

Numinous

Song of Songs 6:4-5

April 21, 2013

Holy, holy, holy are you, Lord God Almighty, who was, who is, and who is to come! Heaven and earth are full of your glory!

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What would you do if you came into the presence of something utterly holy? Something beautiful and terrible, entirely incomprehensible and overpowering, wild and astonishing, terrifying and captivating?

Would you close your eyes and cover your head? Would you run away? Would you stand frozen in your tracks? Would you fall limp to the ground? Would you tremble? Would you cry?

And what would you say? What could you say? Maybe you would say nothing. Maybe you would have nothing at all to say ...

“Numinous.”

How many of you know that word? How many of you have never heard that word before -- “numinous?” So I have a question for you, all of you who don't know the word. What do you suppose it might mean? Do you get any hints just from sound of the word itself -- “numinous?”

I didn't know the word until I read, thirty-five or forty years ago, a book entitled “The Idea of the Holy” by Rudolf Otto. Numinous, as he defines it, describes the human encounter with the “holy,” with what he calls the “wholly other.”

Otto says there is a common element to religious experience of the “holy,” something we meet as other than us, not what we are, something wholly other, above and beyond and apart from us, not by degree, but by kind, something utterly, entirely, fundamentally other. Something wonder-full and awe-full, terrible and beautiful, beguiling and intimidating, something that fills us, when we see it or hear it or feel it or sense it, with wonder and awe and dread and desire.

Reading that book was a profoundly transformative experience for me, not because it introduced me to a kind and quality of religious experience that was previously unknown to me, but because it gave a name to -- it helped me appreciate and understand -- something I had already experienced.

I told you last week about laying in a grassy field in northern Michigan and watching the display of the northern lights, but I didn't tell you what I felt as I watched! It's hard to find words to tell you. It made me still and quiet. It was astonishing and exhilarating. It made me feel small and insignificant, but also wildly joyful and deeply grateful -- just to see it, just to be in that moment, alive, experiencing it. It is feelings like these that Ola Gjeilo was trying to capture with his music.

I have felt those same feelings looking down off a treeless summit, or out the window of an ascending airplane, seeing the huge scope of the landscape, feeling tiny, feeling that all my thoughts, my feelings, my wants matter nothing at all, and yet somehow feeling connected, too, feeling that I am a part of what I am seeing.

I have encountered the numinous out on the ocean, too far from shore to see any land, just endless sea stretching to the horizon in every direction, still and calm, but restless and mysterious, full of hidden secrets and unleashed power. The ocean moves to its own rhythm. It follows its own purpose. It doesn't care a whit about me or that I am there. And yet I am there, to see it.

I have encountered the numinous listening to music or sometimes even as I have sung or played. Some music makes me want to dance or laugh or sing along or tap my foot or clap my hands in appreciation, but some music, other music, leaves me stunned, breathless, speechless, emotionally limp, moved to tears or trembling, literally shaking.

I have encountered the numinous -- the holy -- watching a baby be born. I didn't know I would be telling you this just two days after I experienced that wonder of wonders again as I witnessed Harper Grace coming into the world!

What can I say? What can you say? It is a wonder. It is a miracle. It is beautiful. It is terrifying. It is holy. It is like being there at the beginning of all things, when the spirit of God moved over the chaos, when the voice of God spoke into the nothingness, and then ... it was! All of this, all of creation, came to be!

These experiences take us, somehow, some way, into God's presence, into the presence of the holy. Scripture tells the stories of many such encounters.

The poet of the Song of Songs encountered the holy in the face of his lover, in the presence of the beauty that delighted him and overwhelmed him.

Moses encountered the holy in the clouds atop Mount Sinai, when God spoke to him, and through him to all Israel, out of the smoke and the fire, telling them who they were and what they should do. It was wondrous, beautiful, terrifying. The people would not even set foot on the mountain.

And, out of the storm, out of the whirlwind, the Lord, the holy One, the One who is wholly other, spoke to Job.

*Who are you to question my wisdom with your ignorant, empty words?
Where were you when I made the world? Can you command the lightning
to flash? Can you find food for the lions to eat where they hide in their
dens?*

Job heard and Job fell into a heap of dust and ashes and shame. But that encounter did not leave Job broken. It made him whole!

The holy is beautiful and terrible, overwhelming and incomprehensible, mysterious and untouchable, in some sense supernatural, but not otherworldly. I don't even like using the word "supernatural," because it is terribly misleading, because the place we encounter the holy ... is here!

We encounter the holy, we encounter God, in the display of the northern lights, in the movements of the pulsating ocean, in the beauty of a face, in the terror of a storm, in the wonder of the birth a baby.

But -- I sense an objection -- but this is a new age. We understand these things now. I can tell you, scientifically, what it is that makes the lights of the aurora borealis glow and shimmer, what it is that drives the currents of the oceans, where it is a baby comes from, how she develops and how she is born.

Yes, you can. You can tell me all those things and you are right, but it doesn't change anything! Even when you understand obstetrics, is any birth, every birth, any less a miracle? And even when you understand music theory, is the artistry, the power, the genius, of this particular piece of music any less wondrous, any less delightful, any less awe-inspiring? What makes something holy is not the stuff from which it is made, but the one who makes it!

God is the maker! God is the creator! God is the artist!

God's glory is revealed in what God makes, in what God made and in what God still makes. "The heavens are telling the glory of God!," the Hebrew poet sang, and he, she, they were right! It is here, in and with and through the wonders and mysteries and astonishments of this world, that we encounter the holy, that we meet God.

And that is a good reason, the very best of reasons, to care for this earth, because it is the vessel through which God's own glory is revealed. Creation is not God. Creation does not contain God. But creation is full of God! So to care little about the earth is to care little for God, and to misuse or abuse the earth or even the smallest of its creatures or even the least valuable (to us) of its resources, is to disdain and tarnish the very glory of God.

But there is more to say, too, because encountering the holy transforms not only what we think about the earth, but also what we think about ourselves. In the presence of the holy, I am as nothing -- clueless, helpless, defenseless, powerless, limp, empty, absolutely vulnerable, absolutely humbled -- and that's a good thing! Because I am not God! You are not God! And it is utter foolishness to pretend that we are.

We are creatures -- we are creatures! -- entirely dependent on God, utterly dependent on God's grace ... for life, for breath, for being. It is only when we encounter the holy, when we understand that we are nothing, that we become something, that we become our selves.

Have you? Have you had experienced the numinous? Have you encountered the holy? Have you been left breathless, limp, overwhelmed, astonished, trembling, crying? Have you come into the presence of something that left you speechless and defenseless, almost obliterated by what is great and deep and rich and powerful and beautiful beyond words, beyond knowing, beyond feeling? I hope so! I hope to God you have ...

*Holy, holy, holy, my heart, my heart adores you!
My heart is glad to say the words, "You are holy, Lord."*