“Oh, the majesty and magnificence of his presence!”

The Psalmist speaks for many of us today, I think, when trying to describe what it's like to be in the presence of Almighty God. It is often said that words cannot describe the feeling one gets in those moments in life when God feels closer than normal, perhaps closer than ever before.

These may not be everyday moments, but rather, such emotion may be evoked in certain places or in certain times: like your wedding day, when you saw your spouse for the first time, and, though you may have been left without words, the joy and gratefulness of your heart were very well a sign of God's presence. or in some of your favorite places, be it a grand cathedral, filled with the Spirit, reaching to the sky in praise of God; or a still, small, quiet field, like this place, all around us, where three hundred years-worth of the prayers of God's people have helped hallow this ground. In the space of only a few words from Psalm 96, the Psalmist gives us insight into some of the emotional realities when encountering the presence of God. Majesty and magnificence, splendor and power, the joy of God's presence can certainly be overwhelming.

But we know that God's presence is not just reserved for those joyful moments in life – after all Jesus did promise that he would be with us always – and the more difficult moments are no exception. For example, if you read accounts of some of the Church's earliest martyrs, their final moments are full of pain and suffering but also with holiness and the presence of God welcoming them into the fuller joy of the Kingdom of God. Elsewhere, the Psalms are riddled with desperate cries from the depths of human experience, only for the author to remember that God is a refuge, a strength, an ever-present help in trouble. Even in death, we are not separated from the love nor the presence of God.

This weekend, when we as a country remember and give thanks for those who have given their lives in service and defense of this nation, we may feel God's presence somewhere between joy and suffering. For the power of God is the power of life, which is also the power over death, and returning once again to Psalm 96, we remember that this power and presence elicits more than just thankfulness, something else, as well:

“Worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness; let the whole earth tremble before him.”

Between our joy and suffering is another emotion altogether. Rudolph Otto described it as a “self-confessed feeling of dependence” and an overwhelming humility in feeling the contrast between God as creator and we as simply a small part of creation.

As our nation suffered through the strife of the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln, who wrote regularly in his correspondences about the will of God, approached this emotion when he quoted Thomas Jefferson: “I tremble for my country when I remember God is just.”
And perhaps the greatest knowledge of this specific emotion before God were the people of Israel after witnessing the enormous power of God dividing the sea in Exodus: “Who is like you, O Lord, among the gods? Who is like you, majestic in holiness, doing wonders?” Worship and trembling, indeed.

If you have ever stood at Gettysburg, or Manassas, or Normandy, or Arlington National Cemetery or any number of places and felt these same things, felt so moved not only because of the weight of what happened or happens at these places but a feeling of wonder at the greatness of God, or a fear of the strength of God, or an attraction to the otherness of God and a curiosity and trembling at the authority and power of God—simply put, this same presence of God! –perhaps you too have felt this same emotion, a feeling of awe before God.

So rarely are we moved to awe in our world today. If you saw Sandy's letter this week in your email, he reflected that when everything is labeled as incredible, or unbelievable, or wonderful, it can be difficult to recognize true wonder, or genuine awe. When there is little space for nuance or subtlety, things that are truly incredible or great or amazing may elude us.

This is why reflecting on the presence of God is so important, to realize that it is God's nature to be incredible, to be full of wonder, to elicit awe from all creation, and to receive honor and glory. Perhaps then, it is appropriate that, as we may feel that same awe before God when we honor the sacrifices of those women and men who have died in combat, our lectionary tells the story of a soldier may have been moved by that same presence of God, who believed in and called upon the power of God, the power that is all mighty over life and death in a life-and-death situation.

We know of this centurion from Luke's gospel not because of his military prowess but because he heard of the presence of God as Jesus came to his town. The centurion's servant was lying ill and dying, and having heard about Jesus and he responded in remarkable faith: “Only speak the word, and let my servant be healed.” We know him also because of his humility, his trembling before God: “Lord, do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy to have you come under my roof.” We even know him for his honor – not the honors due to him for his career, but instead the honor he lays aside, the honor he gives to Jesus.

And without having ever met the centurion in Luke's version of the story, when Jesus hears all that has been said, he proclaims to the crowd “I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith.” And of course, almost as an afterthought in the story, the servant is found to be in good health in the end, but it was indeed this power of God, the power to give life, perhaps even the centurion’s faith in the presence of God (even without seeing him!) that made this almighty power of God known and left even Jesus amazed.

Jesus would later tell Thomas “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe,” though he could have said the same thing to the centurion. But for those of us who do know Christ’s presence and who have been called to make him known, we must pay greater attention to what we have heard so that we do not drift away from it. This is what the author of Hebrews wrote to those who had already come to know Christ just as we have (as did Paul to the Galatians) – that though we may not yet see everything as it will be, we do see Jesus, who became like us in every respect that we might know that presence of God more fully.

We do see Jesus – we have come to know him, and perhaps have even felt in awe of him. Like the centurion, may our knowledge of the presence of God, who does wonders for the faithful, elicit a response from us that we might seek not our own honor but seek to honor God. May the fullness of God's awe draw ever closer to you; may God's majestic and magnificent presence fill you and inspire you to believe in the wonderful and incredible nature of God; and may our hearts be so moved that we give God glory, laud, and honor this day and forevermore.

Amen.