

“Awe-Inspiring”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
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Acts 2: 42-47
Psalm 23

One of the hardest things about this time right now is living through illness, death, and grief. Under normal circumstances, when someone is hospitalized, family, friends, and clergy are able to be with that person, providing emotional and spiritual support, while the nurses, doctors, and hospital staff can tend to the physical needs of the patient.

But for the last six weeks, those conditions have changed drastically. Family and friends can only communicate with their loved ones through a phone. Hospital staff are not only providing the physical care, they now must also tend to the emotional and spiritual needs of the patient. Only when someone is at the end of his or her life may family members come in-person, and that is limited to two people. How do families choose who goes? And how heart-wrenching is it for them to be with their loved one only to know he or she will not be coming home with them? This is a hard, hard reality of this pandemic that is playing out every day in our city.

Another hard reality is what is happening when someone has died. I experienced that more than a week ago, when Don Holden died at his residence at The Harrison. We had to have the service outside at the cemetery, and the only people who could attend were myself, the funeral director, and Don’s four children. While I tried my best to lead the service as I would have under normal conditions, these simply weren’t normal conditions. As I told others, it just felt weird – very, very weird.

My wife, Debbie, experienced this on Friday. Debbie’s aunt, Sara Stallings, died on Tuesday after being in hospice care for liver cancer. Debbie and her cousin, Ruth Moore, who is the associate pastor at Northminster Presbyterian Church, conducted the graveside service for their aunt on Friday. It was heartbreaking to know that Sara’s husband, John, could not be present, because of his weakened physical condition. Nor could any of the extended family who would have undoubtedly been present under normal circumstances to celebrate Sara’s life. Instead, the family had to make a choice about who could come, because of the limits on gatherings of people during this health crisis.

And this situation translates to any of us who are in, or who have family members in, long-term care facilities. I’ve heard from many of you how hard it is to not be able to see in-person your parent, grandparent, aunt, uncle, or family member. You’re dependent on nurses and staff to communicate with you, but they are so over-worked and stressed that it’s rare to receive consistent updates. And as care facilities experience more Covid-19 cases, the

anxiety heightens over how fast it will spread, and how best to contain it. Weird, heart-wrenching, and very, very hard, indeed.

The Shepherd's Psalm took on new meaning for me in light of these very hard times. "Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff - they comfort me" (23:4). If ever we are walking through the darkest valley, this surely is it. I wonder how many times this psalm has been read to patients over the phone, or by nurses standing at their bedside, or in cards mailed to loved ones at nursing homes? "You are with me." God will not be far away - even when others cannot be physically present. God is there - God is always there.

As we have been living through this surreal time, it has also been awe-inspiring to witness acts of kindness, love and grace. That made a direct connection for me with our passage from Acts, as we hear that, "Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles." Many times, I think we only are awed when miraculous things happen - what we might interpret as "wonders and signs" of today. But if we read this simple description of the very early church from Acts 2, awe was not inspired from miraculous acts; awe was inspired by the very basic movements and activities of the Christian faith community.

Those activities are laid out in the opening verse of this passage: "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers" (2:42). The ministries of that early church may not have had such catchy titles as "Session" or "Board of Deacons," but they reflected what we at our core are supposed to be as a church: worship, education, fellowship, prayer, care for one another and for our neighbor.

Beverly Gaventa writes, "The sense of awe that permeated the lives of the first disciples (v.43) not only bound them to the object of their awe, the God who raised Jesus from the dead, but bound them also to one another . . . The 'wonders and signs . . . being done by the apostles' are mentioned by Luke not to elevate these persons to a greater importance than they deserve, but to remind the reader of the sense of immediacy to the life-transforming power of God's Spirit, which the earliest Christians possessed . . . Their overflowing love of God resulted in an irresistible urge to express affection among themselves" (*Texts for Preaching, Year A, W/JKP, Louisville, © 1995: 284*).

