

## 2020-11-15 Community + Awe: Gazing Together

### *Community + Awe: Gazing Together*

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Pastor Scott Austin

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[Music Intro]

[Male voice] The following is a presentation of Artisan Church in Rochester, New York.

[Voice of Pastor Scott]

Thanks, Ken, for that reading, and thank you, Del, for leading us in our congregational prayer today.

So, I mentioned at the beginning of our service that we're talking about awe today. Awe is one of our five foundational values at Artisan Church. As most of you know, those values are awe, beauty, roots, community, and justice. And during this particular series, we're thinking about community, because that's a really hard one to kind of grasp and understand and practice and feel when we can't be together with each other in person. And we're thinking specifically about how it connects to the other four values. And so, last week we talked about community plus beauty, and the week before that we talked about community plus justice, and next week we're going to talk about community plus roots. You can maybe peek at my notes on the blackboard behind me.

Today we're talking about community plus awe. Awe is one of those things that has shaped our life together as a church for nearly 16 years now, and it means, like all the values do, lots of things to us. Here are some of the important aspects of this value for us. One is that God is transcendent, which means that God completely surpasses our understanding – that, even as we understand God to be very close to us – and you might think of the language you heard about asking Jesus into your heart or something like that – that God cannot be contained even by a vast and ever-expanding universe. And therefore, another aspect of awe that's important to us is that we are filled with wonder – that we embrace the mystery of it all.

The value of awe is one of the main reasons why we're so fond of questions here at Artisan. Much more fond of questions than we are of answers, to the frustration of some people, I'm sure, myself included sometimes. But it's that foundational value of awe that invites us to lean into the mystery and to be filled with a sense of holy wonder. And you begin to get a sense of

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some of this when you hear a passage of scripture like the one that Ken read a couple minutes ago, where the people are standing at a great distance from a shaking mountain, saying, “Do not even let God speak to us or we will die!”

You know, by the way, Ken mentioned the context there of Moses just receiving the Ten Commandments, and I think the story leading up to that point is really pretty fascinating, and if you find time to read Exodus chapter 19 and 20 on your own, I would encourage you to look for how many differences there are between what God tells Moses to tell the people and what Moses *actually* tells the people. [chuckles] It's different! And you might ask yourself, *Why did he add that part and take that other part out?* or whatever. And then that might encourage you always to remember that there's going to be some difference whenever any religious leader, myself very much included, tries to convey God's words to you, keep in mind that there's going to be that layer of translation or interpretation or [pause] humanity.

But so anyway, the people are so in awe of God that they're actually afraid of God, and that is certainly an aspect of awe – that's language that appears in the Bible a lot and it's something that we could spend some time thinking about and talking about and does it actually mean fear like “be afraid of,” or is it more about respect? Or all those different things. I don't know about you, but I just can't go there today. The world as it is scary enough, and I think I need a kinder, gentler version of holy awe today.

And so, I want to tell you a story of something that happened to me about a week ago, and then I'm going to ask you to share some stories as well. And so, today I'm actually going to, we're going to allow you to unmute yourself long enough to share a story with the rest of the congregation here. And so, be thinking about a story that maybe is the one you thought of at the beginning of our service. But let me tell you my story first.

This happened, like I said, just about a week ago. I was working here at the Artisan building on a Saturday and Anna Vos was using the Artisan kitchen to teach her pierogi-making class for the Rochester Brainery. Some of you've taken that class; it's really good. And I got some free pierogi to take home, but that's not what the story is about. It was “awesome,” but not in the way that I mean. [chuckles] So, Anna and I chatted, you know, with our masks on and at appropriate distance, of course, and then I left to go home. And it was just about the time the sun was starting to set.

As I walked out across that street there toward my house, I looked across South Clinton Avenue, and there's Pinnacle Hill right there, and the trees that had leaves, the leaves were all

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turned yellow. And the time of the afternoon that it was was so perfect, because the sunset was not quite happening yet, but the sun was setting very low, close to the horizon, and so this horizontal afternoon light was just completely illuminating that whole bank of yellow leaves in these trees, and it was just stunningly beautiful. I mean, I sat there and went, “Wow!” And I yelled back into the building, “Anna, you have to come out here and see this!” Her class was done, so she indulged me and she came outside and she was like, “Wow, that's amazing!” And we were standing there together looking at this bank of trees in the evening light.

