

THE FEAR OF GOD¹
Luke 1: 46-50
A sermon by Thomas R. McKibbens
September 18, 2011

The first time fear is mentioned in the Bible comes in the context of Adam being frightened of God. Adam says, *I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself.*² Imagine that! From the earliest stories that humans used to explain their existence, there is a description of what psychologists today call *theophobia*. Yes, it is a real word. It means an overwhelming, debilitating fear of God or things religious.

I

We often speak of loving God, of trusting God, and of having confidence in God. We are told by Jesus that the greatest commandment is to *love the Lord your God with all your heart....*³ Yet over and over in the Bible comes the warning that we must fear God. In fact, the Psalm we read today concludes that *the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom.*⁴ So which is it? Are we supposed to love God or fear God? Trust God or dread God? Have confidence in God's love or live in terror of God's judgment? It seems to me that it can't be both. It must be one or the other.

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² Genesis 3:10

³ See Matthew 22: 34-40; Mark 12: 28-34; Luke 10: 25-28.

⁴ Psalm 111: 10.

There are clearly many churches that choose the fear of God over the love of God. Barbara Brown Taylor, who teaches religion at Piedmont College in north Georgia, describes the experience of one of her students who was writing her senior paper on the phenomenon of “hell houses.” Every fall just before Halloween, various local churches create what is a variation of the haunted house. It involves a guided tour through various rooms where people are doing things that are supposed to land them in hell. The scenes make use of a great deal of fake blood, and are accompanied by deafening soundtracks of wailing, moaning, and pleading human voices.

Finally, people are ushered into the room representing hell itself, where Satan presides. It is dark, loud, and full of putrid smells, with damned souls writhing in the shadows. Once visitors move through that room, they are ushered into a final room where there is light, quiet, and sweet-smelling aromas and they are invited to give their hearts to Jesus.⁵

Some of you are quite familiar with that approach to religion. It transcends denominations, and it even transcends regions of the country. The approach is literally to scare the hell out of someone until he says a little sinner’s prayer and accepts Jesus into his heart. The problem, of course, is that scaring people into religious faith backfires. It doesn’t work.

⁵ Barbara Brown Taylor, “Fear and the American Church,” www.atthispoint.net.

II

We are living in a climate of fear, and there are no signs that it will diminish in the near future. After 9/11, our comfort zone was breached, and we live in a color-coded zone of fear. We stand in long lines at the airport and are deprived of our bottle of hair gel. So we pour billions of dollars into national defense, engage in multiple wars, and still live in fear of the next terror strike.

This uneasy feeling of fear spills over into religion. It reminds me of the horrific picture of religious fear painted by Jeremiah in the text we read today. It describes a people who are panicked not just over the government, but over their God! In the face of their own brand of terror from an invading army, they say, *The Lord our God has doomed us to perish...because we have sinned against the Lord*. These ancient people realize that they are doomed, so they flee to the fortified cities, but they are fatalistic. They know that the invading army cannot be stopped, and they blame it all on the vengeance of God.

A story like this can inflict anyone with theophobia, the same way those “hell houses” inflict the terror of God on kids. Why are millions of Christians so susceptible to fear? They seem to love the *Left Behind* series of books and movies that end in massive violence, when God takes vengeance on all perceived enemies. The loving and forgiving, cheek-turning Jesus of the

gospels is long gone; instead he is the violent, sword-wielding warrior Jesus of the imagined apocalypse.

It is not hard to imagine why this kind of religious faith is appealing to some people for whom all of life is seen as a war between good and evil, and they want to be on the winning side. There are no shades of gray for them. Either you are on the right side or the wrong side, and people are attracted to churches that are absolutely sure they are on the right side. Because many people are basically terrified of God, they want to make sure that they are on God's side when the showdown comes. To them, Christianity means making sure you go to heaven when you die because there is a God who is ready to send you to the eternal fires of hell if you don't accept Jesus as your personal savior. And you better do it in a hurry because God is angry and is coming back to clean house.

III

But there is another way of looking at the fear of God. When we read that *the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom*, it has nothing to do with theophobia. It has nothing to do with any kind of terror or about escaping hell. This admonition to fear God, which occurs at least 75 times in the Old

Testament alone, is not a paralyzing fear, but a grateful fear. In fact, in some of the early writings, this kind of fear is identified with joy and delight!⁶

The truth is that there is no English word that can quite do the Hebrew justice on this occasion. Something is lost in translation. Reverence and awe may come close, but even those words do not adequately translate it, and yet this kind of fear is said to be the beginning of wisdom! It is a kind of fear that is seen in the New Testament story that tells of a time when the disciples were in a storm on the Sea of Galilee. They are terrified, and Jesus is asleep in the stern of the boat. They think he doesn't care! Where is Christ when we need him!?

This is the situation in which many find themselves today. We are in a raging sea of poverty, unemployment, mismanagement, political gamesmanship, embarrassments, betrayals, and craziness all around us. Opposing parties want to shake a fist rather than extend a hand. We are in a storm, but where is Christ? Is he asleep in the stern? Does he care? I think that is what this story is trying to picture.

Then in the story they wake him up, saying *Do you not care that we are perishing?* So he wakes up, and I picture him taking his time, rubbing the sleep from his eyes and maybe yawning, and calmly speaking to the roaring

⁶ Sirach 1: 11-20.

waves, *Peace, be still!* And we are told that there was a sudden calm. And in that calmness, he turns to his disciples and says, *Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?*⁷

Then the English translation says, *And they were filled with great awe.*⁸ The literal translation of the original Greek is this: *And they feared with great fear....* But that fear was not a dread of Christ; they were not frightened of Christ. Instead, they realized that they were in the presence of a power that even the wind and the waves obeyed. They realized that they were in the presence of the divine.

This sense of fear is not terror; it is gratitude and joy and recognition that no matter how terrifying the storm around us, we are in the presence of the very One who created the waves, and therefore has the power to still the waves. The storm around us is no match for the God within us!

This is the kind of fear the architects of the great cathedrals were trying to communicate in stone and wood and flying buttresses. It is a fear that takes your breath away. It is a fear that lifts us up and gives us hope! It is a fear that is full of faith and hope and joy! It is what the Puritans called “godly fear,” a kind of fear that focuses more on the present than the future. It is a fear that

⁷ Mark 4: 35-41.

⁸ Mark 4: 41.

asks, "What can we do to calm the storm now, especially for those who are drowning?" It is the kind of fear that creates and sustains great institutions to help those who are floundering all around us. This is the kind of fear that is *the beginning of wisdom.*

IV

I'm afraid that our culture is lacking this positive kind of fear. We have made God our chum, our buddy, our side-kick. We have become so familiar with God that we have largely thrown out any sense of godly fear. Wouldn't it seem odd, at the time of the passing of the peace, if we said, "May the fear of God be with you!" It would seem very strange, very out of touch with our present culture.

Yet when we realize that no matter what we are facing, we are in the presence of Almighty God in this very place, there is an appropriate place for trembling, not in terror of any punishment, but in speechless wonder over the magnanimous love of God, which, as the old song says, "is greater far than tongue or pen can ever tell."

May the godly fear of God be with you all.