

## “Should I Fear the Lord?”

Date: November 15, 2020

Place: Lakewood UMC

Texts: Psalm 8, Mt. 8:23-27; Philip. 4:6-7

Occasion: Unafraid series

Theme: Fear, God, Awe, Reverence

Today we come to the close of our sermon series on facing our fears and living unafraid, with courage and hope. I hope you have found these messages to be helpful and meaningful. This morning, I want to look at one more fear; though there are probably many more we could examine.

*Should I **fear** the Lord?* Scripture often speaks of the “the fear of the Lord,” and it does so in a positive way. For example, Proverbs 9:10 says, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.” And Proverbs 19:23 states, “The fear of the Lord is life indeed; filled with it one rests secure.”

The idea of fearing God is perplexing to many today. Aren’t we supposed to love God? Doesn’t the apostle John define God himself as love? Why then would we fear God? I believe the confusion arises from some misunderstandings, and at times, misrepresentations.

For some Christians, the best sermons are the ones that scare the hell of you, what we used to call “hell, fire and brimstone” sermons. In 1741 Jonathan Edwards evoked the threat of hell in his Puritan congregation. Many others after him followed his example.

But if we look at the teachings of Jesus, we rarely hear him threaten people with eternal punishment. The only time Jesus ever said anything similar is when he criticized hypocritical religious leaders. “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees! Hypocrites!” Yet to ordinary folk, whatever their list of transgressions, Jesus routinely offered compassion, mercy and grace.

In scripture, the fear of the Lord is not primarily terror evoked by an angry God. It is reverence, respect and awe, inspired by a God who is all-

powerful and who not only created heaven and Earth, but continues to exercise dominion over them.

That's not to deny the last judgment and the discipline of the Lord. I'm reminded of this statement which is found in both the Old and New Testaments: "The Lord disciplines those whom he loves." As parents, we discipline our children. At times we even raise our voices to make sure they know we mean business. But as parents, our discipline comes out of our love for our children, wanting what is best for them. It is true, also with God.

There is yet another sense in which the Bible speaks of the fear of the Lord. The Hebrew word is *yirah*, and conveys being awestruck, seized by an appropriate reverence and respect. When some of the great men and women of the Bible had encounters with God, they hid their faces in fear or fell to their knees.

Being awestruck is the appropriate response to the beauty, majesty, wonder and power of God. I sense that awesome wonder when I look at the universe God has made, looking up at the stars at night, or standing on top of a majestic mountain.

This is the sentiment of the hymn "How Great Thou Art." "O Lord my God, how great thou art. When I in awesome wonder, consider all the worlds thy hands have made. I see the stars; I hear the rolling thunder, thy power throughout the universe displayed."

It has been said, "The fear of the Lord is the awareness that God is God and I am not...I am *glad* that God is God and I am not." The psalmist captures this feeling in our call to worship this morning. "When I look at the heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them?"

It is this sense of the fear of the Lord – the awareness of how great

God is and how small I am – that actually calms my anxious heart and helps me to trust God when he says, “Be still, and know that I am God!”

Now, despite what insurance policies might say, I don’t believe natural disasters are “acts of God.” Though they can be terribly destructive to humans, God does not use them to punish certain places or people in the world. Most natural disasters are increasingly predictable and explainable.

While I don’t believe God causes hurricanes, or that God intentionally guides them to strike certain nations, I do believe God is with those impacted by these storms. I also believe God is able to bring good from out of these natural disasters. God works in the hearts of other people to bring needed relief, resources and assistance.

God has the power to force even the most tragic of tragedies to serve God’s purposes. That’s why, when we fear the Lord – when we share a holy reverence and awe of God, recognizing his power and ability to bend even suffering and evil to accomplish God’s purposes – we can face life unafraid, even in the midst of storms.

Speaking of storms, that brings us back to the gospel lesson. Jesus is sleeping in the back of a boat with his disciples are rowing away. A fierce squall sweeps in. As the winds rise and the waves threaten to swamp the boat, the disciples become increasingly afraid. Yet Jesus sleeps on. Finally, they rouse him, shouting, “Lord, save us!”

Here’s what the text tells us happened next. “He said to them, ‘Why are you afraid, you of little faith?’ Then he got up and rebuked the winds and the sea; and there was a dead calm. They were amazed, saying, ‘What sort of man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey him?’”

What just happened here? Jesus’s friends were awestruck – first by

their fear of the storm, then by their awe of the One who commanded the wind and the waves to be still.

Adam Hamilton tells the story of a woman in his congregation who was battling cancer. She told her pastor, Rev. Hamilton, that when things seemed most frightening to her, she would think about this story in scripture, and she would pray, “Lord, I trust that you are in this boat with me. I belong to you. Please help me remember that you are here, and since you are here, somehow, this is going to be okay.”

My friends, releasing our fears to God requires that we trust God is always by our side, big enough to care for us, and stronger than any storm we may face. One of my favorite scripture passages affirms this truth: “We know that God works all things together for good for the ones who love God, for those who are called according to his purpose.” (Romans 8:28)

Do you see how awe, wonder, and trust in God’s power lead us to NOT be afraid? Isaiah said it this way: “Surely God is my salvation; I will trust, and will not be afraid, for the Lord God is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation.” (Isaiah 12:2)

In the course of this sermon series, we have examined a number of different fears that afflict us, shape us, shake us and can so easily rob us of joy and keep us from experiencing the life God intends for us. We’ve talked about a number insights, strategies and practices to help us control our fears so they no longer have control over us.

But I hope you don’t miss what the biblical authors discovered so long ago: whenever fear, worry or anxiety attack, their abiding trust in God’s unfailing love and power changed everything.

This is what Paul was talking about when, from his prison cell in Rome, he wrote these words:

“Don’t be anxious about anything; rather, bring up all of your requests to God in your prayers and petitions, along with giving thanks. Then the peace of God that exceeds all understanding will keep your hearts and minds safe in Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 4:6-7)

You and I will experience fear in our lives, we all do. But we don’t have to be oppressed, defeated or controlled by it. We can face our fears with faith, examine our assumptions in light of facts, attack our anxieties with action, and release our cares to God.

And in doing this, we will discover the “peace of God that exceeds all understanding.” *This* peace allows us to live unafraid, with courage and hope. Amen!

This sermon borrows heavily from the book: *Unafraid: Living with Courage and Hope in Uncertain Times*, by Adam Hamilton. New York: Convergent Books, 2018, pp. 223-236.