
 It almost has to be experienced.

In the Bible, there are two sides to this word.
 The Hebrew word for glory, *cabod*, derives from a word
 which means "heavy" or "weighty."
 Its meaning developed when applied to people--
 "heavy" or "weighty" not physically--as in "obese,"³
 but socially as in "important."
 A person's glory, or *cabod*, was that which gives them "weight" in the community,
 that which makes them distinguished and wins them respect--
 whether it be wealth, or social status, or power or success.
 The word generally suggests the outwardly visible,

³Though cf. the description of Eli as *cabod* in 1 Sam. 4:18.

an element of appearance,
that catches the eye.

When we see the power and majesty of God displayed in the natural world
we exclaim, "**Glory!**"

We are affirming what the natural world suggests--
that our God is worthy of our respect and our honor.

God's glory--it is his divine power, his divine splendor, his visible radiance,
and at the same time, it is the divine honor that is due him.

It is the "**awe**" which we ought to have toward God--
that "feeling of reverential respect
mixed with fear and wonder."

And this is where this passage, this theme of awe, becomes so hard for us.

I find it hard because in our experience

this response of awe before God is so very rare among us.

Our relationship with God is so rarely characterized by
a "feeling of reverential respect
mixed with fear and wonder."

The reality is, as theologian David Wells puts it,
God has become weightless in our modern world.
He has lost his *cabod*, his heaviness, his glory, in our hearts and minds.

Wells is not arguing that there is heresy in our midst.

No, he says, "This weightlessness of God is not a doctrine that has been espoused
by deceived and deceiving purveyors of theological falsehood.

This weightlessness of God is not a doctrine so much as a condition,
a way of thinking, a way of living.

And that makes it all the more dangerous.

It seeps in among us, eating away at our spiritual lives like termites,
weakening our foundations,
while outwardly we appear strong and happy Christians.

But without this sense of awe before God--

which the Bible itself commonly calls the "fear of God,"
there is a rot within us that will not support the load of life in this fallen world."

We still worship God;

we go to our Bible studies, and our prayer meetings.

We still sing our hymns and praise songs,
and try to live good Christians lives.

But there is no fear of God in us,
no awe before him.

We do not cry out "**Glory!**"

And as a result, God become weightless in our lives.

And that weightless God becomes something less than the God of the Bible.

Not the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob--

certainly not the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

He becomes a God who exists merely to satisfy our own needs,

a God who has no real authority to compel us.

Ultimately, he will become a God who will bore us.⁴

Wells writes,

"The fundamental problem in the evangelical world today is not inadequate technique,

insufficient organization, or antiquated music,

and those who want to squander the church's resources bandaging these scratches

will do nothing to stanch the flow of blood

that is spilling from its true wounds.

The fundamental problem in the evangelical world today

is that God rests too inconsequentially upon the church.

His truth is too distant,

his grace is too ordinary,

his judgment is too benign,

his gospel is too easy,

and his Christ is too common."⁵

Where is the awe of God?

So what can we do?

How can we heed the words of the Psalmist,

and "**Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name;**"

and "**worship the LORD in the splendor of his holiness.**"

How can we, as Hebrews says,

"worship God acceptably with reverence and awe"?

How can we experience the gravity of God,

his heaviness,

the weight of his glory?

That's not an easy question to answer.

But the first thing we need to do is recognize how captive we are

to the spirit of our age--

we are children of modernity.

The modern world is a world dominated by science--

Modern science has its roots in a biblical conception of creation

⁴So Wells, *God in the Wasteland*, p. 93.

⁵David Wells, *God in the Wasteland*, p. 30.

as an ordered system created by a rational God
and therefore, governed by observable laws.
But modern science has turned its back on that foundation
and carved out nature as a self-contained, self-caused sphere,
cut off from its Creator.

Modern science tends to deafen us to the divine voice in creation.
The clap of thunder is no longer the revelation of God;
it's merely a series of sound waves created by super-heated air—
and nothing more.

