

**Awesome!**  
**Rev. Dr. Nancy Cocks**  
**Sunday 18 November 2018**  
**Texts: Daniel 12.1-4; Mark 13.1-8**

I was in line at Tim Horton's a while ago  
 when the server handed a cheese biscuit to a woman beside me.  
 "Awesome," she said as she turned away with her biscuit.

I groaned inwardly.

It was a healthy looking cheese biscuit, but "Awesome"?

I would never call a cheese biscuit 'awesome'.

"Awesome" is the word I'd used for the Frassasi caves in Italy.

After walking through several metres of damp, dark tunnels last fall,

We emerged into an open cave, a million cubic feet high & wide,

Filled with white crystalline stalactites and stalagmites,

An underground city of ancient stone figures carved by dripping water.

Awesome indeed!

"Awesome" also describes the way I feel

whenever I drive through the area of the Frank slide,

dwarfed by those ominous chunks of mountain scattered like marbles for miles around.

"Awesome" sprang to my lips this spring staring at the Renaissance cathedral in Florence,

so perfect in proportion and detail,

yet created by builders over 500 years ago with only basic tools.

Not a fork lift in sight!

But a cheese biscuit? "Awesome"? Not even one from Tim Horton's!

Truth be told, I'm a bit disappointed that the powerful English word "awesome"  
 now applies to very ordinary things.

If everything that makes us smile is "awesome",

can anything be truly awe-inspiring?

Is there any room for grandeur anymore?

For a moment, then, just imagine Jesus' disciples,

lads who'd come into 'big city' Jerusalem from the countryside of Galilee,

standing outside the temple.

Its dramatic walls reached nearly 60 metres above ground,

(that's 3 times the length of St John's sanctuary, chancel to narthex)

made from huge blocks of stone, 20 metres long & 3 metres wide,

(as wide as our sanctuary itself!)

each weighing 50 tons or more.

The building was covered with plates of gold to reflect the sun's rays with fiery splendour.

The ancient historian Josephus described it:

"The temple appeared to strangers at a distance like a mountain covered with snow,  
 for those parts of it that were not gilded were exceedingly white."

Mark understates the moment when he records the disciples saying to Jesus,

"Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings."

Better they should have said, "Awesome!"

For it truly was.

So now imagine how Jesus' words would fall on their ears  
 when he pronounced the Temple's *doom*:  
 "Not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down."  
 How could such magnificence, dedicated to God, crumble?  
 The immense dimensions, the sheer *glory* of the building  
 seemed to proclaim its invincibility.  
 But Israel's history carried a different lesson from the time of the prophet Daniel,  
 about 160 years before Jesus.  
 The temple *was* vulnerable.  
 In Daniel's day, it was the *first* place Israel's enemies struck,  
 desecrating its holy places with Greek statues & sacrifices.  
 And within Mark's lifetime, the Romans would indeed turn its magnificence into rubble,  
 smashing its shining beauty beyond repair.  
 Jesus' words struck awe and fear in his disciples' hearts, I'm sure:  
 Even the most splendid projects of human art and ingenuity *are* vulnerable.

But if you think about it,  
 sights which are truly awe-inspiring do resonate with our deepest fears.  
 Because awesome sights remind us of our own *insignificance*.  
 The awe that we feel amid of the rubble of the Frank Slide  
 rises from an inner recognition of our tiny proportions  
 facing *immense* powers beyond our control.  
 What is truly awesome deserves our respect,  
 and yes, our fear,  
 because awesome things put us in our properly *humble* place.

Perhaps God's people in ancient times  
 felt this *humbling* sense of awe more readily than we do.  
 Without benefit of scientific explanations for natural phenomena  
 like earthquakes or volcanoes,  
 they felt more vulnerable than we do most of the time.  
 Whatever could knock down that magnificent temple,  
 whether earthquake or enemy invader,  
 was truly awesome in its power.  
 In those days whatever struck you with dread or wonder *had* to be of God's doing.  
 And so the psalmist could say,  
 "The *fear* of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom."  
 What you do not understand and do not control was properly *feared* back then.  
 The Book of Daniel and the Gospel of Mark invoke that fear in today's readings.  
 These *texts* are awesome.  
 They cut us down to size  
 by highlighting the things we fear most –  
 the unpredictable forces of nature in earthquake or famine  
 and the undesirable forces of enemies provoking war or rumours of war.