It was in their daily living and devotion to the gospel that the early church centered their life in community. By being committed to this mission, and being open to the Holy Spirit, they experienced a depth of love for God and one another which could not be matched. This is evident throughout the rest of the passage. They met one another's needs through the distribution of goods which each other contributed to the community's life. They shared in the Lord's Supper - the breaking of bread - "and ate their food with glad and generous hearts."

The interesting thing about this passage is its ending: "And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved." We learn that through their life together God blessed them with more and more converts,

and their community grew in numbers and vitality. But it's important to note the distinction between life in community and life for evangelism.

Gaventa writes: "But as the text makes quite clear, this successful evangelistic effort was a by-product of their energies. An important by-product, to be sure, but not the primary focus of the early Christians' concern. They did not 'devote' themselves to evangelism (v.42), but to teaching and fellowship, to worship and to acts of caring. And the growth of the church was generated out of these activities by the Spirit of God (v.47)" (*ibid*).

If there is a lesson for us today from this simple passage from Acts, I believe it is that our call is to nurture the gospel of Jesus Christ, so that when we come in touch with strangers, they don't need a slogan to know we are disciples. When we show genuine care for one another, no matter how much we disagree with another on the latest political issue – then the Lord will bless us. When we open ourselves completely to the Spirit to teach us God's Word, even in ways we did not expect – then the Lord will bless us. When we fervently pray to God to work wonders in our lives and in the lives of those around us – then the Lord will bless us. When we discern the presence of Christ in the breaking of bread and drinking of the cup, and are strengthened spiritually for this incredible journey – then the Lord will bless us.

There is a word that is not included in this passage, but is inferred by the narrative. The passage reads, "All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need" (2:44-45). The word that is not mentioned there but certainly describes this experience is "sacrifice." These first disciples sacrificed their own possessions and the proceeds from selling them to give to the faith community. They gave up something for themselves so that the greater good might be achieved.

In what ways have we made sacrifices in our lives? How do we make sacrifices for others today? I know of individuals who have passed up opportunities to make more money in their profession, so that they would have more time to spend with their families. There are those who sacrifice the chance to travel or live in larger homes, because they are committed to caring for a spouse or a parent in need. There are parents who sacrifice better cars, vacations, and clothing, so that their children will be able to attend the college of their choice.

But sacrifice has taken on a whole new meaning during this pandemic, hasn't it? We have made individual sacrifices to protect the health of others. Medical professionals and staff have made enormous sacrifices of time and energy, with some of them giving the ultimate sacrifice. Some sacrifices have been by choice, other sacrifices have been thrust upon us without our permission. Sacrifice has been very prevalent in our world over the last two months.

But what has been awe-inspiring for me is to witness the sacrifices members of the Body of Christ have made so that all might be blessed. We may not be blood relatives, but we are sisters and brothers in Christ. And the

sacrifices and acts of kindness which you have shown to others and to strangers has been truly awesome.

You call and ask how someone is doing, and continue to follow-up, so that they know the Good Shepherd is by their side. You share ideas of how we can be the church in a new way, even when we can't be together, and those ideas multiply across social media and our email inboxes. You respond overwhelmingly to a call to help feed our neighbors who are in dire straits, and just like the early disciples, our neighbors are able to eat their food with glad and generous hearts. You make the effort – time and time and time again – to mail in your offerings, assuring that our ministry will not shrink during this time of physical separation. It is truly awe-inspiring, and I am deeply, deeply grateful.

Later in the service, we will share your images and stories of how you have felt great awe and joy as a part of the Body of Christ, offering signs of hope in this challenging time. As we watch that video, I pray those images might lead us to consider anew how we are called over and over and over again to share God's hope and love as a community of believers. For the more we live out that calling as the Body of Christ, the more we are able to walk beside those journeying down the darkest valley – and help them know they are not alone.

“Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles.”

Thanks be to the living, loving God. Amen.