Mark 2:23-28 (NRSV)

23 One Sabbath he was going through the grain fields; and as they made their way his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. 24 The Pharisees said to him, “Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?” 25 And he said to them, “Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need of food? 26 He entered the house of God, when Abiathar was high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and he gave some to his companions.” 27 Then he said to them, “The Sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the Sabbath; 28 so the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath.”

Luke 3:10-17 (NRSV)

10 And the crowds asked him, “What then should we do?” 11 In reply he said to them, “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.” 12 Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, “Teacher, what should we do?” 13 He said to them, “Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.” 14 Soldiers also asked him, “And we, what should we do?” He said to them, “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.”

15 As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, 16 John answered all of them by saying, “I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. 17 His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”
Sermon

So Very Human, So Very Blessed

Hlane Royal National Park, Swaziland, July 2010

Three of us – my brother David, son Henry, and I – had driven all day to get from David’s home in Mozambique to the Hlane Royal National Park in Swaziland to explore the wonders of creation in their natural habitat. Night was falling and the temperature was dropping – remember that summer here is the Southern Hemisphere’s winter.

We were staying in a small cabin on the veldt. That night after dinner we walked outside and ventured a few feet away.

Now, I say a few feet because the cabin was set in the happy hunting grounds of lions and leopards. We looked up at the night sky, and beheld the most amazing sight: stars.

Stars, planets, and galaxies beyond imagination were there, before our very eyes.

Lights twinkled and reflected from horizon to horizon. We froze in awe, and we froze because it was so cold. We were still, being in the moment.

A question crossed my mind, one raised in Psalm 8:

“When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?” -- Psalm 8: 3-4

And then we did what any good, modern citizen would do in 2010. We dialed home to share the good news.

That night, in the cold, far from home yet together with family, underneath a canopy of lights offered to the universe by the One who created and creates, in the overcoming of fear of being dinner for Simba and Nala,
in the midst of admiring and paying attention to the wonders of God,
we were happy.

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All were questioning in their hearts and minds, and all means all. The Pharisees took their questions to God.

Why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?
How can your followers possibly be reverent if not bound by ritual?
The crowds, the tax collectors, the soldiers, the whole people of God raised their questions.
What then should we do?
How do we respond to those in need in our midst?
Teacher, what should we do?
What is it about eeking out a living that were tempted to bend the rules?
And we, what should we do?
How do I become more holy, more spiritual, more reverent?

All here today have at some point and time raised questions in our heart of hearts.

So we gather together and bring our questions to God.
We enter the presence of the holy in the sanctuary, on the Sabbath,
around the breakfast nook,
in the coffee shop and in our places of work and play, alone with God, with a friend, neighbor or family member,
with the faith community, or the goldfish, a rapt, captive audience.

We come from a long line of spiritual ancestors who have lifted questions and discovered divine responses, who have been reverent and listened for God’s guidance, whether from around a manger or at the base of the Cross, whether in the grain fields or in the garden of Gethsemane, whether while on the road to Jericho or Jerusalem, Emmaus or Damascus.

Again and again we take our questions from the human context to the
holy.
God meets us in our struggles and celebrations,
answering prayers for blessings and directions and healings.
Time and again we are met where we are by the prophets and psalmists,
the judges of Israel and Jesus of Nazareth, pastors and parishioners alike
welcoming our questions,
our pondering souls and troubled hearts,
our faltering steps and daily struggles.

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Jesus yoked questioning with reverence
when he preached in the Sermon on the Mount, saying,
“Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find;
knock, and the door will be opened for you.
For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds,
and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened.” – Matthew 7: 7-8

Paul laid down a theology of reverence grounded in unity.

“For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God.
...you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you.” – Romans 8: 14, 9

The Psalmist lifted up a spirituality of reverence
grounded in the reality of our life and times.
She celebrated the presence of a Living God, as well,
and sang of the hospitality and historicity of the Holy One:

“Be still, and know that I am God!
I am exalted among the nations, I am exalted in the earth.”
The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge.” – Psalm 46: 10-11

The Psalmist stilled herself and listened for the Holy One to speak.

How shall we draw near to such a loving presence?
What have we learned from Paul, from the Psalmists, from Jesus Christ, from our souls?

**So Very Human, So Very Blessed**

Reverence is difficult to define, but you know it when you feel it. (21)

She says, “Reverence [is] the proper attitude of a small and curious human being in a vast and fascinating world of experience.” (p. 19)

In a sense, one could say that our attitudes feed our practice, and our practice of reverence is lived out in ritual and relationships, in being still and paying attention, in welcoming the Spirit who dwells in you and in me, in us and “them” in ways vaster and greater than we can imagine.

In the world of human experience there is ritual that connects us with what we are doing and being. Ritual introduces us “to the practices that nourish reverence for human life: paying attention, taking care, respecting things that can kill you, making the passage from fear to awe.” (p. 20)

Philosopher Paul Woodruff said, “Reverence is the virtue that keeps people from trying to act like gods.

“To forget that you are only human,” he says, “to think you can act like a god – this is the opposite of reverence.”

