

The Practice of Awe: Reverence

Exodus 3: 1-6

VBS Sunday

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Exodus 3:1-6 Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. ² There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. ³ Then Moses said, “I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up.” ⁴ When the LORD saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, “Moses, Moses!” And he said, “Here I am.” ⁵ Then he said, “Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.” ⁶ He said further, “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

So when I first heard that the theme for VBS Sunday would be The Practice of Awe: Reverence, I told the other pastors that this was just not going to work! Anyone who dropped off a child this week can tell you that VBS is LOUD! It is joyful chaos! We make Cave Snot! We sing really, really fast and just as loud! We play water games and eat tasty snacks and basically show the kids that following Jesus is a heck of a lot of fun.

But I realized just how perfect it is. Young children have an automatic reverence and earnestness. When children hear how powerful and amazing God is, they are naturally awestruck. Our children can show us what it means to live in awe of God – AND to practice reverence toward God, each other,

and all living things because they do so earnestly. They remind us to love God whole heartedly and to then open those hearts to experience God in our lives.

In this summer's book – **An Altar in the World** – Barbara Brown Taylor describes ways of living that allow us to experience God more fully. Especially if you can't be with us each Sunday, I hope you'll enjoy this book for yourselves. Today, she shares with us what it means to cultivate reverence. Reverence means paying attention, taking care...It means making the passage from fear to awe. Reverence, Brown Taylor tells us, is “the virtue that keeps people from trying to act like gods.”^[1] When we recognize that only God is God, it frees us from trying to control every aspect of our lives.

We see that in today's story from Exodus. Moses encounters God and is awestruck. Moses hides his face. He can't even look directly at God! This is not because God is scary or mean. This isn't because God wants Moses to live in fear of God's presence. It is because God is just too awesome!

And when we realize that God is just too awe-inspiring, too amazing, too wonderful for words, we learn what it means to revere something. Brown Taylor goes on to say that when we stand in awe of something—something that dwarfs the self, it allows us to see our own limits. And when we do, we see one another more reverently as well.^[2]

So what does it mean to live with reverence? Let me start by saying what it doesn't mean. Living reverently doesn't mean that we walk around acting all “churchy.” We used to think that being reverent in church meant dressing up

^[1] An Altar in the World. Page 21.

^[2] Ibid. Page 21.

and being quiet the whole time – now we realize that we can be reverent even in our VBS T-shirts.

Reverence IS about paying attention. Reverence is showing up and slowing down. Reverence is noticing God at work. Reverence is looking at the food on our plates and realizing – I didn't make this. Yes, I did the shopping and whipped up something tasty, but God made the raw ingredients and nameless people prepared them along the way.

Reverence is seeing the beauty in other people and in the world around us. The funny thing is that sometimes we can be irreverent and still achieve reverence! Last week, our children created their own Flat Jesus. When we carry Flat Jesus with us and take photos of him at our dinner table or on our vacation, we slow down long enough to take a photo, and to realize that God is with us. Rowan made this Flat Jesus for me – he's coming along to San Francisco this week, so look for him on Facebook. Flat Jesus went on work trip and Pastor Nick sent me a photo that the kids took of Flat Jesus in the restroom. Irreverent? You bet! But it reminds us that Jesus was fully human and even he felt the call of nature. (Our teenagers didn't know they were theologians!)

When we show reverence for nature and all the beautiful people on our planet, we find ourselves living in the best possible way. Sure, it doesn't always happen – we all get tired and frustrated. Sometimes we get jaded or cynical- that's normal, right?

But then we stumble onto a gorgeous rainbow or sunset or crystal clear pond and think, “Surely the LORD is in this place and I did not know it!”^[3] Or perhaps we catch a glimpse of a child or spouse or friend acting with particular tenderness toward another and we think – aah! So this is what it means to be made in the image of God!

And sometimes we see inside our own hearts and feel like we don’t have to pretend. That who we are is good enough. That WE are also made in God’s image. Those are the moments that we revere ourselves, too – just as God intends.

How do we cultivate reverence?