In fact, modern life often cuts us off from experience of the natural world altogether.
We live in man-made cities and suburbs
in which we are sheltered from the elements.
We step out of our air-conditioned homes
into an air-conditioned car,
drive into the covered parking garage,
and walk around our indoor malls.

I found it interesting that one of the most memorable aspects
of the great electrical blackout in the Northeast a few years back,
was that for the first time in decades
people living in Manhattan could actually see stars.
Modern life puts us out of earshot of the witness of creation to its Creator.

Think about it—
Psalm 8 reflects on the insignificance of human beings
when the psalmist looks at the moon and the stars.

Psalm 19 reflects on those same heavens--
**The heavens declare the glory of God;
the skies proclaim the work of his hands.**
2 **Day after day they pour forth speech;
night after night they display knowledge.**
3 **There is no speech or language
where their voice is not heard.**
4 **Their voice goes out into all the earth,
their words to the ends of the world.**
In the heavens he has pitched a tent for the sun,
5 **which is like a bridegroom coming forth from his pavilion,
like a champion rejoicing to run his course.**
6 **It rises at one end of the heavens
and makes its circuit to the other;
nothing is hidden from its heat.**

In our modern world we can be cut off from the natural world,
and when we are exposed to it,
we view it impersonally—
not as a revelation of its Creator,

but as material forces in a closed system
operating according to physical laws.

As a result, modern life has given birth to **secularism**--
that world in which the existence of God is not even an issue in people's lives.
There is no fear of God because there is no thought of God.

We live in what someone has called "a **disenchanted world**",
a world that has lost its wonder and mystery.
Another has called ours "a **world without windows**."
We have no vision of a great and awesome God
who stands outside the narrow confines of our day-to-day existence.⁶

Instead of wonder and mystery, modern life has glorified **reason**,
and we in the church have sometimes so emphasized
the rational aspects of our faith
that we have tried to put God himself in a little box.

We've got him all figured out.
We think we can explain him and his ways in a few simple propositions--
four spiritual laws or ten basic steps.

We no longer marvel at his majesty,
and bow before his awesome glory.

By pushing God out of the picture,
modern life has come to put the self, my own personal desires, at the center of life--
God exists only to fulfill my needs.

We want a God that we can control,
a God we can manipulate to achieve our ends.
We don't want to hear about a holy God,
a God who comes in power and might to judge.
We close our ears to such talk, or just go somewhere else.

This is the world we live in.
If we are to gain a sense of awe before God,
we must first recognize how firmly modernity has its grip upon us--
modern life with its scientific naturalism,
its insulation from the created order,
its impenetrable secular wall,
its rational disdain for mystery and wonder,
and its self-centered, subjective narcissism--
We must confess that we, too, are captives to this world—
this modern world,
and we have become blind and deaf to the awesome reality of God.

What can we do about it?
Let me offer a few suggestions.

⁶ This is what Charles Taylor refers to as the "immanent frame."

For one thing we can reconnect the speaker wire that has been cut
between the voice of God and the natural world.

The God of Creation speaks in and through his creation.
The heavens declare the glory of God;
"God's invisible qualities --
his eternal power and divine nature --have been clearly seen,
being understood from what has been made."

So maybe you just need to take a walk in the park and marvel at God's handiwork,
or look up in the night sky in wonder at its vastness,
or maybe you need to understand the heat of the mid-day sun
as a pointer to blazing fire of God's wrath.

God is speaking, and we need to listen.

As simple as this may sound,
our perceptions of God are affected by our interaction with our environment.

Even our church environment affects us.
That's why church architecture has often had a pronounced vertical dimension
that was meant to direct our thoughts toward God.

Susan remembers a time that she was taking a walk in the English countryside
when our two oldest boys were very young--maybe five and three.
They ran ahead of her and ran into an old church building,
and there was something about the building itself that affected them,
for when she got there, they were sitting quietly on a back pew.
That was highly unusual, I assure you.
Did the building itself help them feel something of the awesomeness of God?

