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## *An Invitation to Awe*

**A sermon by the Rev. Canon Lauren Holder  
The Second Sunday of Lent – Year C**

When reflecting on our lectionary for this week, two things jumped off the page and lodged themselves in my heart and mind. The first was not even one of our readings, but the collect for today—the opening prayer. “O God, whose *glory* it is always to have *mercy*...”

Glory and mercy are of course words and characteristics we often attribute to God and God’s way of being in the world. No surprise there. But for God’s glory to be defined by having mercy... that’s a slightly different take, isn’t it? What do we think of when we think of glory? Perhaps greatness, power, might—strong things. And what do we think of when we think of mercy? Perhaps gentleness, forgiveness, compassion.

But here in this prayer, we are reminded that God’s glory is not just found in God’s greatness. “O God, whose glory it is always to have mercy.” God’s glory is found in the mercy God extends to us when we come forward with our bumps and bruises, with our sin and hardness of heart, with our mistakes and misgivings. And God’s glory is found in our seeking and receiving that mercy. God’s glory is found in the relationship born out of turning to God, asking for help, and receiving the mercy of God’s unfathomable love.

This juxtaposition of glory and mercy seems almost paradoxical. Not unlike the coupling of vulnerability and strength. You know, how the idea of being vulnerable immediately implies weakness—when we think of vulnerable populations or vulnerable species, we think of beings in need of protection and care. But to be vulnerable—to express vulnerable truths about yourself or to open yourself up to transformation—that kind of vulnerability takes courage and strength. It is not for the weak.

To name our weaknesses before God requires strength, and to always have mercy is God’s glory: “O God, whose glory it is always to have mercy: Be gracious to all who have gone astray from your ways, and bring them again with penitent hearts and steadfast faith to embrace and hold fast the unchangeable truth of your Word, Jesus.”

Alongside this glory of mercy, what calls to me in this week’s lectionary is God’s invitation to Abram: “Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.” If we are all descendants of Abram, then surely this is the mark of our shared inheritance: that we are from a very young age a people who marvels at the stars. Truly! I think my daughter’s first word after “Mama and Da-da-da” was “MOON.” We cannot help but look at the sky and ponder our place in the universe.

And what is it you feel when you look to the sky? Is it merely a vague recognition that the sky is there, or the sky is big, or the sky is beautiful? Or have you ever felt overwhelmed by the sky. I hope you have at some point in your life laid on the ground with arms stretched wide beside you, and imagined this world turned upside down... so that the ground pressed against your back is the top, and the sky above is actually below... and you imagine yourself falling into the vastness of sky and stars and universe and infinity. Have you? If not, you have your homework assignment for this week.

This week, I invite you to practice AWE. As we reflect on our mortality during the season of Lent, the weight of our shortcomings and failures and mortal bodies with all their ailments, it can feel especially heavy. But when we practice awe, when we contemplate our mortality alongside the glory of God’s mercy, when we look to the sky and try to count the stars, suddenly our failures become as light and weightless as the ash on our heads.

Count the stars, if you are able to count them. God’s mercy is vast. God’s love is unfathomable.

Now I realize that not everything can be solved by looking at the stars and singing, “there’s a wideness in God’s mercy like the wideness of the sea…” For some, today’s reading can beg the question: But why not me, God? Why do I continue childless? Or why am I denied the longings of my heart: a companion, a cure, a call, an answer, a way forward. I have prayed and I have believed—why not me? For some, today’s reading can ask: If God’s mercy is so vast and God’s love so unfathomable, where is God in Ukraine?

These are honest questions. These are faithful questions. They are questions that need to be asked if we are to be in honest relationship with God.

As I have brought my own questions before God this week, I will share with you the response articulated within my own heart: Love is not the absence of suffering.

Love is not the absence of suffering. To suffer, or to witness suffering, is not to be absent from God or to be absent from Love. Indeed, the word *compassion* means “to suffer with” or “to suffer together.” Like a mother hen gathering her brood under her wings in the midst of a storm, we are covered in our suffering. We are held. We are not alone.

How many times I have wanted to shield others from suffering, to suffer on behalf of another or stop the suffering all together. I feel powerless in the face of brokenness and unanswered prayer. My mortality is ever before me, my weakness and doubt laid bare. And yet, I am never alone. And you are never alone. I am held in love, and you are held in love.

“For the love of God is broader than the measure of the mind.”

There are some really big things going on in our world right now—big scary things. And practicing awe won’t end wars. Counting stars won’t put an end to evil and it won’t answer all our questions. But practicing awe will remind you who you are and whose you are. It will remind you of the vastness of the One who suffers with you and covers you with the down of her wing.

Jesus is at work in the world. Even now, Jesus is casting out demons and performing cures. Jesus is on the move. Go outside. Look to the sky, or look to the budding branches that were brown and bare a week ago, or look to the brave souls defending their loved ones from the forces of evil, or look to the kind eyes of a stranger. Or close your eyes and listen for that first bird of the morning, or the breath of your beloved, or your own heart beating within your chest. Practice awe this week. So that even in your suffering, or in the suffering you see, you know that God’s glory is mercy, that God is with you, and God is still at work in this world.

Amen.