

Sermon Sunday October 31, 2021 The Rev. Alexander McCurdy III

“When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, ‘You are not far from the kingdom of God.’ After that no one dared to ask him any question.” Mark 12:34

There’s an abrupt retreat here. Something had suddenly struck these Pharisees, Sadducees and Scribes who had been peppering Jesus with all kind of “let’s trap the guy” kind of questions. They’d been toying with Jesus—not a good idea. “What about Caesar? Should we pay him his taxes?” “What about after the resurrection and a woman who’d been widowed and remarried several times? How’s that going to work?”

Jesus answers their tricky questions well, but they keep on going. No one’s afraid of him, this inconsequential pretentious man. They offer him a simple question, a basic one for any Jew: “So Jesus, tell us: which commandment is the first of all?”

Jesus responds with the ancient words of the Shema: “Hear O Israel, the Lord our God is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’”

Quite abruptly something shifts. A hardly perceptible fear comes over these men, expressed simply by Mark: “No one dared to ask him any question.”

Dared? What’s happened to them? Jesus didn’t pull out a weapon. But no one *dares* speak. What frightened them?

Of course we don’t know, but certainly some sort of awe overcame them—and suddenly.

I think they sensed that they were dealing with power. They shut up and retreat. Is their fear like the Godly fear in the woman with an issue of blood who squeezes through the crowd pressing on Jesus and touches the hem of his garment? When he asks the question of who touched him, she comes to Jesus healed by his benevolence, but “trembling and falling down.”

Back to the Pharisees suddenly not daring to speak: could they be edging towards a recognition of their own imperfection? Certainly they are far from the St Peter who cries out to Jesus: “Go away from me Lord, for I am a sinful man.” Or from the St. Paul judging himself to be “the foremost sinner.” But maybe, just maybe they are distantly approaching shepherds quaking at the news of the savior’s birth. Maybe they’ve sensed something mighty is standing before them in plain clothes.

Ultimately and fundamentally I believe that what drives this element of fear is their incipient perception of the magnificence and enormity of God’s Grace and Love. Yes: that would be fear; fear in the face of something wonderful.

“Not logical,” you say?

“Fair enough,” I would answer, “but not logical doesn’t mean in can’t be theological and therefore true in its dimension of the attempt to grasp the infinite with finite minds.”

I find a simply put description of this paradox of fear in the face of wonder in the 4<sup>th</sup> verse of Psalm 130: *De profundis* . It starts out with the familiar words in the first 3 verses before the fear moment abruptly appears:

“Out of the depths have I called unto thee O Lord;

Lord hear my voice.

O let thine ears consider well, the voice of my complaint.

If thou Lord, will be extreme to judge what is done amiss,

Who may abide it?

For there is mercy with thee,

Therefore shalt thou be feared.

Yes, you heard that right: when it is encountered face to face, the enormity of God’s mercy ignites a kind of Holy fear in all who perceive the Glory.

Speaking for a moment of my own life and heart, despite tons of my weaknesses and inadequacies, it is the perception and belief in this truly awesome love and grace of God which have been the driving force over the 60 years that I have attempted to answer the call to the ministry of the Gospel of the living Jesus Christ. The enormity of God’s Mercy, and of the Holy fear that comes out of the realization of that, has been my theological driver. I won’t attempt to list the moments I have perceived it, but I tell you: it’s often been at time when I’d been feeling bereft or useless or otherwise down.

(Just as an aside: we do well to watch out for the Holy Spirit whispering about us, just when things are going badly.)

So, one example. Some 60 years ago in my early 20’s, I was alone, wandering in Paris. And I mean wandering also in a soul sense. Drizzly night. I slipped into a very dark and empty Notre Dame cathedral. Don’t know why a side door was left open. The organist was practicing a piece at full volume.

I didn’t know then that it was Olivier Messiaen’s “Nativity of Christ” as Clair and Elaine would have recognized it. Didn’t matter. I was seized by its power, a holy fright that fit in with other holy fright experiences of Glory I’d experienced in my then short lifetime. A number of these events added up in time to a visceral, but frightening knowledge of God’s almighty love and grace superseding even his righteous rage at evil.

Only with time, then, would I grasp how God’s judgment day will be filled not at all with horror, but with the terror-fright-glory music of God’s forgiveness and grace for us. We will be given new eyes, eyes opened to see and then easily repent for who we were and weren’t!—in our lives on Earth.

