

*What strikes us with awe?* For some of you, it's things we see in sports: Maybe it's the things we see players like Saquon Barkley or Patrick Mahomes do. Maybe it's seeing Elon Musk's SpaceX rocket booster landing into a launch pad. Maybe it's seeing a light show in the night-sky, comprised of drones coordinated to present images that move. *What is it that strikes you with awe?*

In today's reading, we hear of those who are struck with awe when they recognize they are in the presence of God. The prophet Isaiah received his call from God about 750 years before the birth of Jesus. What we hear today is not his first calling, but the beginning of a new phase of his prophetic ministry. God ushered in this new phase by giving Isaiah a glimpse of heaven. He heard the voices of angel declaring God's holiness. Isaiah experienced something like an earthquake, and it struck fear in him: *"Woe is me, I am doomed!"*

Then, in the Gospel, Simon Peter, after having witnessed a miracle of nature, recognized that he was in the presence of something greater than himself. It was a moment in which Jesus is revealing his identity, and the only thing Peter could think to do was to fall to his knees and declare, *"Depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man"*.

We sometimes call this *fear of God*. We don't mean fear, as in something that is a threat to our well-being. In this context, fear is something more akin to awe. But I wonder: *Do any of us ever fear God? Even more, Do any of us ever have a sense that we are in his presence? Do we really believe he's at work in what we're doing in this place? Do we hold him in awe as we're here at Mass? Maybe...maybe not.*

Recently, I was speaking with a couple I've known for several years about what attracts people to come to church, but also why many people over the years have abandoned their Catholic faith for either another brand of Christianity or nothing at all. It was a good conversation.

Either the husband or the wife, I can't recall which, suggested that it's about giving a message people want. We then had a discussion about what type of message people seek. *Are they seeking to be entertained? Are they seeking wisdom for their life to guide them in their lives? Are they seeking a message that gives feeling of stability at a time of instability?* But they reaffirmed that it's the message and that the homilist must therefore connect with people through the message.

I thought about what they were saying, and I believe there's some truth to it. But I also thought about how I believe too many of us miss the point of what this is all about. I asked, *"What if you could have an experience with Jesus. Even more, in which he leads us in prayer, takes us back in time to his experience on Calvary, in which he showed his profound love by dying for us. Still more, if he invited us into the mystery of his rising from the dead, and finally if he were to give his risen body to us so that we could share his new life? Would that be enough to attract people?"*

In that vision of heaven that God gave to Isaiah, the angels sang those familiar words: *"Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts! All the earth is filled with his glory!"* We sing and hear those same words at every Mass, and should understand that as we sing those words, we are entering that angelic court witnessed by Isaiah. Earth and heaven become one in that moment.

And here on this altar—as we sing those words—this sacred space becomes the place of real encounter, a heavenly experience. And like the fiery ember that touched Isaiah's lips, like the fire that came down from heaven in the presence of the prophet Elijah on Mount Carmel, God acts in this place, here and now.

St. Ephrem once said: *"In your bread hides the Spirit who cannot be consumed; in your wine is the fire that cannot be swallowed... The seraph could not bring himself to touch the glowing coal with his fingers, it was Isaiah's mouth alone that it touched... The fire came down with anger to destroy sinners, but the fire of grace descends on the bread and settles in it. Instead of the fire that destroyed man, we have consumed the fire in the bread..."*

While a message is important, there's something much greater at work here than any feeble attempt at eloquence offered by me, you or any other orator. The message should support this experience, not try to be the experience. Those who have eyes to see the true experience tend to be left in awe.

But as revealed to us in these Scriptural accounts, telling us about Isaiah and the first of Jesus' apostles, God wants more than just to make our jaws drop. Yes, he wants us to see, to experience his transcendent work from on

high. But then he wants transformation in us and for us to act upon what we have seen. Thus, may we continue with eyes, minds and hearts open.