

We have this thing in us called the soul. It is not something a physician can find, and it will never appear on an X ray or MRI. But it is at the core of us. The soul is a term we use to describe our deepest yearnings. It is not separate from the body, but it drives our decisions about our bodies as well as how we use time and money, why we fall in love, and most of our other important choices. When the soul is healthy, we can handle anything. And when the soul is sick, everything else in our lives is also in trouble.

Since it was created by God, the soul survives on awe. Even those who do not believe in God are driven by their souls to find this awe. Some look to the arts, others look to love, acts of heroism, the oceans or mountains. But all of us are drawn by our souls to something outside of ourselves that we cannot manage because it's overwhelming; something that transcends but reaches into the deepest part of us to inspire awe. It does not matter how successfully you have constructed life you cannot be in awe of a life you have built on your own.

Those of us who do believe in God have learned that the soul has always been yearning for holiness. When we encounter breathtaking beauty in music or painting, or creation, it is because it gives us a glimpse of this holiness. And when we are overwhelmed with anxieties, our souls again look to holiness to find comfort, again, because we yearn for something greater than ourselves and greater than what we fear.

A couple of days ago I participated in the inauguration of the new president of Princeton Theological Seminary, which was held in the beautiful, gothic, Princeton University Chapel. The place was filled, and it was a glorious occasion, but just barely beneath the surface was deep anxiety about the state of the world. The people of Ukraine are locked in a long impasse of violence with the Russian invading army. The people of Israel lost 1,300 civilians who were slaughtered by Hamas' terrorists. And the people of Gaza so far have lost 2,300 people to the airstrikes, and no one knows how far or wide the devastation and violence will grow. Even though we were celebrating something wonderful at the seminary, we couldn't stop thinking about the violent world outside of the hallowed walls of that chapel. But then we stood to sing, "*Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty*" (the same hymn we used to begin our worship service today). From the chancel of the chapel I noticed that few people needed their hymnals to sing that incredible hymn. But more than a few of us were looking for tissues. Why? Because our souls yearned to believe there is something powerful at work in the world that we could not see—holiness.

After three months of journeying through the desert wilderness, the Hebrew people came to Mt. Sinai where they experienced awe-inspiring, terrifying worship. The text says,  
"Now Mt. Sinai was wrapped in smoke because the Lord had descended upon it in fire; the smoke went up like the smoke of a kiln, while the whole mountain shook violently. As the blast of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses would speak and God would answer him in thunder." Exodus 19:18-20

Since the Hebrews had spent 400 years in slavery, and since the road to freedom for the last few months had been a hard journey that included running out of food and water, and then being attacked by the Amalekites, we would think that this first worship service would have been more consoling and tender. And since there was still a long way to go on this hard journey, we would think that this would have been a great time for God to offer words of encouragement: "You can do it..." But no. This first encounter with the liberator God was so filled with awe that it made the people and even the mountain tremble.

How is this a good idea? Because encountering holiness is the only way the people could be free of fear. In the words of Phillips Brooks, "If we do not fear the God above us, we will fear everything around us. If we do fear the God above us, we will fear nothing around us."

The reason we fear God is not because of divine wrath, but because we are creatures overwhelmed by our holy Creator. When we live without anything that transcends, inspires, or compels us to bend our knees, our souls wither, and a passionless fear of the world is all that is left.

So, when we stand to sing, “*Holy, Holy, Holy,*” that doesn’t just ascribe glory to God. We are also affirming that our only comfort in life and death is that we belong to this holy God—the one who made the mountains and can make them tremble. This is the God who called us out anything that would enslave our spirits including every old anger, cynicism, addiction, even the addictions to old hurts, and sets us on a journey to live truly free. But there is nothing that can enslave us like fear. If we do not bend our knees before holiness, we’ll bend them to our many anxieties.

Much of the rest of the Old Testament is the story of how hard a time the people had remembering this. Out of their many fears they kept turning away from their Holy and faithful God to put their trust in so many other things that deceived them and let them astray.

So when we move to the New Testament we hear the incredible news that in Jesus Christ holiness climbed down from the heavens to be with us, as one of us. The author of Hebrews is fascinated by the life of faith in this Holy Savior, and in the twelfth chapter depicts what has and has not changed.

“You have not come to something that can be touched, a blazing fire, and darkness, and gloom, and a tempest, and the sound of a trumpet, and a voice who hears begged that not another word be spoken to them.... But you have come to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant.... “Therefore, let us give thanks, by which we offer God an acceptable worship with reverence and awe; for indeed our God is a consuming fire.” Hebrews 12:18-19,24,28-29

What? On this side of the grace found in Jesus Christ, are we still talking about God as a consuming fire? Maybe you thought the New Testament offered a kinder, gentler God than the Old Testament. No, what has changed between the old and new covenant is not God but us. In Christ, we who have also been led astray from God have been found. We have been forgiven, restored, and cherished. And in Christ, we have been freed with a calling to reveal holiness through our own mercy. However, God is still a consuming fire, and we still fear such holiness. But this is not the fear of being judged. Now it is the fear of having a holy God who loves us.

This is no ordinary lover. This one cannot be controlled, manipulated, or ignored. This is the holy one who in Jesus Christ was literally dying to love us. How do we control a God who will go to the cross? How do we reign in such passion with our careful plans for life? How do we domesticate such holiness even with our religion, or contain it with our theology? We don’t. Authentic love is never controlled. It controls us, and that is why we fear it.

You have no idea where the love of God can take you. It has probably already led you in paths you never would have considered to places beyond imagination, brought people into your life who have dramatically changed you, and led you through a dark night soul of the soul where you discovered the sufficiency of a holy love that makes you stronger than you thought. No matter how old you are, there is still more surprising love to unfold.

Precisely because the journey is unpredictable and often hard it provides plenty of reasons for fear. And you will never talk yourself out of those fears. After over 40 years of pastoral ministry, I have never talked anyone out of being afraid. I can’t even talk myself out of being afraid. When I am up all-night fretting over the kids, or someone’s health, or the future, or the church, every time I come up with a reason for hope I think of three more for fear. No one is ever argued out of fear because it is not rooted in reason but in our hearts. So, as we are told in 1 John it is only perfect love that casts out fear.

When a child is crying in the night that there are monsters under the bed, what parent would stand in the door of the bedroom and say, "Now, we've talked about this. Monsters aren't rational." No, the parent rushes in the room, scoops the child up in their arms, and soothes them. And safe in those strong arms, the child is no longer thinking about monsters but about the love of the parent.

So, when we rush tomorrow morning to our newspapers or to our computers or phones to read the latest about the terrifying and devastating tragedy in Ukraine, Israel, and Gaza, remember that this morning you stood with the people of faith to sing:

*Holy, Holy, Holy, though the darkness hide Thee,  
Thou the eye of sinfulness thy glory may not see,  
Only Thou art holy there is none beside Thee,  
Perfect in power, in love, and purity.*

Though we may not see the glory, the arms of Holy God, perfect in power, in love, and purity, are wrapped around the whole world that in Jesus Christ, God was dying to love. That is why we choose hope over fear. Amen.