

Church of the Crossroads  
Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time  
August 20, 2006  
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THE FEAR OF GOD

1 Kings 2:10-12; 2:3-14

Psalm 111

Romans 11:33-36

Luke 6:46-49

The words of the song Bill Ridgeway just sang are indeed somber and serious, to say the least. They come from Ecclesiastes, a book in the Hebrew Scriptures. In Ecclesiastes, the teacher takes a look at human behavior, observes who prospers and who does not, and comes to the conclusion that the ways of God are incomprehensible. In the realm of the human, it is often the case that the wicked prosper and the righteous go down to defeat. As for oppression, it rules the affairs of humankind. There is no one to comfort either the oppressed or the oppressor. The dead, claims the teacher, are better off than the living. Even better off are those who have never been born.

Even so, the teacher holds fast to the need of reverence for God. In such a world, it is only reverence for God that will carry the human being through this life. Says the teacher, "*With many dreams come vanities and a multitude of words; but fear God.*" (Ecclesiastes 5:7) And, again, after advising his students not to be too righteous or act too wise because both will get human beings into trouble, the teacher says, "*the one who fears God shall succeed with both [righteousness and wisdom].*" (7:18)

But what is the fear of God? I am asked this question more than any other, especially after a service in which one of the scripture readings contains the phrase. The phrase is found in the Psalter reading this morning:

*The fear of God is the beginning of wisdom;  
All those who practice it have a good  
understanding. God's praise endures forever.*

- Psalm 111:10

But what does the Psalmist mean by “the fear of God?” Most often, I have responded, “Oh, that word *fear* simply means *reverence*.” To fear God is to have reverence for God. But, now I realize that answer may be a little too easy and accommodating to our modern sensibilities. Too many of us grew up in religious homes where we were taught that the fear of God was the same as being terrified of God. The fear of God was used as a way to control our behavior, as in “if you do not behave properly, God will surely punish you.” I am thankful that I was never subjected to this kind of talk in my growing-up-years, but I know that many among us were. So, it comes somewhat as a relief to learn that the fear of God simply means having reverence for God.

The truth is, however, that the Hebrew word for fear can mean anything from reverential awe to utter terror. We would like the word to be associated only with reverential awe but at times something more is implied. There are times in scripture that human beings are encouraged to be afraid of God, really *afraid* of God, especially when a radical change in human behavior is required, such as when human beings become greedy and selfish and oppressive and violent. When those behaviors take over, then a little fear of God, in the sense of being scared straight, might be in order. An analogy might be that until we become fearful, even terrified of global warming we may not be motivated to do much about it.

The point here is that the fear of God, whether in terms of reverential awe or in terms of utter terror, is always invoked as an incentive for righteous and wise living. The fear of God can lead us to do justice and make peace and share freely and love extravagantly. That is why the scriptures claim that it is a good thing to fear God.

But who is this God we are to fear? Is it a God more ready to punish than to show mercy, a God who is distant rather than involved in human life and the life of the world. How we describe God makes a difference when it comes to the fear of God. In that same Psalm, Psalm 111, we hear about the nature of the God whom we are to fear. God is righteous. God is gracious and merciful. God provides the food that is necessary for human life to flourish. God is mindful of God’s covenant. The works of God’s hands are faithful and just. God’s precepts are trustworthy.

Surely, this is a God whom we would want to fear. This is a God who is concerned about our wellbeing and the wellbeing of the world. This is the God who invokes within us an awesome reverence.

The fear of such a God motivates us to do as God does, to be righteous in all our doings, to be gracious and merciful, to share food with all, to be faithful and just and trustworthy. If our reverence for God leads us to nurture these qualities within ourselves, then it is right that we should fear God. Such reverence for God will lead us to be as the Solomon who is described in this morning's reading from Kings, who seeks wisdom instead of riches or honor, and as the wise man described by Jesus in Luke's Gospel, who "building a house, who dug deeply and laid the foundation on rock; when a flood arose, the river burst against that house but could not shake it, because it had been well built." (Luke 6:48)

The fear of God leads to wisdom and a well-founded life. The fear of God, furthermore, safeguards us against our human tendency to domesticate God. Such a God described in our Psalm for today cannot be domesticated. In the words of this morning's prayer of confession, such a God cannot be regarded as harmless and bland and inconsequential. Such a God is to be revered.

If American Christianity can be faulted, it can most be faulted for its tendency to domesticate God. American Christianity seems to want a God to be loving but never demanding, a God of costless grace, a God who has little to do with the need for justice and peace in the earth, a friendly God who requires little in the way of sacrifice.

The fear of God breaks through this tendency to domesticate God. The fear of God leads to human reverence in the presence of God. Another thought. Our fear of God, if that is our only fear in life, may help us set aside all those other fears that rule our lives and cause us to seek our own security rather than the common good of all, that lead us to wage war instead of peace, that prompt us to shut ourselves off from the needs of the neighbor. Yes, the fear of God can truly be a good thing.

In our lectionary study group this past Monday, Dan Hatch offered a wonderful analogy for what it means to fear God. He said that the fear of God can be likened to our fear of the ocean. As local culture dictates, we are always to fear the ocean. We are to have reverence for the ocean's awesome

power. That reverence will increase in the midst of a storm. Even professional surfers will refrain from any attempt to ride waves that are simply unmanageable. The reverence for the ocean means that even when we are swimming we are never to turn our backs to it; we are always to face the open sea, so that we will be better prepared for what may come. Ask any surfer or serious swimmer or seasoned fisherman or fisherwoman. They will always approach the ocean with reverence and awe, even when the ocean seems to be at ease.

Such is our approach to God. We are to fear God, always with reverence, and sometimes with an awesome reverence that may border on deep fear. Such fear of God is an incentive towards obedience. It is the beginning of wisdom. It can lead us to become the loving, righteous, peaceful and just people we were created to be.

I trust that these reflections on the fear of God may be helpful as you ponder what this difficult phrase means. I also trust that we will always have such reverence for God that our lives will reflect what God desires for us and our world.

May we always approach God with the kind of reverence and awe and praise that is reflected in the words of the apostle Paul written to the Christians in Rome:

*O the depths of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are God's judgments and how inscrutable God's ways!*

*"For who has known the mind of God?*

*Or who has been God's counselor?"*

*"Or who has given a gift to God,  
to receive a gift in return?"*

*For from God and through God and to God  
are all things. To God be the glory forever.  
Amen.*

- Romans 11:36-39