

RECLAIMING THE THRILL OF AWE AND WONDER

Writers are persnickety about words. On the plus side, that gives us the ability to express things precisely, and in an interesting way. But on the down side, it can seem critical, even curmudgeonly. My family is surely tired of my comments about how formerly potent words like "awesome" and "wonderful" have become puny by overuse. An "awesome" taco does not actually inspire awe; a "wonderful" trip to the mall seldom holds true wonder.

But today, linguistic curmudgeons like myself can be of good cheer, because there are signs that "awe" and "wonder" are being restored to their former glory, enhancing the way we understand the Bible.

Dacher Keltner, professor of psychology at the University of California, Berkeley, just published a book entitled, *Awe: The New Science of Everyday Wonder and How It Can Transform Your Life*. His premise, coming from a secular point of view, is that experiencing genuine awe will improve our well-being, and that it can be cultivated by rediscovering the wonder that awaits in everyday life.

Linguist, scholar, and theologian Junius Johnson has called such wonder "the quotidian necessity", meaning that it can be found in the course of everyday events and is essential for the good of our souls.

These studied perspectives on awe and wonder help reclaim the heft of those words. In doing so, they help us appreciate the true riches of the Bible, where "awe" and "wonder" (and their derivatives) need to carry their full weight in order to convey what the divine Author intends.

The Bible is generously infused with awe and wonder, as it records people's efforts to express what Dacher calls, "the feeling of being in the presence of something vast that transcends your understanding of the world." This is the feeling people in the Bible invariably had when they encountered God.

For example, after God appeared to him in a life-changing dream, Jacob awoke in fear and declared, "Surely the Lord is in this place and I did not know it." He was afraid and said, "How **awesome** is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven" (Genesis 28:16-17).

When Moses and the Israelites joyfully celebrated deliverance from generations of Egyptian bondage, they sang, "Who is like you, O Lord, among the gods? Who is like you, majestic in holiness, **awesome** in glorious deeds, doing wonders?" (Exodus 15:11).

These biblical examples, and so many more, require us to restore the weight of "awesome", understanding it not as a way to extol a taco, but as a reverent attempt to characterize the incomparable God: "For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great, the mighty, and the **awesome** God" (Deuteronomy 10:17).

Likewise, when we reclaim the potency of the word "wonderful" in the Bible, our understanding deepens for verses such as, "I praise you because I am fearfully and **wonderfully** made" (Psalm 139:14). Then we can see that exhilarating wonder is not revealed only in the extraordinary; it can be found in the ordinary as well -- even in something as ordinary yet full of wonder as a person.

As we absorb God's awesomeness anew, we will perceive wonder in our ordinary days. Biblical wisdom gives us examples, such as, "Three things are too wonderful for me: the way of an eagle in the sky, the

way of a serpent on a rock, the way of a ship on the high seas"
(Proverbs 30:18-19).

So let's not miss the daily richness God will impart if we cultivate a keen sense of wonder. He will nurture our souls and lift our spirits as we get glorious glimpses of Him, our truly awesome and ever-present God.

As Roman Catholic Bishop Robert Barron put it, "When, through faith, we see every moment and every creature as an ingredient in the divine plan, we live in joyful surrender and with a sense of wonder."

With love in the Lord,
The Rev. Christine Maddux