
Shock And Awe!!

A sermon by the Very Reverend Sam Candler
Atlanta, Georgia
Lent 3

following the United States military incursion into Iraq
Exodus 20: 1-17

Shock and Awe. Shock and Awe. I know about shock and awe.

There's a lot I do NOT know about, this morning. I do not know what military intelligence knows. I do not know where all the weapons of mass destruction are in the world. I do not know the intent of the leaders of all the nations.

But shock and awe. I do know about shock and awe.

Shock and awe are religious terms. They are spiritual terms. Awe is the most frequent human reaction to God in our religious traditions. Whether we are Christian, Jewish, or Muslim - even if we belong to other religious traditions of the world, awe is the term reserved for God. God -our God, the God of creation and mystery- reveals himself ultimately as awesome, as awe-inspiring, even frightening.

So it was when Moses stood at the mountain before receiving the Ten Commandments. In Exodus chapter 19 (before the declaration of the commandments), Moses and the people stood before the mountain. "There was thunder and lightning, as well as a thick cloud on the mountain, and a blast of trumpet so loud that all the people in the camp trembled. ..Mt Sinai was wrapped in smoke." (Exodus 19: 16, 18). The splendor was mighty because it matched moral power. That moral authority was so great that we humans feared God. We were in awe. God is the ultimate source of awe in the world.

Last Friday night, I woke up at three in the morning, and I listened. Atlanta was quiet at that hour, as it should be. It was a peaceful quiet. I was thankful to be here. But my mind was filled with other images. All day on Friday, since one o'clock p.m., our time, I had watched the shocking images from Baghdad. That night in Baghdad had been far from quiet. The city was billowing with bombs and smoke, thunder and lightning. People were trembling.

Shock and awe was what we were calling that day. Shock and awe.

Shock and awe mean fear and trembling. I know what our national leadership means by those words. They mean we are fighting a psychological war. We want to scare the Iraqi leadership into surrender. We want to scare the Iraqi troops into surrender. I know what they mean. Maybe it is working. So, I pray for our troops, and I pray for a quick resolution to military action.

I admit that there is a degree of moral justification to this military action. I acknowledge that. But as a Christian preacher, I also need to re-claim the meaning of these words "shock and awe" which we are using so easily. Shock and awe belong to God, and not to us.

We Americans risk losing some respect in the world when we have lost our humility. Yes, this military action may be morally justifiable, but it is not yet morally understood. To be morally understood, we must bear public scrutiny. To be morally understood, we must let a higher order convince others that our actions are not merely expedient or impatient. To be morally understood, we must start with humility, humility before others, and humility under the awe of God.

No matter who we are, there is always a moral order above us. No country -even ours-- ought ever dare to say that God is on our side. God does not give himself to one side or the other in our meager contests. The question we ought always to ask is the opposite: are we on God's side?

Most of us who follow current events have probably been losing something in the past several years. We have been losing a sense of moral authority. For the past five years, we have often acted, and our leaders have often acted, as if there is no higher moral authority to which we are responsible. Presidents before this one acted that way. Chief executive officers of our largest corporations, priests and ministers of our largest Christian churches have acted this way.

That misbehavior has affected us all. In fact, it has affected us in two ways. Some of us have begun to act too selfishly without realizing it. And some of us have tended to think that every leader's action is now a self-serving one. Both attitudes are mistaken. It is our public moral landscape that is confused; we do not know where our public moral authority lies. So it is that we have also seen on the news amazing outpourings of demonstration and witness. Most of these demonstrations have been for peace, and some have been for war. These demonstrations indicate something besides our present opinions on war in Iraq. They are also the results of an international mood of frustration.

Again, the frustration is that we do not trust our leaders. We do not trust our institutions. We do not trust our systems; because several of our corporations, institutions, and nations, have given us cause not to trust them. Our temptation is to speculate that every mis-step, every crack, is the indication of earthquake and apocalypse. Mistakes will always be made; but they do not always mean catastrophe.

Is there a way for us to acknowledge mistakes and yet to act boldly? I hope so, because that will be the basis of humble courage. We need leadership whose humility exudes strength. We need leadership who can admit what it means to be shocked and awed -not shocked and awed by military might- but shocked and awed by religious and moral authority.

Obviously, that higher moral authority is difficult to identify sometimes. But when that higher moral authority is discovered, when it is revealed. When we are in touch with it, then nothing can stop us. The war is won when people really find liberation, justice, and peace. The war is won when we have found that higher moral authority, not merely when our military weapons have succeeded. Shock and awe, true shock and true awe, come with moral authority, not with guns and bombs.

The church's The Old Testament lesson today, the story of Moses and the Ten commandments is a story of higher moral authority. Look at the circumstances around that moral revelation: thunder, lightning, trumpet, and smoke. That is shock and awe.

The God of our ancestors is a God who honors humility, not arrogance. I know that it's hard to fight a war in humility. It takes bravado and encouragement and fortitude to engage in military action. But there should be a way for leaders to be humble. There should be a way for each of us to be humble.

There is a God who watches over these actions with more cameras than the media has embedded journalists. There is a God who watches over these actions with more insight than our best analysts and politicians. This is the God we finally answer to. That is shock. That is awe.

The First Commandment is that we should have no other Gods but God. That's the commandment that we probably break the most often. Every fascination becomes an idol for humanity. Even good things can become idols for us. Even good things, like family and national security and economic security, can become idols.

Throughout history, human reliance on military strength has taken the place of God. It is a short-lived reliance. The

scriptures are clear that military power can be an idol. I understand that we sometimes need the military; I understand that! But it will take more than military to win this war. We may win the battle of Baghdad, but the war is about moral authority and respect. This war will be won by honoring freedom and liberation, equality and justice, just as many in our government desire. Those principles, as I understand it, are the reasons for the name of this military operation. These are the values that have made great nations not only of the United States, but also of some of our allies who now disagree with the United States.

We in the United States still need shock and awe, too. We need to know a God who presides high over us and over all the nations, who is wrapped in clouds and thunder and lightning, but who calls us upward. "I am the Lord your God," God says. "You shall have no other Gods but me." That statement shocks me. It awes me. It makes the mountains shake and sky tremble. It causes me to be humble, even if I am winning the battle.

AMEN.

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