And I was like, “I feel like the ‘double rainbow all the way across the sky’ guy.” You guys remember the double rainbow guy? I was going to show you the YouTube video in the service, but then I decided not to. If you don't know what I'm talking about, look it up; it's almost 11 years ago now, but he's, like, so in awe of this beautiful natural scene. He's literally saying, “Oh my God! Oh my God!” over and over again. And I don't know if he's a religious person and if that was a prayer or if that was just an exclamation, but it certainly could have been a prayer for me looking at those trees last weekend. And I was just frozen in place. And the light at that hour is so short that I could actually just stand there until it started to fade, and then I walked home with my mind kind of swimming.

So, I had this experience of awe. I don't think it would be pushing the boundaries of our language to say that that was sort of a religious experience, but what made it really special in that moment was not just that I got to experience it, but that I got to experience it with a sibling in Christ, somebody who shares the same worldview as I do, and who I was able to invite into that experience and say, “Let's take this in together; let's stand here with our jaws dropping together.” And I thought that's such a perfect example of experiencing awe in community. What a great moment to have these two foundational values of Artisan colliding with each other, embracing each other, right there on the premises of the Artisan Church building. It was really quite an experience.

So, I know that many of you have had, if not all of you have had, experiences where you had this experience of holy wonder, of a religious or spiritual or otherwise transcendent moment. And maybe you were alone with that, or maybe you were with somebody else and maybe you were able to experience it in community and maybe you weren't. So I want to invite you now, and we're going to allow you to unmute yourselves (don't unmute yourself unless you're sharing a story, please, and then when you're done, you can go ahead and mute yourself again), but what is a time when you experienced this holy, transcendent wonder? And if you prefer to type it in the chat, you can, but in this case, if you're willing and able, I'd love to hear it in your own voice. And you can connect this to a biblical idea if you want to, if it fits, but you don't have

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to; don't feel any need to make a religious observation just now, unless you have one already ready to go. So who wants to share first?

[Voice of Penny] The first thing that I thought of when you were talking about this was the first time I heard my son's heartbeat in an ultrasound. I wasn't (and I've told the story before, but) I was not expecting to hear anything. And when I heard that heartbeat coming into the room, and it suddenly became real to me that I helped create another life – I said that it was love at first thump.

[Voice of Pastor Scott] [laughs] Love at first thump! Thank you, Penny, for sharing that. What a great story. I know it inspired a memory for me; I wonder if it did for others, as well.

[Voice of Michael] I could share a story of life and death as well. I'd like to share that when I was 16, my football coach told me my father had died. And they took me home, and I consoled my mother and my brother on the couch for a minute, and then Mom said, "Somebody's gotta tell the girls," (my four older sisters). So I grabbed the address book (back in the day when people had those) and went up to the landline (back in the day when people had those) in my parents' bedroom, and called my four older sisters to tell them that Dad had died. I used the same words that my coach had used, that I had "some very bad news," as kind of a preamble. And called all their best friends, just called a dozen people, and as I concluded my calls, I realized that I was resting my hand on my father's knee and he was still in the bed. And I hadn't noticed that previously. The sheets had been pulled down, and I closed his eyes, and then did what came natural at that moment, which was to kneel at the side of the bed and to start to pray. I felt this incredible, divine presence wrapping me. God was there in a very personal and vibrant way. And then, at that moment that I'm praying at my father's deathbed, in walks my coach into the room, and did the exact perfect thing. He knelt down next to me and put his arm around me and also just prayed in silence. And that moment lasted for probably 10 or 15 minutes. It was an experience of awe of the presence of God at the time of death. And then I'll just quickly say that that's juxtaposed with the experience of my first child being born, Connor. My wife's a midwife, and we had planned a midwife to come to the house to deliver a home birth, but she didn't make it. So it was just Catherine and I in front of a roaring fire in our bedroom, and I got to catch my son, and fortunately everything went okay, except that when I put the bulb syringe in his nose, I squeezed it and shot the boogers up instead of sucking them out, but he lives, he's 28. But again, an incredible moment – just God's divine presence, and awe at this new life. Thank you for listening.

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[Voice of Pastor Scott] Wow! It's going to be a tough service to make it through, I can already tell. Powerful stories of awe and community, both. Thank you, Michael.

[Voice of Jolene] I have a story. I will never ever forget, I was in Australia, working as a teaching assistant for a college program. And a lot of the program we spent out in nature, so we were at a national park at the very southern tip of Australia, right on the coast. No lights at all, no light pollution. There's no moon, so you could see all the stars, and we were on the beach and the tide was really low, so we had to walk out quite a ways to get to the water, to get to the waves, until the sand was all wet. It was very shallow water, and there were phosphorescents in the water that week. And so I just remember standing there, being in awe, because you have the stars stretching overhead, and they were reflected in the shallow water on the sand. And so there were stars overhead, they were stars in the ground, and then there were stars in the water with the phosphorescents, and it was just a magical experience.

