

“An Awe-full Sermon” (6Feb22)
Luke5:1-11; Is6:1-8; Ps138; 1Cor15:1-11

You may go to a haunted house or a movie theatre intending to get scared, but it’s probably not why you’d typically come to church.

Our Bible readings today share similarities in something we don’t talk much about: God is scary. We tend to believe and expect God’s goodness. This is less like a cuddly puppy dog than a fire-breathing dragon. In this season of Epiphany, a word that means “show forth” or “showing up,” today, it seems when God shows up, the trembling response is “Yikes! No, thanks!”

Peter is afraid enough to tell Jesus to go away, and Isaiah is shaking in his sandals in what must seem like the Great and Powerful Wizard of Oz’s throne room on steroids, with a presence so ginormous the room doesn’t begin to contain it; it fills the earth! As if the six-winged seraphim flying around weren’t enough. However they exactly look, it certainly isn’t the stereotypical white-robed blonde-headed angel or fat baby cupids. Their name meant “fiery” and was also the term used for poisonous snakes. We may as well call these flaming flyers, these strange angels strange-ls or scary-phim instead of seraphim. It’s understandable Isaiah would be panicked in this presence—even before a burning coal is stuck in his mouth.

In the Psalm, we might pick out the fearfulness as God shuns the haughty and God’s hand can stop “the fury of my enemies.” The Psalm might well praise such powerful assistance. But still it’s at least nerve-wracking: is the Incredible Hulk actually on your team, or will his might be used against you and you’ll wind up smashed?

That’s a later part of the fearfulness in Isaiah, too. We opted not to continue with an ugly second part of the reading, where the people are suffering death and destruction. Assuming that their fate was entirely in God’s hands, they can only believe God causes the bad things to happen, in their case enemies conquering them, instead of the reverse. Which team is God fighting for and whose side is God on? That’s frightful even to consider. It gives voice to our dread: are bad things punishment? Is

God against you for being sinful or rich and privileged? I much prefer to dwell with the proclamation from Romans 8: “If God is for us, who is against us?”

The situation in the Gospel reading of why Peter is afraid and wants Jesus to go away isn’t so much about God against him, in his own fate or human fate, but is the power of Jesus even over nature. Though the expert fishermen had been out all night long, Jesus was suddenly a better fish finder, leading to the miraculous catch.

This story reverses themes we heard last week. Last week Jesus’ hometown presumed they were close to him and wanted miracles for themselves. In this one, Peter winds up with a miracle, leading him ask Jesus to go away. But then he goes on to call Peter closer. And the miracle ends up disregarded; they use the phenomenal catch neither as food nor income for their poor, hungry families, but abandon it immediately. The miracle’s real point, then, is about Epiphany, about God showing up in Jesus.

So we had fearfulness in God’s presence, because God has power over human fate, over our personal wellbeing and survival. Then we had fearfulness because God in Jesus has power over creation and creatures.

Finally, we get to 1st Corinthians. The words fear or afraid aren’t in this reading, and it doesn’t seem like anybody is acting very worried. But Paul is talking about Jesus appearing. (And “appearing” is another good way to translate Epiphany.) Paul mentions Peter on Easter morning, and the 12 disciples. And he says Jesus appeared to a group of 500—a story nowhere else in our Bible, but it always makes me picture Jesus doing a show at a concert venue.

Except that this is, indeed, a freaky concert. Because the headlining act is a dead guy. We should remember that: the Jesus appearing to all these people is the one with holes in his hands and feet, still bearing the marks of being crucified, dead, and buried three days. It may not be like visiting with a zombie, but at the very least it would be creepy to have one you know was dead come back and be talking with you. God isn’t just a ginormous presence, not just involved in how your

life goes, or with power over the fish in lakes. Even death is under God's power.

A few implications: we may think about church as where get close to God. But maybe we start asking how close we want to get to this fearsome God.

We also need to ask how far away we think we can get. God doesn't only appear in Isaiah's temple or in visions, but in the commonplaces of your job and daily life, like for fishermen. Jesus shows up where you are. Behind locked doors and along highways, as the resurrection appearances portray. Maybe the horror movies have it right, as this one will come to surprise you in your house, and is also likely to turn up in a graveyard to raise the dead.

Still, scary and fear might not be our best terms for this. We might better call it awe. The God who will never let you get away, who has power over your fate, over enemies, over all creation, even over death itself isn't just awe-some. God is awe-full, if we can call it that. You'd better be thankful that God doesn't come as your worst nightmare but with good news, wanting what's best for you.

Our response, like in the Psalm, could be to bow down before this God, to offer praise. But praise isn't just singing sweet holy, holy, holy hallelujahs. Maybe the best word for awe is simply wow. Let your jaw drop and mouth say wow, as you recognize this God showing up wherever you are, now and forever.

Wow. Just: wow.