

“Life is Just Awe-full!”

Psalm 148; Hebrews 12:18-29

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Airline seats can be awfully awkward spaces for some pastors. Any hope of just making small talk with the person or persons in the same row usually evaporates the moment a pastor is asked “And what do you do for a living?”

According to several colleagues I’ve talked to about this through the years, several scenarios usually appear following the big “reveal.” Some folks simply say “oh” and immediately clam up, finding a sudden intense interest in the airport maps found in the back of the complimentary airline magazine. Others react as if they had no idea relics like Christian ministers still existed, saying – well, okay, probably thinking -- stuff like, “Well this is wonderful! Me, sitting here with a live one!” This is usually followed by small talk about going to church as a kid or about some favorite Garrison Keillor routine. The first sort of rowmate I’ll call the “clammer-avoider” and the other I’ll call the “archeologist-reminiscer.” Both are easy enough to sit with. Ah, but awkwardness rears itself full throttle when a third sort of fellow passenger realizes they have a clergyperson perched like a sitting duck. I’ll call this type the “opportunist-confessor.”

Yes, this is the person who will use up whatever oxygen remains for the flight confessing long held guilts or lifelong questions as if Jesus himself had miraculously been assigned row 12, seat b, right next to them. I’ve heard some really fun stories, as well as quite a few serious ones, regarding this sort of scenario. And if the “opportunist-confessor” just happens to have a fear of flying, well, break out the Bible, the rosary (even if you’re Protestant), and an oxygen mask for good measure. A guaranteed long flight for the pastor.

Knowing all this, I was more than a bit anxious when I took my first cross-country flight a few years ago. And I knew I had the middle seat of a three person row, with Jenny on the aisle. But who would be crammed up against the window next to me? Would this person want to make small talk, as I’m inclined to do? If so, was it going to be an “opportunist-confessor” situation?

Once I found my seat, I quickly noticed the person was a middle-aged man with a nicely trimmed beard and professional looking haircut. His attire looked somewhat like he’d borrowed a few things from my closet. So I felt pretty comfortable at first glance. At second glance, I

grew a little more uncertain. That's when I noticed a logo on his shirt. It was a logo for Princeton University. Having attended seminary in Princeton, we had an immediately affinity point for conversation. On the one hand, if he was affiliated with the university or if he lived in Princeton, we could make small talk about the campus, or about eateries and the like on Nassau Street. On the other hand, however, since my connection with that town was through the seminary, I'd more than likely need to explain how I know and love the area and therefore identify my profession. Keep in mind, I have no problem ever really saying I'm a pastor – but long flights are another story.

I don't clearly recall how it all unfolded, but the bottom line is that he was a physics professor at the University. Following my "reveal" our conversations, quite sensibly, focused on creation and nature. He was a church member somewhere, but, he admitted, mostly for the wife and kids. His base line perspective on life was pure science. Our conversations could have taken on the tone of debate, as often happens when discussing science and faith. Pleasantly, though, this was not the case and our talk was respectful. Chances are, he didn't want a long flight either!

What I remember most, and the reason I've shared this story with you today, is what happened when our words turned to talking about sunsets. Both of us did not feel a strong need to precisely identify the cause behind their beauty. We just completely agreed that we've both seen some real "beauts," and that our response each time has been the same – one of overwhelming awe. Facing such awe-inspiring beauty, we both had feelings of wanting to shut-up and shut off our minds so as to immerse ourselves in genuine joyful and transcendently peaceful moments.

And so the pastor and scientist sat together, reminiscing about awe some thirty-eight thousand feet in the air. Both of us could conclude, in our own ways, that life truly is just awe-*full*.

We can arrive at this conclusion, this summary statement that life is full of awe-inspiring moments, in so many ways, many happening in unexpected ways and circumstances. Each path of revelation is equally important and relevant. A bigger point needs to be made. It is that we should never ignore life's awe-*full* moments. This is the message of today's Scripture passages.

The twelfth chapter of Hebrews reminds us that when we feel humbled and awed by our God-breathed relationships with one another and with all of Creation, what we Christians are feeling is reverent worship. By grace and through faith, we realize in those moments that we truly are citizens of God's sacred dominion and that we are blessed to be receiving glimpses of

the unshakeable kingdom of heaven. Our “acceptable” worship, that is our responding in a manner pleasing to God, is therefore reverence and awe.

And so it is that we find ourselves praising God. We find ourselves back, however briefly, in communion with the God described in the first chapter of Genesis whose intention was to declare “Let there be ...” and whose conclusion was “it is good.” And what a litany of communion with the Creator we have in Psalm 148! It’s not just humankind doing the praising. All of creation is in awe! Angels, stars, sea creatures, snowflakes, tall cedar trees join together with world rulers and young and old people alike. The purpose, the soul reason (s-o-u-l) of this awe, is exultation of the One whose creative, inclusive, eternally good power permeates everything we know and hold dear. And so we are inspired to gaze and be grateful and to generate good tidings to all generations to the Glory of God. Life *is* perfectly awe-*full* and we who profess our love of God are to love it!

Indeed, though, there are times when life’s awe-fullness crashes into a point of personal crisis. Such times can feel like blinders have been put on not only our eyes, but also our hearts. Starry nights succumb to heavy cloud cover. The smiles on children’s faces morph into frowns of dread. Birds seem gagged of their pleasant chirping. Feelings of awe-*fullness* come across only as awfulness.

Just consider what happened to the late preacher John Claypool’s sense of awe when his daughter was diagnosed with, and later died at the age of ten from, leukemia. This triggered within him a churning of “horror and bitterness and terror and fear.” Such feelings did not keep him from preaching a sermon about this, which he entitled “Life is a Gift.” It was written, as he describes it, while he was “still much in shock, much at sea, very much broken, and by no means fully healed.”

No wonder then, his words were so poignantly blunt, revealing such things as how he was “tempted to conclude that our whole existence is utterly absurd.” But alongside the “utter absurdity” of what was happening to his little girl, he also experienced awe-*full* moments that, again in his words, were “full of love and purpose and meaning.” Such were community and creation born evidences of “goodness that were anything but absurd.” These evidences did not eradicate the deep, deep grief he experienced. Nor did they necessarily buoy him back up to a strong, unshakeable faith. They did, however, lead him to gratitude.

In the end, his conclusion was that his daughter, Laura Lue, was a good gift from the Creator’s hand, and that the “appropriate response to a gift, even when it is taken away, is gratitude.” And so he was able to move between an awful experience and awe-*full*

experiences, better able to try and thank God. To his congregation at the time, he asked they not see him as an authority on how to conquer grief, but as someone needing to be reminded that indeed, “life is a gift, every last particle of it.”

And so, every time we wake up, we come into the presence of holy awe. Boarding an airplane, coping with loss, come what may. You and I, we are in the midst of it right now. What do you see? How are you experiencing it? In gratitude for every particle and particular gift of God in all of Creation, let us offer our praise this day and in the week to come. Amen.