

“To Fear or Not to Fear”

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Psalm 111

*<sup>1</sup>Praise the LORD! I will give thanks to the LORD with my whole heart, in the company of the upright, in the congregation. <sup>2</sup>Great are the works of the LORD, studied by all who delight in them. <sup>3</sup>Full of honor and majesty is his work, and his righteousness endures for ever. <sup>4</sup>He has gained renown by his wonderful deeds; the LORD is gracious and merciful. <sup>5</sup>He provides food for those who fear him; he is ever mindful of his covenant. <sup>6</sup>He has shown his people the power of his works, in giving them the heritage of the nations. <sup>7</sup>The works of his hands are faithful and just; all his precepts are trustworthy. <sup>8</sup>They are established for ever and ever, to be performed with faithfulness and uprightness. <sup>9</sup>He sent redemption to his people; he has commanded his covenant for ever. Holy and awesome is his name. <sup>10</sup>The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom; all those who practice it have a good understanding. His praise endures for ever.*

From time to time Steve and I ask for thoughts and suggestions regarding sermons that you in the congregation would like to hear preached. Over the last year we received several suggestions and selected two to preach last week and this, as we transition from 2006 to 2007. Last week Steve, at the request of John Rogers, preached a sermon about Revelation called “Interpreting the Signs.” If you weren’t here for that I’d encourage you to think about checking it out on the web – we have been posting our sermons at [www.ridgeumc.org](http://www.ridgeumc.org) for some time now and want to make sure that everyone is aware of the opportunity that you have to see sermons that you missed or to see them again or share them with friends.

This morning we’re going to address a theme that is often talked about in Christianity, but I’m afraid all too little understood. It comes from the prompting of Jan Watson who shared it with me saying something to the effect of, “Hey, what’s the deal with the Fear of God?” What is the deal with the fear of God? When we look at the scriptures we see fear illustrated and talked about in a variety of ways. Most of the time

however, when we talk about fear it is addressed in one of two ways. On the one hand we hear prophets and the psalmist and the author of proverbs make the claims like we hear in Psalm 111, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of all wisdom.” On the other hand we have the angel appearing to Mary and Joseph and the Shepherd’s in the Christmas narrative proclaiming, “Be Not Afraid.” We’ll talk about both of these in more depth in a few minutes, but they admittedly seem confusing at best and downright contradictory at worst. And so with apologies to William Shakespeare we are left with the question of the day – to fear or not to fear.

While our question might initially be “to fear or not to fear?”, I think we need to ask ourselves another question before we dig into that one. What do we mean by fear? What does it mean to say that we fear God and what does it mean that the fear of God is the beginning of all wisdom?

When looking up the word fear in the dictionary there are several different definitions, all of which primarily boil down to two different categories. On the one hand we are told that fear is “a distressing emotion aroused by impending danger, evil, pain, etc., whether the threat is real or imagined; the feeling or condition of being afraid.” On the other hand, we are told that fear is “Extreme reverence or awe, as toward a supreme power.” Quite different meanings for the same word aren’t they?

And so this is where the fact that most of us can’t speak Hebrew becomes an issue. The Hebrew word that so often gets translated as fear can just as easily, if not more appropriately, be translated as a reverential awe. When we translate the word in the first way it paints a troublesome picture of God, one that we often let go unchallenged. If we understood fear as our response to impending danger, evil, pain, etc. what does this

say about our understanding of God, when we hear that the fear of God is the beginning of all wisdom? It makes the connection, even if subconsciously, that God is one who will bring impending danger, that God is or will act in evil ways, that God will bring pain into our lives. It's no wonder that so many people today don't want to have anything to do with the God that is so often proclaimed by the church!

Fear of God understood in this singular way, that God will bring about evil, that with God there is impending danger, that God is going to bring pain into our lives, paints a picture of a God that I sure wouldn't want to be in relationship with! Why would anyone want to be in relationship with a being who is judging you and lurking around the corner hoping to bring pain and evil and danger into your life. People don't! Especially in this day and age when domestic violence, both spouse abuse and child abuse is so rampant! It is not helpful to describe and understand God as evil and dangerous and vengeful.

