

Praise is due to You,  
    O God, in Zion;  
and to You shall vows be performed,  
    O you who answer prayer!  
To You all humanity shall come.  
When deeds of iniquity overwhelm us,  
    You forgive our transgressions.  
Happy are those whom You choose and bring near  
    to live in Your courts.  
We shall be satisfied with the goodness of Your house,  
    Your holy temple.

By *awesome* deeds You answer us with deliverance,  
    O God of our salvation;  
You are the hope of all the ends of the earth  
    and of the farthest seas.  
By Your strength You established the mountains;  
    You are girded with might.  
You silence the roaring of the seas,  
    the roaring of their waves,  
    the tumult of the peoples.  
Those who live at earth's farthest bounds are *awed* by Your signs;  
You make the gateways of the morning and the evening shout for joy.

You visit the earth and water it,  
    You greatly enrich it;  
the river of God is full of water;  
    You provide the people with grain,  
    for so You have prepared it.  
You water its furrows abundantly,  
    settling its ridges,  
softening it with showers,  
    and blessing its growth.  
You crown the year with Your bounty;  
    Your wagon tracks overflow with richness.  
The pastures of the wilderness overflow,  
    the hills gird themselves with joy,  
the meadows clothe themselves with flocks,  
    the valleys deck themselves with grain,  
    they shout and sing together for joy.  
Praise is due to You, O God! Psalm 65

Yesterday I visited some of our homebound members, and asked what we could pray about together, and about their favorite scriptures. Getting someone to talk about their favorite scripture is a way to talk about God ~ a way to see into another person's understanding and experience of God. When I think about my favorite scriptures I always come to the Psalms, these intimate songs and prayers of the ancient Israelites, full of praise and full of complaint, full of grief and full of wonder; full of awe. The Psalms help me access God. When I'm tired or sick or angry, or when I don't know how I feel, the psalms put me in touch with this vital, creating, living Spirit whom we call God. I especially love Psalm 23 because of the water and meadow images, and because Janet Thompson and I literally walked this scripture with our Confirmation class. We put the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm on paper and laid it out like a labyrinth, and we all walked it as we prayed it. Joe Beaty took pictures of our group "walking" Psalm 23. It was awesome.

I've been exploring spirituality because one of my heart's desires is to create places for people who define themselves as "spiritual but not religious" to experience God, and to feel the love of Jesus Christ. And one of the places we experience God is... awe.

Psalm 65 is a song of awe. I didn't recognize the awe until I read this Psalm aloud to myself, and then I heard it: "Praise is due to You, O God... O You who answer prayer! Happy are those whom You choose and bring near Your courts. We shall be satisfied with the goodness of Your house... By Your awesome deeds You deliver us... You are the hope of all the ends of the earth... You make the gateways of the morning and evening shout for joy. Those who live at earth's farthest bounds are awed by Your signs." Awe. It seems to straddle fear and wonder and joy. It seems odd to preach a

sermon about awe because awe is often wordless, or it makes a single sound: **O**. Praise to You, **O** God; **O** You who answer prayer; **O** God of our salvation. The writer of Psalm 65 finds awe in God ~ and expresses with the sound that expresses awe: **O**. In today's worship program all of the sounds of awe "**O**" are highlighted.

In a recent conversation I was asked if I have gone to church in the past because it was just something that was expected, and not because I got anything out of it. I said yes... thinking of a boring Sunday morning during my college years when my hair was long enough to sit on and keep my head from nodding, so I could close my eyes and doze. But I'm sorry now that I did say yes, because I don't want anyone to go to church if it doesn't mean anything... just because it's expected or considered the right thing to do. Worship is an awed-place for us to meet God and it is supposed to mean something! Somewhere along the line - perhaps in the middle ages when pews were put into churches to fold people in half, into seated positions, and into orderly rows - at some time in our past, the church became more of a spectator sport rather than a participatory event. But if your heart isn't touched in worship, if you're not stirred by the Holy Spirit to a new thought or idea, or to a deeper feeling of love... why would you come? I believe that God leads us and entices us to worship because God wants us to experience awe. God wants us to live awed (a.w.e.d.) lives.