I don't want to make too much of this,
but we designed this building with this in mind, in two ways--
It's got a fairly high ceiling--
And our hope is that in some way that high ceiling
will lift up our worship of God.

And second, you will notice the windows all around--
Many churches today are doing away with windows altogether--
a church sanctuary is a media center, like a theater.
They want to control the environment, especially the light, completely
so that images on the screen will be crisp and clear.

We haven't done that--
this building has lots of natural light,
and through those windows you are able to see
the trees and the sky around us--God's creation.

We don't worship Nature--that's not the point.
We worship the God who created the natural world,

and who sustains the natural world,
and who works in and through the natural world
to reveal his power and majesty.

May we hear that voice--
the voice of the Lord that thunders over the mighty waters.

If the first suggestion to you is **environmental**,
my second is **intellectual**--
more specifically, if we are to sense the proper awe before God
we must foster **intellectual humility**.

I think of Job--
at the end of that book
Job comes to a point of humble submission to the will of God--
not because the Lord answers Job's questions,
but because Job cannot answer the Lord's questions.

The Lord speaks to Job--
Job 38:2 **"Who is this that darkens my counsel with words without knowledge?
Brace yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer me.
"Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation?
Tell me, if you understand. . . .
"Have you journeyed to the springs of the sea
or walked in the recesses of the deep?
Have the gates of death been shown to you?
Have you seen the gates of the shadow of death?
Have you comprehended the vast expanses of the earth?
Tell me, if you know all this."** (38:1-4,16-18).

Job doesn't know all this,
and Job is humbled by God's greatness.

Shouldn't we be humbled, too?

Don't let the voice of science convince you that science tells us all we need to know—
it doesn't and it can't

We mustn't pretend that we've got God all figured out--we don't.
We can't put him in a box--he's bigger than any box we could imagine.

Our God can't be domesticated;
he can't be tamed.

He's God!
And we must avoid thoughts of God that make him too small,
too familiar,
too much like us,
for he is holy--he is above us and beyond us.

If we are to worship him in reverence and awe

we must humble our minds before him,
by filling our minds with great thoughts of God.

Environmental,
intellectual,
and my final suggestion if we are to worship God in reverence and awe is **moral**.

Ultimately, we don't attend to the voice of God
that thunders over the mighty waters
and which strikes with flashes of lightning,
we don't bow in worship God in reverence and awe
because we don't want to.

Paradoxically, we don't fear God rightly because deep inside we are afraid of him.

We are afraid of him because we know that we are guilty before him.
Our passage declares in v. 10 that **"The LORD sits enthroned over the flood;"**
The word for **"flood"** here probably refers to
the flood of God's judgment of human sin
in the days of Noah,
for the same word is found 12 times in Genesis to refer to that flood
and nowhere else in the Bible.

God is a righteous Judge who stands over the world he has created.

And again in v. 10 we read,
"the LORD is enthroned as King forever."
And we don't like that--we don't want that.
We want that throne for ourselves;
we want to be king of our own lives,
and so we hide from the awesome reality of who God is.
That's what the Bible calls sin.

We can't and we won't worship God in reverence and awe,
when we aren't willing to submit to his rule in our lives.

The angel of the book of Revelation declares a simple message to all peoples--
**"Fear God and give him glory,
because the hour of his judgment has come.
Worship him who made the heavens, the earth,
the sea and the springs of water"** (Rev. 14:7).

So whether you will bow in awe before God or not is ultimately a moral issue--
it is a call to repentance--to turn from your moral rebellion
against the God who has an absolute right to your obedience.

The voice of the Lord speaks loud and clear in the thunderstorm--
every person is without excuse.
But only some,

only those worshipping in God's temple, cry, "**Glory!**"

Do you want to be among them?

But look at the last verse of the psalm.