We've seen and heard this done time and time again though - haven't we? People talk about God watching, judging, punishing. When bad things happen to people we hear others say things like, well they had it coming to them, God's going to teach them a lesson. Or, God really let them have it didn't they. We heard this after Hurricane Katrina, We heard it after September 11<sup>th</sup>, Christian leaders in our nation stating that God would intentionally do these things to the world and to human beings because of their behavior. Let me make something clear. If this is how I thought God functioned in the world, I would not be standing up here this morning, I would have chosen a different career path! God is not Santa Claus, there is not a naughty list and a nice list and we are

not being evaluated at every step of the way to see if we will end up with a lump of coal in our stocking...

Have any of you ever trained or worked with dogs? Have any of you at least owned pets in the past that you wished you get to behave in a certain way? Well, there are two primary ways that people can go about trying to train their dogs. The first is through using anger, fear, and even violence. When your dog doesn't sit or doesn't stay or goes to the bathroom in the house, you can yell at it, say mean things to it, even get physically violent with it. This kind of behavior is our natural response when we get frustrated and upset – we want to lash out and we don't even really know what other options we have.

When we do this kind of thing, we might begin to see more of the behaviors that we're hoping for in our animals, but we won't be creating healthy animals and we won't be nurturing positive relationships with them. One of two things is likely to happen when you yell at or strike an animal repeatedly? They could rebel by lashing out and attacking back or they could cower and tremble in fear of being hit or kicked. This is what begins to happen to us as human beings when we understand God as a punishing-judging force that is out to get us for our disobedience.

So, what's the other option for training our pets to sit, stay, go to the bathroom in certain places, etc.? It's positive reinforcement. You remain neutral, maybe expressing your disappointment vocally or physically, but otherwise neutral when your pet is not doing what you want it to. And every time your pet does what it is supposed to do, you praise it and give it treats. Eventually your pet learns the behavior it is expected to do and you develop a stronger relationship with your pet in the meantime; trust is

established, a bond is formed, and a sense of security is felt. This way of training pets is more challenging, time consuming, and trying on our patience. And this is likely why so many people have pets that don't behave how they'd like them to. But, fortunately, for us, God is infinitely more patient with us than we might be with our pets.

Now, I realize that this metaphor isn't perfect, God doesn't give us treats or rub our belly when we behave in certain ways, but there is something to be said about the idea of positive reinforcement and our relationship with God. Let's go back now to that second definition of fear that I mentioned earlier, fear as, "Extreme reverence or awe, as toward a supreme power." To have reverence or awe towards God as our supreme power is quite different than to fear God as one who is there to bring evil and danger into our lives.

To be in awe of God or to have reverence for God are ideas that illustrate a healthy relationship. As folks who are a part of God's good work in the world we can be in awe of God's ability to create when we look at the budding of flowers, the birth of new life, the rising and the setting of the sun. We can have reverence for God, knowing that no matter how badly we screw up, or how many times we do, that God forgives us and loves us and wants us to be better. To fear God in this instance, is not to be afraid of God's punishment or wrath, it is to desire to please God out of love and respect for all that God is.

Some translations of Psalm 111 read differently than others. While many traditional ones state that it is the fear of God which leads to wisdom, there are some that are reclaiming what is likely a more appropriate translation of the Hebrew – awe of God

as the beginning of all wisdom. And this, the idea of awe at God's work, seems to be much more consistent with the whole of the biblical story.

Today is Epiphany Sunday, the day that we as the church celebrate the Wise Men's arrival to see Jesus. Today is called epiphany because these wise men got it – they had an in breaking of the light – an eye opening experience – and aha moment – that allowed them to understand God was doing something new in their midst. And we remember also the appearance of the angel to Mary and the angel's command to "be not afraid." And we remember that an angel also appeared to Joseph telling him to "be not afraid." And also "be not afraid" the Shepherds were told by the angel. We have no need to fear God as one who is out to get us or to inflict pain into our lives. This is the good news of Jesus in this Christmas Season, on this epiphany Sunday.

And so our task as persons seeking to work out what it means to live in relationship with God is to "be not afraid." God wants the best for each and every one of us as God does for all of creation. And God is with us constantly, calling us to make wise decisions, calling us to be better people tomorrow than we are today, calling us to do God's work in this world each and every day. And when we don't get it, when we fail or fall short, God is patiently there, working with us and hoping that tomorrow we might get it. So, to fear God – at its best – is to be in awe of God. We can want to be our best for God, we can strive to do the things that God would hope for us to do, we can even be afraid of disappointing God or letting God down. But we are not to be afraid of God. Simply being in awe of and having reverence for our loving Creator is all that we need to live the lives to which we are called – it is the beginning of wisdom.