[Voice of Pastor Scott] Beautiful, thanks for sharing that, Jolene.

I'll read one out from the comments here and then we can hear a couple more, maybe, but Doug Barlett said, "Seeing the Hubble Telescope images in the early years." Wow, yeah. And then Melody says this, "I think we can experience community in these moments even when we are alone. I witnessed an amazing sunrise in New Zealand when I was travelling alone and felt both awe at the beauty and sadness that I was experiencing that moment by myself, but then I realized that I'm connected to the community of everyone who has experienced this place before, everyone who has experienced sunrises across time and place. There is a community even amidst solitude." Wow, what a lovely story and powerful sentiment.

[Voice of Crystal] Hello, everyone. So, for me, growing up in a charismatic background and as a worship leader, music has always been that moment of awe. And I never really quite understood when we would say, "Lord, show me your glory!" You know, you get the Moses idea in your mind. Someone told me, I heard later on that the glory was really just God's love and affection being present. And so I have many shared experiences of that, but recently, especially since we left that movement and I wrestled with it, where I truly experienced that was when I joined the Rochester Oratorio Society, and we gave a concert with the music of Jenkins at Hochstein (and if you've ever been in there, the big, round theatre, it's just so amazing) and it was all about different faiths, different religions, and the common need and communication for peace. And I remember being there, a couple years back, singing with all these different voices about peace, and just having this holy, again from all the different religions and everything else, just coming together and the feeling of see all these voices and

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this reverence just fall into place, and outside of my own traditional charismatic background. And I think in the past few years that's where I've really experienced a sense of awe, being in that choir, singing, whether it's old church masses or something from a different cultural background and felt something truly amazing, to still feel an affection outside of something I thought was the only place I could experience it. So, that's been pretty awesome.

[Voice of Pastor Scott] Mmm, thank you, Crystal. Thanks for sharing that great story. Love it. If that story inspires you, I encourage you, whenever COVID is in our rearview mirror and we can do it again, if you've never been over to Christ Church Episcopal Church downtown on a Sunday night for their Compline service, this is one of the most breathtaking and awe-filled experiences you can have. And it's beautiful choral music in a dark room.

[Voice of Susan] I can share something, I think. Everyone's stories are making me think of things where I experienced awe, but one thing that's really powerful for me is when I am in a place that has a lot of history to it and that moment of recognizing that someone else centuries ago has been here. And two specific times: One was on our honeymoon at a church from, what was it, the 15th century? I mean, we went to some that were super old. And seeing how worn down the steps of the monastery were, where they would go up to ring the bell for prayers every day, and realizing that I was standing in a place where there had been centuries of people had walked, also. And the other one was, I actually had the opportunity to hike up Mr. Errarat – I'm sorry, am I saying the right mountain? – Mt. Sinai [laughs] in Egypt. And again, there were a couple monasteries on the way and there were steps that were centuries upon centuries old and knowing all these people of God had walked them before, and even Moses and the people of Israel had walked there, at least according to tradition. And not just the Christian ones, but people of all faiths. The guy before us was most likely Muslim, and just seeing how it was a point of connection and point of history and that it was a place where God had been and was and that was just really neat to be there.

[Voice of Pastor Scott] Thank you Susan, what a great story.

I think I saw Hannah unmute herself earlier, but maybe this comment in the chat was the reason for that. She said, "Jolene and I just had a community awe moment. We've both been on the same beach in Australia, Wilson's Prom, and had the same awe experience." Wow! Community and awe over space and time. My goodness. Totally perfectly illustrating what Melody had said earlier; I love it so much.

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We're trying to keep these services under 45 minutes; we're I think at 42 minutes right now, so as much as I would love to hear so many more stories, I do want to try to bring this in for a landing. And the way that I'll do that is with a few more words from Exodus chapter 20. So, the people had perceived God's presence as thunder and lightning in a smoking mountain in the verses that we've already heard. And I want to read just a few more verses from that passage, and I think it might give us another angle from which to look at God. So this is Exodus 20:21–25.