While most of us live in a culture that reveres money, reveres power, reveres education and religion, Woodruff argues that true reverence cannot be anything that humans can make or manage themselves.” (p. 21)
“Reverence is the recognition of something greater than the self – something that is beyond human creation or control, that transcends full human understanding.” (p. 21)

My friends, you and I can relate to this conversation about the practice of reverence. You know this feeling, this attitude, this faith experience and expression and ecstasy. When we get to a place of reverence, when we stand in awe of something greater than ourselves, to see and appreciate the full extent of our limits and limitations, we make room in our spirits to see and appreciate one another more reverently, as well. (p. 21, adapted)

Chances are that we’ve also experienced the opposite, the troubling side of irreverence. We may have seen it in others and felt it within.

Paul Woodruff says, “An irreverent soul who is unable to feel awe in the presence of things higher than the self is also unable to feel respect in the presence of things is sees as lower than the self.”

For example, one cannot claim to revere and love God while at the same time claiming that entire populations of neighbors are evil. Irreverence of the holiness around us and of one another opens the door wide to practicing fear. The Light of God is mighty and the darkness shall not overcome it, yet we all know that fear has a big mouth and demands our full attention.
Fear insists on its own way. Fear insists on irreverence, on selfishness, on being right and in control. Irreverent behavior may encourage one to respond to the recent mass shootings in schools and cities and places of worship by standing in the long line of folks who purchased guns. Reverent behavior, on the other hand, may encourage one to foster curiosity and wonder about neighbors yet to be known, about what we can do together to build a safer, healthier, less-violent world.

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Daring to raise questions leads to curiosity and wondering. When we quiet ourselves and connect with the Spirit who dwells within, we find ourselves starting to ask questions, real questions, living questions.

*I wonder why they live the way they do? I wonder what we have in common? I wonder how we can find a way to work and play together?*

Choose to abide live into faith, rather than subsiding and sliding into fearful living.

Hospitality begins with practicing reverence. When you appreciate, respect, and revere that there is something greater, larger, awe-inspiring in the world that is larger than yourself, you begin to foster a sense of wonder about others.

Wonder and curiosity lead us to want to know more about each other. Reverence leads us out of our cocoons; it makes us open our windows and garage doors; it helps us to pay attention to those who are around us whom we may have taken for granted as if
they were invisible.

I remember as a child seeing a book on our family bookshelf
by Ralph Ellison called, The Invisible Man.
At the time I thought it was about that really cool guy in the old movie
who became invisible, and then started to lose his mind.
Actually, The Invisible Man is a 1952 novel
about a grown man living in the community who feels as if he is socially invisible,
that he is physically present yet not seen;
he is alive yet ignored due solely to the color of his skin.
When we practice reverence we pay attention to our surroundings,
to our place on this earth,
to our relationships with family and friends,
as well as to those we come in contact with regularly yet may take for granted.

*So Very Human, So Very Blessed*

“Welcome to Moe’s!”
When you enter the burrito restaurant
does your heart skip a beat that you are welcomed?
Are you surprised to be greeted at Quick Trip?
Do you know why the McDonald’s in Moscow is so popular even though it is cost prohibitive to most Russians?
The McDonald’s employees at the counter smile at the customers.
That is it.
Folks in Moscow line up around the block for a smile.
The practice of reverence in any institution or family or friendship begins by paying attention,
by becoming still enough to acknowledge those in our midst,
especially the folks who tend to become invisible.
One of the areas I cover in pre-marital counseling is for each family to have something that is larger than themselves.

The way I put it is that when the couple sits down at the kitchen table every morning and every evening they need to have something else to talk about besides their kids, pets, work, bills to pay, and what they are going to watch on TV.

Have something else that you can talk about and share together and do together that is bigger than the two or three or four of you. I encourage couples to consider a variety of options. Go ahead and join a local church; volunteer at Habitat for Humanity; tutor a child from across the railroad tracks; get involved in your neighborhood association; or help to rebuild a home or a school or someone’s life.

Whatever you decide, do it so you can practice reverence as a family; if nothing else, your conversation over dessert will be infinitely more interesting.

By practicing reverence the lives you save may be your own.

A broad-shouldered border guard stepped away from his post and walked purposefully toward me. I had just stepped out of the car and was preparing to present my passport to enter Mozambique. My brother David, my son Henry, and I had been in Swaziland for
three days,
and we were returning to the capital city Maputo,
where David and his wife lived and served international nonprofit agencies.
As the border guard approached me,
David – who speaks Portuguese -- left his space on the visa application line
in order to run interference in case there was a problem.
The guard drew near, smiled, and said, “Pastor James!”
David was taken aback.
How was it possible that someone knew his youngest brother,
almost 9,000 miles away from his home,
and called him by title and name
at an isolated border crossing in Southern Africa?

After a millisecond of thought I recognized the guard;
we had worshipped God together the previous Sunday
at Malhangalene Parish in Maputo.
“I remember you,” I said to the border guard.
“You served as a deacon and wore a sharp blue suit.
Please tell me your name,
and what are you doing over a hundred kilometers from Maputo?”

Urias Temotes Simango said that he patrols the border during the week
and lives in the city on the weekends,
where he is a member of the United Church of Christ congregation.

In worship, at home, and while patrolling the border under the stars and the sun,
Mr. Simango practiced reverence,
which made him most hospitable.

All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit! Amen.