

Awesome Jesus

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio
January 7, 2018—Epiphany Sunday

- [Matthew 2:1-12](#)
- [Sermon-in-a-sentence](#): To the Magi of old as to us today, beholding God in Christ inspires awe.

What impresses a king?

For that matter, what impresses someone of means who's not part of a royal family?

- An athlete who's set for life with a guaranteed multi-million-dollar contract, for instance.
- A celebrity who is adored by throngs of cheering, screaming fans not only while performing but also before and after the show.
- A college-aged entrepreneur who transformed a sophomore year sociology class assignment into an app that's had over 4 million downloads and was just purchased by a west coast venture capitalist group.

For a royal who's waited on hand-and-foot... for an athlete who's pampered in order to protect his physique, talent and skill... for the performer whose name and face are recognized instantly wherever she goes... for the geeky inventor whose ragged jeans and backward ball cap give no indication of his astronomical net worth... For people like that, what catches their attention? What gives them pause? What fills them with awe?

How about for the Magi of biblical fame, those "scholars from the east" who were experts in astronomy and astrology, in history and prophecy, open to the guidance of God and the ways of human nature? Would anything impress such folk? Would anything fill those elite scientist-scholars – Magi, "Wise Men," "Kings" – would anything give them awe?

We all have a sense of what awe is. According a Berkeley psychologist, "Awe is the feeling of being in the presence of something vast or beyond human scale, [experiencing something] that transcends our current understanding of things."¹ Maybe last summer's solar eclipse gave you a sense of the awesomeness of the universe. Maybe you were awestruck the first time you saw the ocean, or the Rockies or Alps, or the inside of a real major league ballpark. Maybe you were overcome with awe as the doctor explained that first ultrasound image of your baby. You know how they say it's impossible for you to tickle yourself? I think it's just as impossible to create for yourself an experience of awe. You can't plan or make awe. Awe happens.

Recent research is suggesting that the sensation of awe should be added to the "big six" emotions of happiness, sadness, fear, anger, disgust, and surprise. It seems that awe is a "basic part of being human that we all need."²

Awe-inspiring experiences bind us together. They enable us to remember (or realize for the first time) that we're part of something much larger than ourselves. Awe-inspiring experiences move us (even momentarily) from focusing on "me" to "we."

¹ Dacher Keltner, head of the Social Interaction Lab, University of California – Berkeley, quoted in "Feeling Awe May be the Secret to Health and Happiness," by Paula Spencer Scott, *Parade*, October 9, 2016, p. 6

² Arizona State University psychologist Michelle Shiota, quoted in "Feeling Awe May be the Secret to Health and Happiness," by Paula Spencer Scott, *Parade*, October 9, 2016, p. 7

Awe helps us see things in new ways. When we encounter something awe-inspiring, our fight-or-flight response is disabled, allowing us to pause and consider, to stop and think.

So what was it like for the Magi when they found and looked upon the child Jesus after their long trip? A cynic could claim that maybe they were disappointed: “Huh? Is he it?? Pretty ordinary little boy, it looks like to me.”

But that’s not what Matthew’s gospel tells us. When they found the place where they had been led by a star, Matthew writes, “They could hardly contain themselves: They were in the right place! They had arrived at the right time!”

Matthew then says that they went into the house and saw the child in the arms of his mother Mary. How did they react? Matthew says they were “overcome.” They were overcome. Beholding Jesus brought them to their knees. Even in his innocence and youth, the child Jesus projected God’s providential care, God’s unfailing acceptance, God’s power above every power. They saw Jesus as awesome.

Kneeling before him in humility and honor they worshiped him – speaking or singing words of praise and thankfulness and joy. And then out of their bags they produced treasures truly “fit for a king”: frankincense burned only for occasions of the highest honor, the perfume of myrrh often used in royal anointment ceremonies, and the treasured element of gold, perhaps in the form of coins or jewelry or ornaments or statuary. These were not prizes or rewards but gifts of honor – tributes – offered from one party of dignitaries to another.

That’s what the Magi did.

What do we do? What are we supposed to do with Epiphany, Christianity’s peculiarly-named tradition commemorating the world’s discovery of the Son of God?

As I said earlier, I don’t think it’s possible for us to will ourselves to be overcome with awe. Awe is not something we can do; it’s something that happens to us.

And yet... ponder the significance, the uniqueness, of what we’ve just awaited through Advent and celebrated at Christmas: that God so loved the world that God came among us in Jesus – God’s son and our brother. God reached across the vast and mighty distance between our humble daily lives and God’s majestic omnipotence and God became embodied in our midst in Jesus. Emmanuel – God with us – was born in Bethlehem. Ponder that. Consider that within the incomprehensibly vast universe of God’s concern, God opted to invite us into closer, deeper fellowship by coming to dwell among us.

What do we do? In response to seeing God in flesh, the Magi offered the gifts they had. I think we’re called to something remarkable... called to something more than being nice people... more than being people who get along with each other. God’s action of coming among us in Jesus signals a call to action for us:

- To show compassion and generosity when others feel they’ve done their share.
- To stand with people who are being taken advantage of through the greedy or disrespectful actions of others.
- To strive for our lifestyles and attitudes as well as our words to attest to our profound gratitude to God as the source of all blessing.

Let’s take a lesson from the Magi. Overcome by the awesome strength and inclusiveness of God’s love for all the world, we, too, can present ourselves in humble submission before Jesus, and offer the gifts of our lives for his use. From us... for God... that would be an awesome response.