

Fear of the Lord

Psalm 111 & 1 John 4:16b-21

4/10/2011

A few years ago, our Sr. High mission trip was to the Rosebud reservation of the Lakota Indians in South Dakota. One of the teams, that included my niece, Sarah, was working on a house where they found, in the mud outside the house, a rather creepy looking doll. It was one of those baby dolls where the eyes opened and closed, and one eye was stuck half-open. My niece was particularly disturbed by the doll, and the others on her site took great pleasure in moving the doll whenever she wasn't looking. She'd find the doll in a different place every time she looked, including one time when she walked outside and it looked like the doll was starting to climb the steps into the house.

We all thought it was pretty funny hearing about it each day, until the night when Sarah had a nightmare that she had woken up to find that everyone had been transformed into dolls but her. It was obvious that while others in the group just found the doll creepy, Sarah was truly afraid of it. It terrified her. Every time she saw it, she felt fear.

In our reading today from the Psalm, we find ourselves coming to an interesting ending line. Most of the Psalm is pretty straightforward, then we get to

verse ten, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; all those who practise it have a good understanding. His praise endures forever." The fear of the Lord...is the beginning of wisdom. This isn't a new verse for us here at Baker Memorial. Anyone who has paid any attention to the stained glass windows in the church has seen that verse. The owl window, pictured on the front of the bulletin, that hangs in the stairwell by the main office sports this very verse, and it has always seemed to me a strange verse to choose for a stained glass window. In fact, it is sort of a strange wording to use in a Psalm at all isn't it?

I mean, is the psalmist telling us we should be afraid of God? That we would be wise to be terrified of the Lord? Are we meant to be afraid of His punishing wrath? Most Psalms are meant to be prayers or songs that bring us closer to God, but when we fear something isn't our first instinct to move away from it? So why would the psalmist be telling us this?

In contrast today we hear from one of John's letters that where there is love, there is no fear. John seems to be saying that we should have no fear. He says that "There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love." So from the Psalm we hear that if we are wise, we fear God, but then we hear that if we Love God there won't be any fear. So which is it? Should we be afraid? Should we Fear God or not? Is John saying that Loving God means giving up on wisdom?

Or is this just one of those times that people talk about when they say that the Old Testament and New Testament don't match at all? That the Old Testament is all about fearing a vengeful God, and in the New Testament that all goes away and it is a God of Love. Are they talking about two different Gods...or could it be that it is more likely, that they are talking about completely different kinds of Fear?

Because there are different kinds of Fear, aren't there? In my last sermon, I talked about several different kinds of love, so today, let's look at something a lot less pleasant...at fear, and some of the many different ways we are afraid.

There is the kind of fear that shocks us. That live-wire of emotion that gets the heart pumping and the adrenaline flowing. It is the kind of fear that comes from a car suddenly swerving into your lane when you are driving, or from the fire alarm suddenly going off because you forgot about a pan of rolls in the oven. It is the kind of fear that can either paralyze us in its suddenness or push us into a frantic rush of activity. I often think this is the kind of fear that people in the Bible experienced when they would first see an angel or when Moses saw the burning bush. It was this type of fear that led to the angel's first words almost always being, "Be not afraid". Now there are a lot of people who like this kind of fear. Who like that shock of heart-stopping adrenaline rush. this is why horror movies are so popular, and why the youth love playing games like Zombie tag during lock-ins in the dark church.

Then there is the other type of fear, as cold and slow as shock is hot and fast. Let's call this fear "dread". This is the type of fear that gets inside our heads and makes us question what we should do. The kind that messes with our thoughts and actions. As one of my favorite authors, Jim Butcher says, "It's a rational sort of fear that puts a lawn chair down in the front of your thoughts and brings a cooler of drinks along with it." It is "waiting for medical results" fear. It is fear of discovery, of ridicule, or censorship. It is distrust and paranoia. This isn't the type of fear that hits and is gone an instant later, but the kind that lingers for days and weeks, haunting our thoughts and influencing our actions and our mood. No one finds this type of fear fun. This dread is the type of fear that Peter must have felt after the arrest of Jesus, when he was confronted, and when he turned away and three times denied that he even knew Jesus.