Our daughter, Mimi, went to Kenya on a mission trip several years ago, and came home and told the church who had sponsored her how boring worship is here. And that in Kenya it was awesome. There was singing and dancing and shouting, and not enough room to hold everyone and so some people were outside around the building, and worship went on for hours. While she was in Kenya Mimi experienced

unimaginable poverty and deprivation, and so many desperate needs, and so few resources. When Becky Straw comes to Lafayette she shows us pictures of some of the desperate needs and primitive resources our brothers and sisters in developing countries live with. And yet the church in Africa is growing, as if into the soil of poverty and desperation, the Holy Spirit drops seeds of joy and awe. As if in the midst of “not-enough” God’s abundance shines like a vein of gold. God shows up anywhere and everywhere where people recognize and celebrate... awe.

Through the Refugee Task Force at Lynnewood United Methodist Church in Pleasanton, I’ve met a Congolese family, who moved here to Oakland in July, from a refugee camp in Uganda. There are six children, all of whom were born in the refugee camp, and a mother and father. They don’t speak English, and I don’t speak Swahili, but awe has been one of our common languages. Two weeks ago I was at their home and I gave the children my cell phone and they took pictures of themselves, of each other, and of their parents. I don’t know if they’ve seen pictures of themselves before, and they were fascinated... they were awed. And because they were... I was. I was invited into their experience of awe. The children have been friendly and comfortable with me, a stranger, and they leaned on me and watched me and I’ve had this sense of... awe that I was included and accepted in this home as a friend. The first time I visited, I was wearing this cross and Noella, the mother, pointed to it, and asked me, “Catholic?” I answered, “Christian” and we shared just a second of awe for the God we both know.

Psalm 65 is a song about the awe of God’s abundance. In our consumer culture where abundance is measured by success... how often do we pause to be in awe of God’s abundance, God’s gifts, the joy of God? Awe is a spiritual practice, an exercise in

delight and wonder and spontaneous joy. Why do worshippers in in places of poverty and deprivation seem so attuned to these spirit-experiences of delight and wonder and spontaneous joy? I think it's because worship comes from the heart, and the heart listens for God's voice and feels God's presence. The heart celebrates God whenever there's the opportunity; praises God for every gift; and enters into God's joy. Recognizing abundance and awe comes from the heart. On page 3 in the worship program is a sentence about the sound of awe. It says, **"O!" This one letter can hold the joyful, amazing, loving wonder of awe, worship, and jubilation to express what surpasses normal speech.** There's a space to fill in a word about your experience with God and awe. It says: **O how \_\_\_\_\_ You are, Lord!** *This is a quality I associate with God such as "wonderful" or "amazing" or "mysterious" or... whatever the word is. Don't rush to fill in the blank... this isn't a timed test. Listen for your awed-word for God. [PAUSE]* The sentence below again has the sound of awe: **O Lord, how I \_\_\_\_\_ You!** *This is an emotion I feel for God such as "love" or "treasure" or "appreciate" or... whatever the word is. Again don't rush to fill this in. God invites you into an awed-relationship. What's your response to God? How does that make you feel? [PAUSE]*

Remember... the first time you saw a baby you were waiting to meet. Or sitting outside in the darkness and seeing a shooting star. Or receiving a handmade gift from a child. Or realizing how much Jesus loves you. Or realizing how much you love someone. Or hearing church bells ring and echo. Or seeing a great work of art. Or hearing the call to prayer from a mosque. Or donating blood and seeing the plastic bag fill up with your red, liquid gift. Or seeing a glorious sunset. Or singing the Hallelujah

Chorus. Or being served Holy Communion. Or feeling your heart overflow with gratitude. Those are awe-experiences and everyone has them. They fill us with joy, and wonder, and sometimes fear, and sometimes tears spill over. When we recognize God in awed-moments we're participating with God in the awe, in the delight, in the spontaneous joy. And when we name those awed-moments as spiritual experience, we invite others... outsiders... skeptics... seekers... to see God through us, and with us... to see God in awe.