It says: <sup>21</sup>Then the people stood at a distance, while Moses drew near to the thick darkness where God was. <sup>22</sup>The LORD said to Moses: Thus you shall say to the Israelites: “You have seen for yourselves that I spoke with you from heaven. <sup>23</sup>You shall not make gods of silver alongside me, nor shall you make for yourselves gods of gold. <sup>24</sup>You need make for me only an altar of earth and sacrifice on it your burnt offerings and your offerings of well-being, your sheep and your oxen; in every place where I cause my name to be remembered I will come to you and bless you. <sup>25</sup>But if you make for me an altar of stone, do not build it of hewn stones; for if you use a chisel upon it you profane it.”

There's all this sacrifice stuff, and maybe that seems just too weird and bizarre for us, but I want you to catch this one simple thing, which is that these Israelites who were terrified and experiencing this awe of God as big and huge and actually dangerous were told by that God, “All you need to make for me is an altar of Earth.” Just make a pile of dirt! No gold, no silver. None of that stuff. Don't even carve the stones if you insist on making steps. I was struck by that this week – that even as we worship a God who fills us with awe, we can experience that God in the very simple elements of the world of just dirt – God is in the dirt!

And so you know this is my transition to communion, right? Because I've been harping on this lately, how the sacramental beauty of Holy Communion, this grace that God offers us, comes to us in the form of these very simple things: bread and table wine, the most basic meal of the first century and, actually, the current century, for many people, too. And so if you have something like bread and something like wine, I'd encourage you to take it now. Take your food, take the bread and remember Christ's body which was broken for you. (Once again, I'm using these little self-serve communion things that someday we'll get to use together in person.) And you can eat that bread and remember the sacrifice of Christ.

And then I'm going to peel the cap off of this little cup of juice. I don't know what you have at your house, whether it's juice or something else. But Jesus was with his disciples and gave them the simple cup of wine and said, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood; drink it in remembrance of me.” So whatever you're drinking may be in remembrance of the Savior.

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Simple gifts from a God who asks nothing more than an altar of Earth from the people of God. Thanks be to God.

Before we have our last song and our announcements, let me just give you a quick heads up about what we're going to try to do here at Artisan. I was really disappointed to have to make the announcement to you this week that we were pressing pause on our plans for a partial phased reopening. The timing was just so bad, where it took us a while to get kind of ramped up to the point where we could do it, and then just as we were doing that, you could almost plot the same curve of positive infection rates in our community. And it just, it's the wrong time to do it. And it was really sad to have to make that announcement, but I'm really confident in the people who helped us make that decision, and that it was the right one.

That being said, I know that so many of you were really eager to have some kind of in-person interaction. And so we are going to be doing a small group version of in-person interactions at Artisan. And we're gonna start that this week; we're gonna do it on Wednesday and Thursday night at 7 p.m., and these are going to be conversation and community groups. Very simple, low pressure, small group experiences; there's no curriculum, there's no linear, week-to-week-to-week thing, you come in and out as you please. And it's simply just two things: conversation and connection. So we're going to have just a get-together in the room, talk to each other, how're you doing? That's the conversation part. And then something to do with the spiritual life without having to do too much heavy lifting, that's the connection part.

Pastor Jessie's going to lead the ones on Wednesday at 7, using creative prayers as the connection point. That's something that she's done and had great success with with our young people. And on Thursdays, I'm going to be doing one at the same time, 7 p.m., where the connection point is simple spiritual practices that anybody can try, and we'll try them together, we'll encourage you to try them during the week. There's not much to it, but we're going to get together and have that experience.

Now, these are capped at ten people, including the leader, so that's nine of you that can come to each of these each week, and you need to sign up online to do it. Would somebody who knows how to do it drop the link in the chat to the Conversation and Connection page, both on Zoom and on Facebook? If you don't have your current info in our church database, there's a link on that page that you'll see that you need to fill out. You have to sign up using that. It's not hard; it's way less complicated than I just made it sound, but we do need you to sign up so that we know the right number of people. Thank you, Scott; I see that the link just went into the chat.



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So I hope that I'll get to see you on Thursday. Jessie hopes that she'll get to see you on Wednesday. We *are* going to offer a Zoom version of this as soon as we can kind of get our bearings and get our heads above water. And also, if we find the demand is greater than we can meet with two nights, we'll add a third night. We want to do this and we're going – all the same safety precautions are in place, it's just a smaller gathering; we'll have a maximum of ten people in the church sanctuary, which is a big, huge room with lots of air and ventilation, so we think it's relatively a very safe activity. Hope that you'll be able to make it to one of those, and if you have any questions, don't hesitate to reach out.

[End of sermon]

[Male voice] For more information, visit us at [ArtisanChurch.com](https://www.ArtisanChurch.com).