Then there is the healthy fear we feel when we have learned how dangerous something can be. I read a study once that said that new-born babies show only two fears, the fear of falling and of loud noises. That all the other fears we have are learned things. We've all learned to be afraid of fire, but it is a respectful fear, not one that causes us to cringe or run screaming, arms flailing from a lit candle like the monster in the old Frankenstein movies. It isn't the type of fear that causes most of us to lie awake in the night like dread does, but rather it is a fear born out of respect for how potentially dangerous something like fire can be.

Many would say that it is this type of fear that the psalmist is talking about in our reading today. They would say that when the Psalm says, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; all those who practise it have a good understanding," that it is telling us that we are wise to be afraid of God because we should respect how potentially dangerous the Lord is. That it is wise for us to be afraid to not follow God's commands, because otherwise smiting might commence! And if this were a Psalm about God's wrath or anger, I might be inclined to agree with them...but it isn't.

This is a Psalm of praise. The heading in my Bible even reads "A Psalm of praise for God's Wonderful works"! It contains phrases such as, "Great are the works of the Lord, studied by all who delight in them," and "...the Lord is gracious and merciful," or "The works of his hands are faithful and just; all his precepts are trustworthy." Does this sound to you like the psalmist is worried and talking about a God who could cut loose with the smitings at any moment? No. Instead, it sounds to me like the Psalmist is proclaiming his love and admiration for God.

And this brings us to our last type of fear today, the fear for someone we love. We've all felt this one. Whether it was as a child worrying that our parents would be mad at us for something we've done, or as a parent's worry for a child riding their bike the first time. This is a fear of disappointing a loved one, or the fear that our loved one will be hurt by our actions or inactions. This is the type of

fear that can drive us to do crazy, overprotective, things or that can drive us to new heights, to do brave things, because we don't want to let our loved one down. This worry is the type of fear we see in the story of the Prodigal Son. We see the son's worry as he practices his speech of repentance before he sees his father, and this fear for a loved one is what drives the father to run to his son the moment he sees him and gather him protectively into his arms.

I am guessing that each one of you recognizes and has felt these different types of fear. I am guessing that you have all experienced shocks and dread, worry and respectful fear. That's part of life. And there are lots of things in our world to be afraid of. When I hear the Psalm say "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; all those who practise it have a good understanding," it makes me think, that if we let this fear...this worry of disappointing this great, gracious, merciful God that we love...if we let This fear overpower all our other fears...our other dreads, then we have indeed reached the beginning of wisdom.

We are two weeks from Easter. Two weeks from the celebration of Christ's great, loving sacrifice for us. And the night before Easter, Saturday the 23rd, we will be holding our Service of Confirmation for the youth who are seeking to join the church. Easter Vigil, or the night before Easter is a traditional time when new initiates were welcomed into the family of the church, into the body of Christ. And with Easter being so late this year, we decided to honor that old tradition.

Now at the Confirmation service, the confirmands will be asked several questions as they affirm their faith and accept for themselves the role as a follower of Christ's teachings. One of the questions is "Do you accept the freedom and power God gives you to resist evil, injustice and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves?"

Think about this question, because this can be one of those things we fear can't it? How many times do we see injustice and oppression in the world around us? Whether it is a small case of bullying or harassment in school or at the workplace or the larger injustices caused by corporations and governments across the world. We see the effects of injustice and oppression and yes, evil in the world on an almost daily basis, and this question that we are asking these youth...this question that we ask those joining the church says that when we see these evils, when we see these acts of injustice and oppression, we accept the power that God gives us, the freedom to oppose them in whatever form they present themselves! in other words, to act as a follower of Christ.

How often in our fear and dread of what people will think, or what might happen to us, have we turned away and not acted as we should? Not stood up when we saw injustice, or spoken out against oppression?

Our second reading today, the one from 1 John says that God is love and that we love because he first loved us, and that if we love God, we must also love our

brothers and sisters. It is saying that we must love those around us. And if we do that, if we truly love our brothers and sisters on this planet, than shouldn't our love and worry for them drive us to act on their behalf regardless of our other fears and our dread?

Verse 21 of 1 John says, "The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also." And so it stands, brothers and sisters, if wisdom indeed comes from letting our worry for one we love eclipse our other fears...then may we all go forward into this season of Easter a little wiser.

Amen.