

Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time – Cycle C
Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception – February 10, 2019
Reverend Robert W. Marshall, Jr., Pastor

Childhood is filled with wonder – or at least it used to be. I think today’s children send texts before they can even walk, but years ago – OK, decades ago – children were gradually introduced into the world. I have vague recollections of my first visit to downtown Memphis where my father worked. Main Street was a busy, fascinating place back then – and, as I recall, we watched a Cotton Carnival parade with bands and floats. I vividly remember entering the Poplar Plaza theatre for the first time and seeing a movie in color on a screen much bigger than I was – a far cry from the little black-and-white-and-fuzzy TV screen we had at home. I remember our first visit to Florida. I had seen lakes and streams and the Mississippi River, of course, but seeing the endless ocean – or at least the seemingly-endless Gulf of Mexico – was beyond my comprehension. I greeted all of those events – and so many more with wonder and with awe. As an adult, I have been excited at the sight of the Grand Canyon, at the beauty of the Alaskan scenery, at the splendor of a Bavarian castle or a Viennese palace, but I cannot say that any of those sights filled me with wonder. None of them filled me with awe. Unlike in childhood, wonder and awe do not come easily for us. We have everything figured out. We know the statistics. We’ve seen the pictures. We know what to expect and we adults are rarely, if ever, surprised.

In our gospel reading today, we find a group of fishermen finishing up from a hard night’s work. They are intrigued by Jesus, and interested enough in what he is saying that they stuck around – and let him use one of their boats as a speaking platform so that he wouldn’t get pushed into the waters of the lake. After he spoke, he asks Simon – whom we now know as Peter – to take the boat out into the deep and put out their nets for a catch. We can only imagine what was going through the mind of Simon Peter. Jesus, Master, you may know everything about the Law and the Prophets, you may have great insights into the Kingdom of God, but if there is one thing I know – it is fishing. I’ve been doing this for years, and if we didn’t catch anything all night long, we’re not about to catch anything now. Simon Peter undoubtedly thought this – but he was too polite to say anything. Instead, he just suggests to Our Lord that putting out the nets was a futile exercise, but that he would do it anyway. When they tried to bring the nets back up and found that they were so full of fish that their nets were breaking, when they realized that they not only had more fish than they had ever had before, but that they needed the help of the other boats – well, that was wonder and awe, that was an experience that opened their eyes to who this Jesus was and what he could do.

We hear the prophet Isaiah describe a similar experience of wonder and awe. He received a vision of the Lord Himself, seated on a throne, surrounded by angels. He saw the door shake and the room filled with smoke. And he was frightened. He knew that he was unworthy of such a sight – his lips were unclean, as were the lips of all of his people. Simon Peter was similarly frightened by the large catch of fish – “Depart from me, Lord,” he told Jesus, “for I am a sinful man.” There is something about a remarkable, a wonderful sight that causes us to step back, to be frightened just a little. When we stand before the ocean for the first time, for example, we feel a little unsure about walking in. When we stand before the vastness of the Grand Canyon, we look down to make sure that our footing is solid. Wonder and fear are often two sides of the same coin.

In our second reading today, we hear the testimony of Saint Paul, who had his own experience of wonder and awe. Remember that on the road to Damascus, Saul had been struck blind by the sight of Christ who asked him directly, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me.” Paul recovered from that experience and, as he tells us today, went on to proclaim the Good News of Jesus, went on to be an apostle not because he was worthy, but because the grace of God was at work in him.

Our confirmation students learn the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit: wisdom, understanding, counsel, knowledge, fortitude, reverence, and the final gift which used to be called “the fear of the Lord,” but is now more often referred to as “wonder and awe.” The change in terminology has happened because our concept of fear is often limited to terror, to shock and surprise and horror. We do not want anyone to be afraid of the Lord – as we now understand the word. But it is a gift to view the Lord with wonder and awe and, yes, with a sense of unworthiness, with a sense in which we are caught breathless for a moment, and are moved to take a step back and recognize that there is someone greater than I am. We need the gift of wonder and awe to remember that the earth does not revolve around us, that we are God’s servants, He is not ours. Our readings today demonstrate how the gift of wonder and awe are lived out. There is Simon Peter’s initial, natural reaction, asking Our Lord to depart as he becomes keenly aware of his sinfulness. There is Isaiah’s reaction when cleansed by the Lord – stepping forward and saying, “Here I am. Send me!” And there is Paul’s reaction – a life lived in faithful service to the God whom he encountered, the God who called him in the midst of his persecution. Paul grew in his awareness of his own unworthiness and also in his recognition of the love and mercy of God. In a time when nothing seems to surprise us, when nothing seems too outrageous or too magnificent, may we rediscover wonder and awe. May the Lord show us his tremendous love and mercy – and may we fall to our knees and catch our breath as we endeavor to take it all in.