

**AWESOME**  
*Sermon for Epiphany 5C: Lk 5:1-11*  
LPC, 2/7/10

Have people lost their capacity for awe? You would never know it from our conversation and advertising. Everything is “awesome.” A display of particular skill in the field of sports is *awesome*. The specifications for a fast new car are *awesome*. The computer graphics in the movie *Avatar* are *awesome*.

I’m not a person who usually complains about the deplorable debasement of the English language, but for the last twenty years it has seemed as if “awesome” is simply a synonym for “very good,” which makes “awe” no more than simple admiration.

Contrast this rather pallid understanding of “awe” and “awesomeness” with some of the experiences related in the Bible, such as Simon Peter’s experience of being called by Jesus in today’s selection from Luke.

In this story, Jesus finds himself on a beach, being so hard-pressed by the crowd that he takes to a boat to find himself a vantage from which he can teach the people. The boat belongs to Simon Peter, a fisherman. The fishermen have been washing their nets, which means they are done for the day. The time must be morning, because the traditional work period for fishermen in this time and place is the night-time. The fishermen are most likely tired after their night’s work, and we are told they have caught no fish, so they are likely frustrated and discouraged as well.

When Jesus finishes his little sermon, Simon Peter is probably hoping he can finally go home and get some rest. But Jesus asks him to put out his boat and let down his nets. This is wrong on two counts. You don’t fish in the daytime and you don’t fish in the deep water. But Simon Peter reluctantly complies.

When the nets come up teeming to the point of breakage, Simon knows he has witnessed a miracle, because, as I’ve said, the conditions aren’t right for catching a single fish, never mind a boatload. He is awestruck, in the true sense of the word.

What characterizes Simon’s awe, as opposed to the “awe” we feel when watching *Avatar*, is a combination of complex and unnerving sensations. Simon realizes he is in the presence of something so much bigger than himself that he doesn’t know how to comprehend it, never mind how to react to it. He is terrified. He feels *unworthy*. Isn’t that interesting? When was the last time something happened to you that was so magnificent you felt *unworthy* of it?

The miracle Jesus has wrought is so challenging to Simon that he doesn’t want to deal with it. Simon begs Jesus to go away. But Jesus makes a counter-offer. Sure, I’ll go away, Jesus says, but I’m taking you with me, to share in my miraculous work. And here is the second miracle. Simon and his companions *leave everything* and go.

This pattern of miracle accompanied by some kind of call from God is a common one in the Bible. In the passage we heard from Isaiah today, the narrator, who knows himself to be a sinful person living among other sinful people, experiences a miraculous vision and knows his sins to be blotted out. He is then sent to proclaim God's message. In the excerpt from I Corinthians, Paul relates how Christ miraculously appeared to him of all people, a persecutor of Christ's followers, and how he was then called to proclaim the Gospel.

Miracles in the Bible are always experienced in awe, not only at the amazing power of God, but also at the fact that God chooses the unworthy. In these miracles, God displays inconceivable power, then condescends to form a relationship with people. Theologians call this the tension between God's transcendence and God's immanence. God is huge, powerful, above all things, and yet God finds refuge in the human heart, and calls imperfect, broken humans to help in God's work.

American Protestantism, with its emphasis on "a personal relationship with Jesus," has historically run the risk of emphasizing God's immanence over God's transcendence. When this balance tips, that necessary sense of awe is lost.

I wonder if the cheapening of the idea of awe has anything to do with declining church memberships. People no longer have a sense of awe at powers greater than themselves, so it doesn't seem like God is doing them any favors by forming a relationship with them. Who needs a God who only loves and forgives but does not inspire awe? Your dog can do as much.

Still and all, there are people who find awe, and with it, a sense of relationship with God and of God's call. Consider the alcoholic who admits that he or she is powerless before addiction and who then turns to a higher power. You don't think that recovery from alcoholism is a miracle? Did you know that before the advent of Alcoholics Anonymous with its dependence on a higher power for healing, there were no effective treatments for alcoholism? Zilch. Nada. Recovery is a miracle. And, as always, with the miracle comes a call. Many recovering alcoholics in turn become sponsors for others wrestling with addiction.

My suggestion is that we Christians make a conscious effort to renew a genuine sense of awe. Before the message of our awesome God is lost in this jaded world where awe is devalued, we ourselves can serve the gospel by getting in touch with what awes us. If something is truly awesome, chances are that God is there.

What awes you? The beauty of nature? The love of your family? The miracle of recovery from illness or addiction? The joy of creating something beautiful or useful? If it makes you feel humble and a sense of wonder, God is there.

Remember that Jesus worked his miracle with Simon the fisherman by giving him lots of fish. God works miracles in a language that is meaningful to the recipient. What is meaningful to you? Where are your miracles? Where is your calling? Where is your awe?