

Sermon for 4 Epiphany, Year B
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Holy Nativity, Plano
1 February, 2009

“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom”. So we have just sung in our psalm this morning. But what does it mean?

We’ve all been taught that fear is a bad thing. I remember a conversation I had with a young woman who was working as a youth minister in another parish. She said, “I don’t believe that we should fear God. God loves us. All that stuff about fearing God is just old fashioned nonsense. It’s unhealthy.” You see, she thought fear and love couldn’t go together. Anyone you’re afraid of can’t possibly love you. And if you love someone, you will never make them afraid of you. Those of you who are biblically savvy might even quote the New Testament to this effect. St. John tells us in his first epistle that “perfect love casts out fear.”

So let’s clarify a little bit. Remember that the psalmist does not say that the fear of the Lord is the *end or completion* of wisdom. He says that it is the *beginning* of wisdom. This is what I said to my young acquaintance: “How do you know that God loves you?” If God is powerful enough to hurt you, you do well, as a beginning, to fear him. Then, when you learn that he loves you and isn’t out to get you, you’re capable of moving beyond your terror at the sheer power of God. He loved us; therefore, we can love him. But if he weren’t powerful enough to hurt us, if we never feared him, then we would never really understand his love and care of us. He would simply be irrelevant.

You see, the opposite of fear of the Lord isn’t love. The opposite of fear of the Lord is indifference to the Lord. And indifference to God doesn’t lead to love. Indifference to God leads to hell. It is only on the foundation of fear, awe, respect, and worship that God’s love for us can build in our hearts the proper response of love for him. And when our love for him is perfected, it will drive out all the terror and uncertainty of fear, leaving only the awe, respect, and worship appropriate to the creator of all things.

But the real dividing line is between those who begin by fearing the Lord and those who never begin. True fear of the Lord includes respect that leads to attention. And if we attend to God, we will learn of his great love for us. A small beginning of wisdom will lead to more and more wisdom. But the hardest thing to do is to convince someone to pay attention in the first place. That’s why the psalms and proverbs have so much to say about fools. All of us do stupid things sometimes, but the fool is one who refuses to pay attention. The fool is one who has no fear of the Lord. He doesn’t truly respect or care about anything outside of himself. And how do you get someone like that to learn about God’s love?

In our reading from Deuteronomy, Moses reminds the people of their experience at Mt. Horeb, when God came down and they were afraid. In their fear they said, "Let me not hear again the voice of the Lord my God, or see this great fire any more, lest I die." But then God responds, "They have rightly said all that they have spoken." They are right to be afraid of the holiness and power of God. It is a fearsome thing. It is possible that it might kill them.

But this fearsome, holy, dangerous God is also the one who cares tenderly for his people. Even though the people must be careful about approaching him, he will never abandon them. He promises to communicate with them through prophets. "I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brethren; and I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him."

There still remains one question, however. Those who are afraid, do they have a healthy fear of the Lord? Or are they just afraid of what might happen to them? Some people understand that God is holy and approaching him is dangerous. Others might not have any real respect for God; they just want to stay away from him and get on with their own lives. You see the difference? Both kinds of people might say, "Don't come near us, lest we die." But one is the fear of the Lord. The other is merely foolish self-interest.

The difference comes out in a person's response to the prophet. Whoever, God says, "will not give heed to my words which he [the prophet] shall speak in my name, I myself will require it of him." The fool thinks that God is absent when the prophet is speaking. But it is not so. The fact that God speaks through his prophets is a sign of God's mercy, because we couldn't take the glory of his tangible presence. But he is still omniscient. He still sees into the very souls of men. And those who fear him will "give heed" to his communication, no matter what form it comes in.

God is present with us wherever we go. He is with us in church. He is also with us in the car on the way to church. He is with us in traffic jams and at the office and in the kitchen. He is with us in bed and in the shower. In every situation of our lives, we must "give heed" to God's word. That doesn't mean that we have to have a morbid focus on God to the exclusion of the business God gives us to do. You can't read your Bible in the shower. But it does mean that we must carry our fear of the Lord into every facet of our lives. Everywhere we go, we are walking in the presence of the Lord, and we ignore that fact at our peril.

God, the creator of the universe, the one who is terrifying in his glory and unapproachable in his holiness, *God* loves us. But we will never truly know it if we ignore him.