

“The Baptism of Jesus”

Rev. Dr. Laura Miller-Purrenhage

Sunday, February 16, 2020

Please pray with me: Holy God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be faithful and pleasing unto you, for you are our rock and our salvation.

As many of you know, my daughter, Katie, is studying overseas right now. Although my husband had to work after Christmas, my other children and I were lucky enough to be able to visit her. We spent a little time in Nuremberg, Germany (which is right near where she’s studying), but most of the time we were in Rome.

Rome is gorgeous with incredible artwork and architecture, and it was all decked out for Christmas. For the most part, I was amazed by its beauty. But seeing the Vatican, the Colosseum, and then the Documentation Center in Nuremberg (which documents the rise and fall of Hitler and the Third Reich, and the Holocaust) one day after the other left an impression on me that I would like to share with you.

St. Peter’s Basilica is astounding. It is gigantic and completely—I mean completely—covered in art. Peter, Jesus’ disciple, is said to be buried there and everything that he is reported to have said in the Gospels is written on the walls. A lot of the art in the basilica is dedicated to him, with other images of other figures from scripture and, famously, Michelangelo’s Pieta sculpture (which is a sculpture of Mary holding Jesus just after he’s been taken down from the cross). There is also a gorgeous golden stained-glass window with the Holy Spirit represented as a dove. When the sun is out, which is most of the time in Rome, the window glows golden.

All of this is overwhelmingly beautiful, and it feels appropriate as a place of worship of our triune God. But the basilica is also full of images of popes and contains many of their sarcophagi. In fact, behind the altar to St. Peter is a huge throne—the throne of the Popes. My understanding is that much of this cathedral was built as a sign of papal power and authority. The church sold indulgences (which was basically a way of selling forgiveness of sins) to help pay for it, which is one of the main reasons that Martin Luther protested and, eventually, why Protestantism began. One guidebook I read suggested that, the Pope at the time made the Sistine Chapel even more grandiose, as a result of Luther’s protests, as if to say: You think we abuse our power? Let us show you power!

After having seen that, we spent the next day visiting the Colosseum. It is also huge and imposing! And, again, it used architecture to teach a lesson. As you probably know, it’s basically a stadium, with a bottom that all the spectators look down into. Slaves, foreigners and Christians were put in that bottom part of the arena to be tortured, to fight one another, and to fight dangerous wild animals. Caesar, members of the senate, and other powerful members of Rome sat in the highest seats, looking down on the ones in the arena. They had life and death power over those in the arena, and they tried to show it.

The next day, we flew to Germany and went to the Documentation Center in Nuremberg. Part of it is built upon the model of the Colosseum and uses some of the same architectural tools

used both by the ancient Romans and by Christians, putting Hitler up on a pedestal and encouraging everyone else to feel insignificant next to him. In fact, one of the goals of the Third Reich was to cause people to stop caring about their individuality and to focus on their role as supporters of the community. They used powerful propaganda to play to people's emotions, encouraging them to fear and hate Jews, the Romani, the disabled—anyone who was different, while helping the Germans to feel like they were part of something bigger, much the way that the Caesars and even Christian religious leaders tried to do help people feel like they were part of something bigger.

Seeing these three sites one day after the other caused me to think about reverence—who we should have reverence for and how we should practice it. Paul Woodruff, in his book *Reverence: Renewing a Forgotten Virtue*, makes some claims about reverence that have guided me for many years. Having studied ancient Greek and Chinese cultures, he claims that reverence is the core virtue of both, and that it is the virtue that leaders need the most.

He defines reverence as having the right amount of awe, respect, and shame at the right times and towards the right things. Shame is a feeling we should have when we fail to live up to the virtues that we hold; it's a gut reaction that should cause us to want to apologize, fix the mistake we made, and try to make sure that we don't make the same mistake again. Respect is a feeling we should have for others—for those who might be above or below us in any hierarchy.

