

EVE OF THE FIRST SUNDAY IN LENT | FEBRUARY 25, 2023

GENESIS 2:15-17; 3:1-7 | MATTHEW 4:1-11

About 98% of the time, the homily you hear on Saturdays is pretty much the same as the one folks hear on Sundays. This is one of other 2% days because we have a baptism tomorrow, and I thought that hearing about a baptism that you aren't going to be at would be sort of boring. So instead, we're going to spend some time thinking about a question that one of you had about the role of fear in the Bible. Specifically, what do we mean when we talk about the "fear of God."

This is an interesting question. The phrase "fear of God" or something similar comes up a lot in the Bible, most obviously in the Psalms and, to a lesser extent, in the book of Acts.¹ And it's used in a lot of our theological writings, too. For example, if you read Luther's Small Catechism, which is at the back of our hymnal, it has this phrase that it keeps coming back to. "We are to fear, love, and trust God so that..." So what's this stuff about fear about?

The best place to start this is by thinking about the role of fear in our own lives. A number of years ago, I was visiting one of our homebound members, one of these people that always had the TV on in their house. And they were asking me something about my wife Anna's job. And when I told them that she was working in Manhattan, they just couldn't believe it. And she asked something to the effect of *Well, isn't she afraid?* And I sort of shrugged because I couldn't figure out what they were talking about. This was in 2018 or so, and so crime was at a historical low. And then the 11 AM news came on. And as you can imagine, the whole thing is crime. And so this person, understandably, had gotten the message that if you go into the city, something bad is 100%, for sure going to happen to you.

And you can take that idea and apply it to a bunch of other stuff. Maybe you're afraid of heights or dogs or needles or whatever. If you're around it, something bad is going to happen. So you should avoid it at all costs.

If that's the way you interpret "fear" in the Bible, then you'll end up with a sort of funny picture. That when the psalmist tells us that we should "serve the Lord with fear," we think it means that should serve the Lord but be super apprehensive the whole time. Or when Luther says we should "fear, love, and trust God," it makes it sound like we should love someone who might harm us. At best, it doesn't really make sense. At worst, it makes God sound like an abusive authority figure.

Of course, there are some people, mostly fundamentalist types, who think this kind of fear is a good thing. They will tell you that God is really angry with you. And you should be scared of God. But most of this is the result of misreading scripture and theology² or, as is more often the case, not reading at all.

When scripture talks about fear, this is especially true in the Hebrew Bible, it's not about something bad happening. It's about a recognition of difference between us and God. One scholar defines it as "profound respect with an implication of awe."³

¹ "God fearers" is used in Acts to describe Gentiles who are open to the God of Israel.

² Misreading Anselm by confusing satisfaction with substitution, mostly.

³ Quoted from Bruce Metzger's *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*.

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I like to think about this by way of the Grand Canyon. I've never been, but if you ever talk to someone who's visited, they usually say some version of the same thing. Which is that it makes you feel so small. Not just physically small. (You can go to an NBA game and feel that way.) But you're looking at this feature that was carved over a process of five million years. And it makes you realize how small your own span of life is in comparison. So often, we go through the day thinking that we are the center of the universe. But then you come to the edge of the canyon and you get a very different sense of your place in the world. We would usually describe that as awe or reverence.

When scripture talks about "fear of God," that's what it's talking about. It's not about something bad happening if you're around God. It's about encountering something wholly different from ourselves and our experience of life that leads us to reconsider our position in the world. So fear of God is about transcendence. It's about a recognition of difference. That God isn't just a bigger version of my own beliefs or my own desires or my own agendas. But God is wholly other, always beyond my comprehension or grasp.

The readings we heard from Genesis and Matthew this afternoon aren't explicitly about fear of God, but it's latent in both of these stories. First, consider the Genesis reading. When the serpent in the garden of Eden tries to get Eve to eat from all the trees in the garden, he doesn't talk about how the fruit is really tasty and she's really missing out on this. The serpent says, "Don't you want to become like God?" What the serpent promises is life with no fear of God.

But when we try to become like God, we often just make our agendas bigger (the world is here to serve my desires) or we make God smaller (God is just here to tell me I'm right). No sense of awe. No sense of reverence. No sense of humility. The serpent promises to make us like God but only turns us further in on ourselves.

In today's gospel reading, you heard the exact opposite of that story. Instead of humans trying to become like God, trying to live without transcendence, you heard a story about how God becomes like us, of God becoming immanent in our lives. When Jesus is tempted in the wilderness, it means that Jesus lives amidst the forces that try to pull us apart from love of God and love of neighbor. That a God who is wholly other, wholly beyond our understanding, becomes wholly like us, understands what it's like to be human. So even if we can never fully understand God, God fully understands us.

This is, in a way, what the season of Lent is about. It is not a season where you try really, really hard to impress God so you won't have to be afraid. It is a time when we reflect on how God doesn't fear taking on our lot in life, our experiences of loss, and our experiences of death. And so a symbol like the cross, which was meant to instill a kind of fear in anyone who saw it, brings about a different kind of fear in us. Not fear of punishment. But reverence and awe at the depth of God's love for each and every one of us. That even when we reach our limit, God keeps on loving and living.

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