Out the window go all visions of eternal hell-fires of punishment for all humankind who are **all** sinners to begin with. Didn’t Christ die for the sins of the whole world? Didn’t Jesus say

return good for evil; to turn the other cheek when struck once? How in earth, or at heaven's pearly gates, how could he do otherwise than to forgive? Am I to think that the God who is love; that He of all beings would imitate and outdo all the horrors of pain-inflicting which we humans have done to each other over the ages? God acting like Satan and infinitely worse? Impossible, the essence of scripture told me.

So I believe that only at that judgment day will the enormity of God's capacity to return good for evil be revealed. His capacity to open every eye will fill all human kind, alive and those rising from the dead, will fill us with the most comprehensive Holy fear of Almighty God in our forgiveness. As for the unforgiveable sin you ask? It suspect it will have been forgotten.

So I step out of this pulpit for the last time on a Sunday morning, hoping that in all of our intimacy with God, we may have and treasure a measure of the shepherds' holy, and utterly joyful fear of God. May we learn to treasure that Holy fear in the awesomeness of God's love and Grace for all humankind when, as St. Paul put it, "every knee in heaven, on earth and under the earth, shall bend the knee to Christ." May the concluding words of Psalm 22, the opening lines of which Jesus spoke from the cross, may these words stay with us and give us a joyful fear of God:

*"All the end of the earth shall remember and turn to the Lord; and all the families of the nations shall worship before him.*

*"For dominion belongs to the Lord, and he rules over the nation.*

*To him, indeed, shall all who sleep in the earth bow down. Before him shall bow down all who go down to the dust."*

But what's the basis of this trembling, this fear? Is it similar in origin to any kind of horrid, every day or banal fear, the likes of which haunt us too much in this temporary life we lead. Is it fear of pain, of death, of war, of excruciating human types of losses and tragedies? No, I don't believe so. Is the fear of God as the beginning of wisdom rooted in thoughts that God can be a far far better torturer than the monstrously behaving Hitlers, Stalins, and Pot Poles of the last century?

Actually, the Christian Church since early on has been quite good at preaching punishment and threatening people with it's Dante-esque Inferno types of things. And most certainly, there are plenty of images, threats and horrors mentioned all through the Bible right down to Jesus. Try his words in Matthew 25. Indeed frightening. People, you and I getting what we deserve.

And oh have I tried to make sure I'm a sheep instead of a goat in response to this.

No it's the fear experience that stems from just the dimmest perception of God's almighty potential for Graceful forgiveness even to the worst swines of human beings who have ever lived, forgiveness and mercy to the Saints of God like Paul who, at one point, declares himself to be the greatest of sinners. Yes, you heard that right. Forgiveness and mercy to St. Peter also who, right from his initial call to follow Christ, falls on his knees and cries out to him: "Go away from me Lord, for I am a sinful man!" to the utter enormity of God's love and Grace, to the perception of the impossible possibility of God's Grace and love and Mercy which will forgive the sins of the whole world can only cause us to quake, to cry out to God in the words of Peter when Jesus called him: "Go away from me Lord, for I am a sinful man." Luke 5:8

"After that, no one dared to ask him any questions." Not daring means they were suddenly afraid.

Mark recounts the build up to this moment. Some Pharisees, Sadducees and Scribes had been peppering Jesus with all kind of "let's trap the guy" kind of questions. "What about Caesar? Should we pay him his taxes?" What about after the resurrection and a woman who'd been widowed and remarried several times? How's that going to work?

Jesus answers their tricky questions well, but they keep on going. No one's afraid of him, this inconsequential pretending man. They offer him a simple question, a basic one for any Jew: ""So Jesus, tell us: which commandment is the first of all?"

Jesus responds with the ancient words of the Shema: “Hear O Israel, the Lord our God is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’”

But after his answer something shifts, fear comes over these men who had been doing their best to trap Jesus. Quite abruptly: “No one dared to ask him any question.”

What’s happened to them? No one dares. What could have frightened them? Of course we don’t know, but certainly some sort of sudden awe came over them as they suddenly sensed that they were dealing with enormous power. It resembles the Godly fear in the woman with an issue of blood who squeezes through the crowd pressing on Jesus and touches the hem of Jesus’s garment. It’s like blind Bartimaeus who yells, cries out for Jesus’s help, despite everyone shouting at him to shut up. It’s like the partially blind Centurion at the crucifixion who thrusts his sword angrily into Jesus’s side only to suddenly reverse himself, no doubt stumbled backwards and cried out: “Surely this was the Son of God.”