The pastor who led my Confirmation class, when I was in the seventh grade, was about 107 years old. He didn't tell us that but I figured it out by the fact that he had very little gray hair and he was very, very serious. He conveyed to us that the religious life was serious business. I don't want to convey that to our children here. I want to convey that life in God is an awed-life... joyful, full of wonder, and delight. Life is serious business, I get that. This past week has been very serious. We've watched the communities of Santa Rosa and Calistoga and Napa go up in flames. Lives have been lost, homes and schools and businesses destroyed. I'm guessing that everyone of us here knows someone who's affected by this tragedy. The smoke in the air has been oppressive, the daily updates devastating. Life has been very serious this week. Sometimes the "O" in "O-God" is a cry of helplessness, of anguish. Psalm 30 acknowledges that. "Weeping may endure for a night (or however long it takes for us to grieve) but joy comes in the morning." Joy is God's essence, God's middle name; joy is part of an awed-life. Psalm 65 says, "O God, You crown the year with Your bounty; Your wagon tracks overflow with richness. The pastures of the wilderness overflow, the hills gird themselves with joy, the meadows clothe themselves with flocks, the valleys deck

themselves with grain, they shout and sing together for joy.” Creation sings of God’s joy... creation witnesses to us God’s awesomeness. Even in the seriousness of life, we need to make space for awe... and live the joyful, awed-life with God.

Research shows that how we view God changes our brains. This is a quote: “Contemplating a loving, joyful God strengthens portions of our brain - particularly the frontal lobes and the anterior cingulate - where empathy and reason reside. Contemplating a wrathful God empowers the limbic system, which is filled with aggression and fear. The God we choose to love changes us.” Psalm 65 tells us of a joyful, creating, playful, awesome God. There’s a question in the worship program that says: **What effect would it have in my life, and in our faith community, if we understood God to be an essentially joyful being?** Take a minute or two... and reflect on this question. What if you knew that God was essentially joy, and was inviting you to live an awed-life? [PAUSE]

Don Keeble has helped the Worship Team create a survey about worship here. This next question isn’t in the survey but it can help you get ready for it. How can worship lead you into the Spirit-experience of awe and joy? Take a minute or two and contemplate this: **What words, songs, sounds, visual images and experiences most evoke joyful worship for me?** [PAUSE]

Next weekend I’m going to Huntington Beach to a conference on Messy Church. Remember that I said one of my heart’s desires is to create places for people - people who have tuned out or turned away from traditional religious experience - to experience God, to come to know Jesus? I’m going to this conference to learn about a way we might invite people into an awed-life. This is what the Messy Church website says:

“Messy Church is a form of church for children and adults that involves creativity, celebration and hospitality. It's primarily for people who don't already belong to another form of church. It typically includes a welcome, a long creative time to explore the biblical theme through getting messy; a short celebration time involving story, prayer, song, and games; and a sit-down meal together at tables. All elements are for, and should include, people of all ages, adults and children. It's fun. It's a church for people at all stages of their faith journey and of any age - a congregation that is as valuable and worthy of investment as any of your other congregations. It models and promotes good ways of growing as a family: a nuclear family, an extended family, and a global and local church family. Its aim is to introduce Jesus, to give an opportunity to encounter Him and to grow closer to Him.” Doesn't this sound like an invitation to the awed-life? I can't wait to share with you what I learn.

From the book of James comes an invitation to the awed-life: “Draw near to God, and God will draw near to you.” If we practice the spirituality of awe - delight, wonder, and spontaneous joy - God is going to draw us ever closer. I know, we think it's our doing but it is God who calls us closer... and when we respond, God draws us further into the awed-life. Here's a last question in the worship program: **How might I be changed by being a more wholehearted worshipper of God?** Take a minute or two and write down what comes to you... [PAUSE]

Let's pray. Thank You, Jesus, that You came to show us the awed-life... Your delight, Your wonder, Your joy... Thank You that You don't get impatient with us when we are slow to respond to Your invitation to experience and express awe. So move us, awaken us, dance with us, Lord! And show us the awed-life. Thank You Jesus. Amen.

