

The Fear Beyond Fear

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Preaching on:
Psalm 111

“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.”

Now about three years ago I preached a sermon on the fear of God—the exact topic was put forward by our own Craig Wood who asked, “How can we fear God and love God at the same time?” A great question. And in response I guided you away from fear and towards love. I told you all that we’re not supposed to be abjectly terrified of God. And it’s deeply unfortunate that some of us have been raised in traditions where we’re made to feel afraid of God and God’s righteousness and anger and ability to punish us in life and in death.

And I explained that there’s actually a translation issue going on here. The ancient languages had fewer words than we do in our modern languages. Modern English has 170,000 words in current usage. Ancient Greek, the language of the New Testament, had about 60,000 words—110,000 fewer words. Ancient Greek was a less precise, more metaphorical and poetic language than modern English because every word had to do more work, it had to carry more meaning. There was no Ancient Greek word for “awe.” There was no Ancient Greek word for “reverence.” There was no Ancient Greek word for “numinous.” There was no way to say in Ancient Greek, “And it was an awe-inspiring sight.” They literally didn’t have the words. So, how would they convey the meaning? They’d have to say

something like, “And seeing the angel he fell down quaking in fear.”

So, the word that meant “fear,” in certain contexts, had to mean more than just fear; it had to point at these more complex, nuanced feelings. When we read about fearing God, it's about having profound respect, awe, reverence in the presence of the Almighty, it's not about being afraid of God. Don't ever confuse love with fear, I told you—that can lead to some very unhealthy relationships. And the fact of our faith is that you don't need to be afraid of loving our loving God.

MMM. That was a good sermon, right? But one sermon can never say it all. One criticism I could make of my sermon three years ago was that it was a little too tidy. And folks like a tidy sermon—I get it. But God is almost never tidy. And so this Sunday I'm going to try to bring back—to recommend to you all a little bit... a little bit of fear.

The fear of God means awe before God, reverence to God, yes. AND it also means FEAR. We can't dismiss that. It's too big a clue to ignore. There's a reason that the word “fear” in the ancient languages carried these other ideas of awe and reverence. It wasn't chosen at random. It could never have been, “The happy-happy, joy-joy, good time of God is the beginning of wisdom.” Those feelings just don't live in the right neighborhood. Is God a source of happiness? Yes. Is God joy? Yeah. Is being with God a good time? Sure. AND if you want to find awe, if you want to feel reverence, if you want to come into the presence of the God who is in all things and beyond all things, if you want to get to wisdom, occasionally you're going to need to go looking in fear's neighborhood. And the psalmist suggests to us this morning that fear's neighborhood might just be a good place to start.

Jesus taught us that God is our loving, heavenly father. And this wasn't something we had ever really encountered before. And he taught us this as a corrective measure—not in terms of gender, of course (you can't do it all), but in terms of the attitude of God. God is not distant or aloof. God is not an untouchable king, not a cold judge, not an alien power. God is as close, as warm, as intimate, as caring, as involved as a loving parent is. It's a strong spiritual medicine, meant to bring us back into harmony, but not to utterly erase the other Biblical traditions of God. So, we don't need to fear our loving, mother-father God. And yet God is so much more than any one metaphor or symbol. It is beyond our ability to put God into a box, to tidily label God and then say to God, “God you will behave according to this metaphor and this metaphor only. Don't show up in my life as anything scary. That's not allowed.”

Now, I assure you that God doesn't want us to cower in fear in God's presence. But fear is a perfectly natural reaction of very small, mortal creatures like ourselves when we come into contact with a God who is ultimately wholly and utterly beyond the tiny little boxes that define our reality. And it is, in fact, spiritually healthy for us, from time to time, to tremble in the presence of a loving God who opens all our boxes, unties all our knots, overflows all our containers, and reminds us that anything is possible and perhaps our most cherished ideas about what is true, about what is real, about what is just, about the ways we should live, and what is important, and what is meaningful are not total, are not complete.

In the presence of a God who is so wholly other, so completely beyond us, we may even feel something like terror. And yet if we are not overwhelmed by fear, if we don't go running away, grasping to our own ideas and our thinking, refusing to let God take control, we will also feel the mercy of being relieved from our illusions that we can do it all our own. Once you have truly felt the fear of God, you begin to understand the truth of grace—you will see that our existence depends totally on a Mystery we will never fully understand or control. And that is an awe-inspiring sight.

So, this morning I'd like to recommend to you, on occasion, to seek out situations or experiences that make you tremble a little. When I stand in my back yard here in New Jersey, and I look up into the sky at night, so bright with city lights, full of the roar of airplanes, I don't feel a thing. But out in the woods, in the wild, in the mountains, the sky at night is bigger, vaster, deeper, scarier. It's not just a few bright stars you see, you look up into the vastness of the universe. Everyone should find a dark spot at least once a year to look up into the night sky, to see the Milky Way, and to feel almost impossibly small, lost in the vastness of creation that is full of the vastness of God. Light pollution is a spiritual problem. We're so enlightened! We think we have all the answers. But sometimes our light just closes our eyes to the true reality of the problem. We edit the big sky out of our lives. We stop looking up.

Something that made me tremble once was a silent meditation retreat. For a full-day, we sat in complete stillness and silence, facing the wall and focusing on our breath. And in that deep stillness, I could feel the fear creeping in. Fear of my own thoughts and emotions, fear of the unknown, fear of facing myself without any distractions or noise. I had these bizarre fantasies around lunchtime about having a medical emergency that would force me to leave. It was terrifying and eye-opening at the same time. And in that fear, I found a deeper connection to God, a sense of awe and reverence for my own existence and for the vastness of the universe. It was a powerful reminder that sometimes we need to let go of our comforts and persist through fear in order to more deeply understand ourselves and God's presence in our lives.

I don't know what the right experience is for you, but I recommend you seek out the opportunity to tremble a little in God's mysterious presence. I recommend experiencing whatever emotions you feel when you open up your grasping hands and let God truly define you and your life. Step into the vastness of God's presence, and allow yourselves to be moved, to be challenged, to be transformed. This is the beginning of wisdom—a journey not away from God in fear, but towards God, with a heart full of reverence, love, and awe.