But these fearful forces are *always* with us, now just as in those ancient times.  
 So these awesome readings remind us of our vulnerability  
 in a way that intends to put us on edge.

reminding us we live in a world beyond our control,  
 in which God's purposes exceed our own,  
 in which threats seen and unseen make life a fragile gift,  
 something to honour in faithfulness, not squander recklessly.  
 Yet these ancient warnings often fall on our ears as if they are predictions.  
 When we hear of an earthquake rattling the West Coast of Canada  
 Or rumblings of yet another war in the Middle East,  
 people begin to worry, "Is this the end?  
 Is God bringing about the judgment of which Daniel wrote?"  
 Yet people have been worrying about these same questions in every generation.  
 Earthquakes regularly rattle human composure  
 year after year after decade after century.  
 Wars have been breaking out, especially in the Middle East,  
 since well before Daniel was a twinkle in his parents' eyes.  
 These threats that bring fear and awe to our hearts are *always* with us.  
 The writings of Daniel and Mark are not predictions;  
 they are descriptions of awesome realities  
 which regularly shake us to our roots and remind us we are not in control of everything.  
 They're not asking us to panic about the latest news  
 nor do they give us a chart to the timing of 'the end'.  
 As Jesus' words toward the end of Mark 13 declare,  
 "About that day or hour no one knows,  
 neither the angels in heaven nor the Son, but only the Father.  
 So, instead, keep alert."

The question our readings put to us is how we keep alert  
 when awesome, fearsome things rattle us.  
 What does it mean for the faithful to keep alert?  
 How shall we respond to danger or impending disaster?  
 It's not simply a question of refreshing your emergency kit  
 every time an earthquake or tornado hits somewhere else.  
 The parable at the very end of Mark 13 suggests that keeping alert keeps us at work,  
 serving our master in important but ordinary ways.  
 You see, the problem with panic & end time predictions is how they divert our attention  
 from the on-going needs of our neighbours all around us  
 to *self*-preservation,  
 building bomb shelters or hoarding supplies in our cupboards.  
 But this is not what The Book of Daniel or Jesus' words had in mind.  
 Daniel encouraged wisdom.  
 Jesus encouraged faithful service.  
 Our psalm pictures trust in God's goodness, come what may.  
 All of this sounds simple, perhaps too simple,  
 but it's really not naïve advice in the face of our fears.  
 It reminds us there are always realities around us beyond our control.  
 But what is *within* our control is wise, faithful service  
 offered to God in the trust that God will always raise up goodness  
 even in the face of our most daunting fears.

So back to that “awesome” cheese biscuit.  
 I guess the impish part of me is winking at anyone  
 who uses the word “awesome” for things that please you.  
 It is the popular word at the moment,  
 just as “cool” was the word of my youth – which I still use.  
 Whatever word you choose to indicate your small delights,  
 please, never lose touch with your ability to be awe-inspired.  
 There are works of beauty and drama,  
 Within both nature’s grandeur and human ingenuity,  
 which deserve to strike us silent in wonder.  
*(whispered) Wow! Awesome!*

Let us stand humbled before things we could never have created ourselves.  
 But even more importantly,  
 let us not lose touch with the connection between what is truly awesome  
 and the fear we sense whenever we face forces beyond our control.  
 For truly, God is beyond our control.  
 God’s purposes do not neatly match our own hopes & designs.  
 And so when we pray for God’s kingdom to come,  
 as we do every time we say the Lord’s Prayer,  
 we should do so in awe,  
 recognizing God’s kingdom will not simply bring victory for “our side”.  
 We will be humbled when that day comes,  
 by God’s judgement  
*and* by God’s mercy.  
 Awesome indeed!  
 Whenever we pray for God’s kingdom,  
 let us pinch ourselves alert and ask ourselves,  
 What else can I be doing as God’s servant to further justice and mercy in God’s world  
right now?  
 This is a much more important question to ask  
 than whether the end of the world is at hand.  
 For it asks us to set aside our fears  
 and put our trust in God’s awesome power as the only power that truly matters  
 every single day of our lives!

**Resources consulted:** [www.workingpreacher.org](http://www.workingpreacher.org) website on lectionary readings; Joel  
 Marcus, *The Gospel according to Mark* in the new Anchor Bible series.