

Text: [Genesis 28:10-22](#)

Date: October 17, 2021

Title: Thin Places Series, Week 1 > “Awe”

Theme: To have more experiences of God, spend more time in places that inspire awe, wonder, and curiosity.

1

This week, Captain Kirk, William Shatner – at 90 – became the oldest man to go to space

And regardless of what you think about this enterprise of private space flight

There’s no doubt that even a few minutes near the edges of earth’s gravity does something to those fortunate enough to have the experience Shatner, upon his return said, “I hope I never recover from this.”

Have you ever felt that?

There have been many moments in my life where I’ve felt a profound sense of awe and wonder at this world we live in

A profound sense of God’s presence and power

In the past year, I’ve made it a point to get out in nature

To do more hiking and exploring – in New Jersey and elsewhere

And so I’ve had more opportunities to experience that feeling

I know I had that feeling standing on the cliffs overlooking the Atlantic at Acadia National Park last fall

I had that feeling on a trail through an old-growth hemlock forest in the Poconos

I had that feeling on LBI, when a full moon caught the barrel of each wave at precisely the right angle to make the water look like it was lit from within

These are things you can never forget

Things you never want to recover from

2

This series that we are calling “Thin Places” is about how God meets us in moments like that

Ancient people believed that there were “thin places” on the face of the earth

Places where God’s presence was so real it felt like you could touch it
Where the veil between the physical and the spiritual felt almost non-existent

We often associate this idea with the Celts, and Celtic Christianity
In places like the Isle of Iona on the coast of Scotland – a place of pilgrimage for centuries

But people all over the world had their own lists of holy places
Often marked by unusual and striking natural features

It’s not just places that can be thin, though
There are also times when God seems to draw closer to us

Ancient people, or really *anyone* who lived prior to the invention of the electric light

Were much more attentive to the natural cycles of light and darkness through the year

They were much more in tune with natural time

Days like the solstice and the equinox, the beginning of harvest, the migration of animals that provided food for your tribe – your life centered around these moments of the year

I would argue that there are also times in our personal lives when God seems to draw nearer

Or, at least, when we can become more open to God’s presence

We’re going to talk about these over the next five weeks

How God meets us in moments of wonder, and in moments of challenge

Awe. Heartbreak. Fear. Remembrance. Change.

These are our topics for this series

3

And for today's topic, awe, I want us to focus on those moments where we are left speechless

Those moments of transcendence where we're like: "it's so indescribably beautiful," or "I can't believe that just happened"

I know that the historical meaning of awe also captures an element of fear That's definitely present in today's Bible reading

It should be, because Jacob is on the run from his brother, whom he has royally wronged – and we can return to that

But I want to set aside the fear dimension for a bit in order to stay focused on the idea that God meets us in places where we experience awe and wonder

This famous story of Jacob's ladder is about a vision Israel's patriarch has in a dream

It's a dream of a promise renewed – a promise of land and descendants that was first made to Jacob's grandfather, Abraham

Which makes sense, because it happens while Jacob is en route to find a wife for himself from among his mother's relatives in Haran

According to Jewish tradition, the story takes place on Mount Moriah, the same mountain where Abraham was commanded to sacrifice Isaac, before God stayed his hand

As the ancient rabbis told it, Jacob was forced to pause there for the night because God made the evening suddenly dark

And Jacob was afraid

Fear of the darkness, fear of the wild animals, and fear of his brother (from whom he's stolen an inheritance and a blessing), caused him to set up a hedge of stones around himself

Before he laid down to sleep with another stone under his head

And Jacob dreams of a ladder – or a staircase – to heaven, with angels going up and down

Now why angels would need a ladder to go up and down, don't ask me Except that it definitively establishes this location as one of those "thin places" where earth and heaven meet – "the entrance to heaven," Jacob says

Standing on the staircase, he sees the LORD, who renews the promises first heard by Abraham

When he wakes up from this dream, Jacob has one of those “I hope I never recover from this” moments.

He takes the stone that was under his head, and sets it up as an altar, anointing it with oil to consecrate it

And he calls that place *Beth-El*, the house of God

He sets up the stone because he doesn't want to forget this experience

He doesn't want to forget this place

He doesn't want to forget this feeling of awe and wonder at God's power at work in his life

4

Isn't that the whole point of these experiences of awe and wonder?

They open us up to a sense of praise and thanksgiving

And not just in a general way, as we might expect

Not just for the vague sense of “God, thank you for creating all this beauty”

But rather, in a very specific sense of “thanks for taking the time to create one of me, too”

“Thanks for taking care of *me*, and *my* life, and *my* people”

That's here in this passage of scripture as well

God says to Jacob: “I am with you now, and I will protect you everywhere you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done everything that I have promised you.”

The wonder at God's care for the general – for whole vastness of creation

Gives way to a gratitude for God's care for the particular – for me

“I can't believe you did that” becomes “I can't believe you did that *for me*”

Isn't that how Jesus taught?

“Consider the lilies of the field.

If God cares so much for them, to make them so beautiful, even though they exist only for a moment, won't God care for you, too?”

The *show* is meant to *tell* us something

Are we listening?

5

So, now that we understand a little bit more about how *awe functions* in our
spiritual lives
What can we do with it?

Well, I think the answer is simple: we can seek *more* of it
The good news is that we don't have to be a billionaire (or hang out with
billionaires) who have the means to blast us to the edge of space
No, we can experience awe right here
Now, it might mean getting up earlier than you normally do
Friday I was driving the girls to school and saw the most remarkable
sunrise
The clouds were perfect pink and orange and blue cotton candy

Those moments are meant to capture our attention
And when they do, they demand our full attention
Because they don't last long
That which is transcendent never does

I mean, Jacob woke up from his dream
And by the time I was driving back to my house, the sky just wasn't the
same
They may not last, but they are still worth pursuing
Because they stick with us in ways we hope we never recover from

Those moments of awe are times when God is drawing close to us
They provide the evidence our hearts need that the Creator of the whole
universe cares for us, too

So, this week:

Get up early and see the sunrise

Drive to a dark place where you can look up at the night sky

Head out into the woods

Get down the shore and walk on the beach

Watch a beautiful nature documentary on Netflix

Do one thing that lets you experience awe and wonder at what God has
done

And see if God doesn't draw closer to you in those moments

See if it doesn't become a thin place for you

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