There we understand that those who are in his temple and cry "**Glory!**",
those who bow in submission before the awesome power of God--
they are his people—
"**The LORD gives strength to his people;**" we read,
and they are blessed by the God of the thunderstorm "**with peace.**"

Peace--after the violence of the storm,
this word almost comes as a surprise.

But only the God who sits above this world as King
can give us a peace that transcends the unsettling turmoil of this world.
And that is what we most need.

One commentator suggests that

"this closing word '**with peace**' is like rainbow arch over the Psalm.
The beginning of the Psalm shows us heaven open . . . ;
while its close shows us God's victorious people upon earth,
blessed with peace in the midst of the terrible utterance of His wrath.
Gloria in Excelsis ["Glory in the highest"] is the beginning
and *in terra pax* ['peace on earth'] the close."⁷

The point is this--

In the Bible, the fear of God is a moral term--
it is something you must choose.
You must choose to submit your life to his rule.

After all, that's what "shock and awe" was all about, wasn't it?

Its aim was surrender,
and its ultimate goal was peace.

Is that what the Lord God is up to?

Is God like the U.S. military--bombing us into submission,
overwhelming us with his destructive power--
with hurricanes and tornadoes
and devastating earthquakes?

Is that how God operates?

Is that how he brings glory to himself?

⁷Delitzsch, cited in Kidner, Pss.

Is it possible?--

Does God really use "shock and awe" to reach us? //

Maybe he does.

Do you have a problem with that?

But certainly, Psalm 29 is not the whole story.

The Lord does reveal his glory in the violent power of the storm.

But the Bible says that that is not the supreme way in which God's glory is revealed.

No, for that we must go to the revelation of God in the New Testament--

for there in the gospel of John we read--

John 1:14 "The Word—

(the Word that was with God and who was God)—

that Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.

We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only,

who came from the Father, full of grace and truth."

In Jesus Christ "We have seen [God's] glory."

And where do we see God's glory displayed most clearly?

On a Roman cross--

There we see Jesus, the Son of God, dying for our sins.

For those with eyes to see--

there can be only one reaction to that event--

"shock and awe."

The cross of Christ is shocking in its cruel violence—

as it pictures the fire of God's wrath against our sin;

but that same cross of Christ is also awe-inspiring in the depth of God's love

that is displayed there.

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son

that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."

It is that "shock and awe" that shows us the kind of God we are up against—

He is a holy God, who will pour out his wrath on human sin,

but he is also a gracious and merciful God—

a God who loves us so much

that he bears the awful penalty of our sin upon himself;

a God who rescues sinners like us.

The God of the thunderstorm

and the God of the cross.

Will you--here in this place--join in that cry,

"**Glory!**"?

Will you worship our great God this morning as you ought--

in reverence and awe?

Prayer—

Charles Spurgeon—“The call to worship in [the opening verses of this psalm] chimes in with **the loud pealing thunder,** which is **the church bell of the universe ringing kings and angels,** and **all the sons of earth to their devotions.**”⁸

May we respond to that call—
and worship acceptably—in reverence and awe.

Sing: *Restore, O Lord, the Honor of Your Name*

Benediction: Jude 25

“to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority,
through Jesus Christ our Lord,
before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen.”

⁸ *Treasury of David*, on Ps. 29.

Glimpses of Godliness in the Psalms, #3
Aug. 26, 2018

Psalm 29 Awe

Awe is a feeling of reverential respect mixed with fear and wonder, and though we frequently use the word “awesome,” true awe seems rare in our sophisticated age. But awe before God is the central theme of the psalm we consider this morning. We are called to recognize in the awesome boom of thunder the voice of God himself. This should beckon us to worship.

I. A Call to Worship (vv. 1,2)

II. The Voice of the Lord (vv. 3-9a)

IV. Our Proper Response (v. 9b)

“And in his temple all cry, ‘Glory!’”

The Challenge of Our Secular Age

V. The Blessing of God upon His People (vv. 10,11)

“Peace”

The Glory of God Revealed in the Gospel.