I can think of a rather unusual example – Marie Kondo, the home organizer who wrote the New York Times bestseller **The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up** shows us how to revere our space. When she enters a home, first she bows to it, honoring all of the “things” that have brought joy to the home’s owners. And as she organizes and discards, she first thanks the items for the joy they have brought. At first I thought this was goofy, but I find it rather delightful.

We live in a throw-away world where food comes in disposable containers. Most of the time it is cheaper to replace a broken item than it is to fix it. I’m not suggesting that we worship our “stuff” – on the contrary! But reverence means taking care, and our belongings are a good place to start.

^[3] Genesis 28:16

When I was at the Faraja School in Tanzania – a boarding school supported by this church -- the children had one uniform each. Each Saturday, they carefully washed it and hanged it to dry with clothespins.

Reverence.

Imagine, parents, if our kids ran into the house and carefully hung up coats, put shoes in cubbys, and put clothing in the hamper at the end of the day. Reverence. What if we took time each day to revere our surroundings – not because we need to accumulate stuff – but to honor the shelter that keeps us out of the elements. Might we create “holy ground” in our own homes?

Reverence for our natural places is a great next step. In fact, it’s almost too easy. Studies have shown that when we put our hands in the dirt, we actually increase our happiness! ^[4] This is great news for our gardeners in the room, but even the rest of us can get our hands dirty and just hold the soil in our hands, run our fingers through it. If we do this while looking at a body of water, all the better! Appreciating the beauty of trees, clouds, lakes, and robins – and God’s role in creating them– cultivates reverence.

How, then do we move toward reverence for each other? These are light-hearted examples, but there are serious happenings in our world today. I can’t help but think of how a culture of reverence could shift the way we address the refugee crisis, immigration, crime in Chicago and elsewhere – and how it could prevent some of the tragedies we see in the news.

^[4] <http://www.healinglandscapes.org/blog/2011/01/its-in-the-dirt-bacteria-in-soil-makes-us-happier-smarter/>

You might think that it isn't an appropriate topic of conversation for VBS Sunday, but I want to talk about the rape that occurred at Stanford. I hear from so many parents -- how should we handle this kind of thing with our children? How can I raise my children so that they will be safe? How can I raise them so that they would never even dream of hurting another human being in the way that Brock Turner hurt this young woman?

And I wonder -- *Might it help if we actively cultivated reverence?* You see, if we decide to revere each other, that means everyone -- no exceptions. I can't revere my own children and dismiss other people's kids. I can't look at my husband or mom and see that they are made in God's image and dismiss a stranger on the street as a "loser" or "lazy."

And so if our young people grow up looking each other in the eye and seeing -- truly seeing -- the image of God in each other, how might our world change? You can't sneer at, bully, callously disregard, or rape someone made in the image of God. You just can't.

Joe Biden wrote a powerful letter to the rape survivor in California -- the most telling words he wrote were, "I see you."^[5] *I see you.* Biden let that young woman know that he truly saw her. Saw her as a human being. Saw her as a child of God. Even though she had not been treated that way in the crime and in the courts.

I see you.

^[5] <http://www.motherjones.com/media/2016/06/read-joe-bidens-open-letter-stanford-suvivor-sexual-assault>

Reverence is about seeing – truly seeing – God’s world around us. When Moses truly saw God at work, Moses stopped and took off his sandals. He realized that he was on holy ground.

We, too, stand in places that are holy, alongside God’s beautiful children. In order to see this, though, we have to stop. And we have to look. And Moses only saw God because he stopped.

Remember that our story today started with an angel guarding a bush. Moses said, “I must take a look! I must see why this bush is burning but is not consumed.” Only then did God take over. God waited until Moses was paying attention before stepping in. Perhaps a dozen other people passed by the bush first. Perhaps they were in such a hurry to get home for dinner or to put the laundry in or to get to their meeting. Perhaps none of them noticed this amazing sight.

Slow down. Stop to look.

Make time this week to give something – or someone – your full attention.

You may find you are standing on holy ground. Amen.