In contrast, you and I look out on the world today, if even through the safe distance of our newspaper or media feed, and fright would be a healthy response. But as we notice, the daily descriptions of horrible occurrences begin to drift into a kind of neutral zone where our emotions are dulled and anesthetized. Ah, starvation and gangs in Haiti, starvation all over the globe; political horrors and weather calamities and civil wars driving mass migration all over the world; now China with a new nuclear bomb delivery system; and Russia what’s next with them; then even closer the political enmity we have on our doorsteps. Toooooo much,

In the words of one of our PB collects, these dark dark things are described as: “clouds of this mortal life which can hide from us the light which is immortal and which has been manifested to us in our Lord Jesus Christ.” These dark nasty things are clouds all right, mighty thick ones. But, and this is hard for us who have never had the living Christ standing before us, the light that shines powerfully behind all clouds and which we believe will eventually dry up every cloud, is I believe a glimpse of what frightened these Scribes and Pharisees.

How so would that frighten them?

Attempting to answer that I recall a verse from Psalm 130. It’s a familiar one beginning: “Out of the deep have I called unto thee O Lord.

A source of Goodness beyond the expressions of all human hyperbole

A force which dwarfs evil. But it is awesome. The Magnificence of God’s Almighty mercy

Holy Fear Messiaen Shepherds quake. OT God

Wrong all the associations of God’s power being manifested in the acts of eternal evil and the most exquisite tortures. Although there are repeated threats of such deserved punishment all through the OT and NT, the enormous final fact of the matter is that God himself bore the suffering.

## Messian

We space out or to turn to more dark things we can control: horror movies, Stephen King novels or “just” someone getting bones broken and a head smashed on football fields. We have to fight off insensibility.

Verse 4 of Psalm Suddenly no one dares to speak. Did they quiver or quake slightly in sensing that they had been out of line; that they had been challenging and toying with a magnificence beyond their wildest imagination, although they couldn't have imagined that they had dared to quiz none other than God Almighty standing before them in human form.

Once upon a time George Fox, an Anglican/Episcopal priest, experienced a found himself standing in the presence of the living God in his Holy Spirit. He began quake. Did these men too? “The fear of God is the beginning of wisdom,” as Proverbs put it.

Of course the fear being spoken of here is Holy fear, based on the experience of God's utter magnificence and power. {In attempting to say something superlative or even positive about something, how often and easily we toss around words like “awesome” or “tremendous” or the ridiculous over-usage of the word: “incredible.”}

Yes, it's the beginning, not the middle point or the end, but it's the foundation. It's a foundation we all have to attend to, to make sure it is firm as we build structures of the loving God upon this basis.

So how's our fear of God? Let me try and sketch for you the whopper of a Holy fear which would absolutely knock all our socks off, that is if any of us were still wearing socks at the time.

I'm speaking of the time of the general resurrection of every human being, renewed bodies and souls with new eyes..

You know, I love the book of Ruth. Not just for those jewel like words where she

clings to Naomi and make her vow:

“Do not press me to leave you or to turn back from following you! Where you will go, I will go; where you lodge I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die—there I shall be buried.”

(There’s someone also to whom Jesus might say the words: “You are not far from the kingdom of God.)

These are such affectionate spoken by Ruth to her mother in law whose husband and two sons had recently died. She herself was but young woman who had suffered the loss of her husband and brother in law. Misery on top of misery. I love the story of Ruth, including Naomi her mother in law too, because of the amount of suffering they endured yet, like Job in his afflictions, like Jesus himself on the cross, their faith absolutely remained and sustained them. Despite misery on top of misery.

I find a succinct expression of this in the 4<sup>th</sup> verse of Psalm 130. It starts out with the familiar words in the first 3 verses before the moment I speak of:

“Out of the depths have I called unto thee O Lord;

Lord hear my voice.

O let thine ears consider well, the voice of my complaint.

If thou Lord, will be extreme to judge what is done amiss,

Who may abide it?

For there is mercy with thee,

Therefore shalt thou be feared.

Christ on the cross, God Almighty, speaks the ultimate words of Universal Salvation: “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” The “they” Jesus references are not merely the men who beat Jesus and nailed him to the cross. No. The *they* are *we* human beings throughout all time we think or thought we knew exactly what we were doing, but in a more profound level, we knew pitifully little if not knowing nothing at all.