Awe, to me, is the core of his philosophy and the thing I want to talk about for the rest of this sermon. Awe, says Woodruff, is something that we have towards the transcendent. It's that feeling we get when we look up at a night sky full of stars or when we stand on the banks of Lake Superior or Lake Michigan or the ocean—when we can't see the other side and all we see is water. It is that sublime feeling we get when we realize that, in the span of the universe, in the expanse of time, we each are tiny, tiny blips.

This feeling is both terrifying and beautiful. Realizing that we are tiny in that expanse can cause fear. But realizing that we are a *part* of that great expanse—that should cause us to feel thankful and amazed. Both should cause humility. This mix of thankful, fearful, amazed humility in the face of the transcendent, that is awe.

Importantly, it is this sense of awe that reminds people to love, respect, and have compassion toward all life. Woodruff says,

Reverence begins in a deep understanding of human limitations; from this grows the capacity to be in awe of whatever we believe lies outside our control—God, truth, justice, nature, even death. The capacity for awe, as it grows, brings with it the capacity for respecting fellow human beings, flaws and all.

When we really think about the fact that we are a part of this vast universe and network of life, we remember that life is all around us, all the time, and that it will go on without us when we die. And when we really think about the insignificance of our own lives and our own selves, we gain a profound sense of awe for life and for death. The result is that we become able to see the common bond that all living things share: we are all limited. We live for a short time, we often make mistakes during this time, and then we die. It is this awareness of our common bond that helps us become respectful of, and compassionate toward, all life, seeking to promote and enhance life, rather than harm it.

Importantly, Woodruff points out that both Greek and Chinese philosophy teach us that we should only feel awe towards the transcendent because awe is the thing that helps remind us of our situation in the universe. It helps us remember that there is always something bigger and greater than ourselves, and that is why awe is so important to leaders. A leader who has forgotten to have a true sense of awe for the transcendent or who has awe for them self or who encourages awe for human-made things, has forgotten humility. That person thinks they can act like a god.

The danger caused by leaders who forget awe is that they stop caring about life—about the lives of individuals both in their care and the lives of those of other nations. This, I think, is what happened with all the leaders who created the three structures I visited.

The Popes who created St. Peter's Basilica had it partially right. The structure was built to inspire awe in the visitor—and that is exactly what it does. But it clearly encourages awe not just for God—the transcendent one—but awe for the Popes and for the Church. Christian leaders—both Protestant and Catholic--have continued to make this mistake ever since then, and it's precisely when we make this mistake that we start to allow people in our care to become hurt. How many people could the church have fed and housed with the money it took to build St. Peter's Basilica?

The leaders who built the Colosseum and the structures of the Third Reich had it entirely wrong: their goal was to inspire awe for people—for themselves, really--and for the governments created by people. Both used slaves to build their creations, both encouraged violence and cruelty towards foreigners, Jews, and the disabled. Both used their power to whip up fear among their followers and both murdered countless people. The lesson from studying them and the structures they built was that we should beware of anyone who plays on our fears; we should beware of anyone who tries to get us to feel awe for a human or for human-made things. Our awe should be towards God—the transcendent one who made all of this, and all of us.

This is the message of our scripture readings for today. Jesus is the Son of God. He could have walked up to John the Baptist and said, Okay, you're done. I am God and the world will now bow to me. He could have made enormous structures to himself, forced people to obey him, or killed in God's name. But he didn't. He went to the one humbly preaching in the wilderness and asked to be baptized. He humbled himself, wading into the water and always seeking the voice and guidance of God.

As the prophet Isaiah has explained, Jesus didn't seek leadership or rulership. He didn't abuse his power but, instead, used what he had to heal and comfort, to seek justice for the marginalized and oppressed. He was a servant and modeled servant-ship to his followers. That is the effect of true awe—it is the recognition that, no matter the authority we have, there is a greater authority to whom we are beholden. It is the full knowledge that, no matter our authority, we will likely make mistakes and need to constantly seek the guidance of the transcendent to avoid as many of those mistakes as possible, and to make amends for those mistakes when they happen. It is the understanding that others will make mistakes as well and, therefore, need compassion and forgiveness. And it is the full and certain knowledge that life—the lives of all people—are precious, both because they are so very brief, and because they are part of a larger whole. Amen.