

Fear of God

Questions of Faith: Part 1 “Fear of God”

Rev. Cameron D St. Michael – January 30, 2022

4th Sunday After Epiphany

Readings: Deuteronomy 10:12-22; 1 John 4:13-19; John 14:25-29

Reflection: Psalm 85

Greeting: The Lord by wisdom founded the earth. By understanding he established the heavens. By his knowledge the deeps broke open. And the clouds drop down the dew. Praise the Lord! (*Proverbs 3*)

Prayer: Lord, we turn to you this day that we may seek your wisdom. We know that all knowledge begins with you. Help us to walk in your ways and to follow the example set for us in Jesus Christ our redeemer. Bring us into your light so that we may live in your great love. Renew our spirit so that we may sing your praises and glorify your name. Strengthen our faith and our hope in your steadfast love and faithfulness, through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Reflection: Psalm 85

LORD, you were favorable to your land; you restored the fortunes of Jacob. You forgave the iniquity of your people; you pardoned all their sin. You withdrew all your wrath; you turned from your hot anger. Restore us again, O God of our salvation, and put away your indignation toward us. Will you be angry with us forever? Will you prolong your anger to all generations? Will you not revive us again, so that your people may rejoice in you? Show us your steadfast love, O LORD, and grant us your salvation. Let me hear what God the LORD will speak, for he will speak peace to his people, to his faithful, to those who turn to him in their hearts. Surely his salvation is at hand for those who fear him, that his glory may dwell in our land. Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; righteousness and peace will kiss each other. Faithfulness will spring up from the ground, and righteousness will look down from the sky. The LORD will give what is good, and our land will yield its increase. Righteousness will go before him, and will make a path for his steps. (Psalm 85 NRSV)*

We read the words of Psalm 85 and hear of God’s forgiveness and love. We hear of fearing God alongside his salvation and steadfast faithfulness. This creates a feeling of awe more than terror. Are you in awe of God’s mighty deeds in your own life? Do you feel that God’s love is there for you in every part of your life? Do you extend the love we find in Christ to those around you? What does it look like to walk in God’s ways and to follow his path for your life? What does it mean to you to seek God’s salvation?

Prayer: O Heavenly Father, you have watched over us all the days of our lives. Be with us now as we come to you with our worries and questions. Help us to find wisdom through your steadfast love. Help us to understand what it means to be a part of your love. We thank you that your ear is always turned towards us so that we may come to you with the joys and troubles in our hearts. We raise our prayers to you because of your steadfast love and faithfulness. We seek your grace and love through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Now let the words of our mouths, and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Sermon:

Our scripture readings for today come from the New Revised Standard Version Bible. Our first reading for today comes from Deuteronomy chapter 10 verses 12 through 22.

So now, O Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you? Only to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the commandments of the Lord your God and his decrees that I am commanding you today, for your own well-being. Although heaven and the heaven of heavens belong to the Lord your God, the earth with all that is in it, yet the Lord set his heart in love on your ancestors alone and chose you, their descendants after them, out of all the peoples, as it is today. Circumcise, then, the foreskin of your heart, and do not be stubborn any longer. For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. You shall fear the Lord your God; him alone you shall worship; to him you shall hold fast, and by his name you shall swear. He is your praise; he is your God, who has done for you these great and awesome things that your own eyes have seen. Your ancestors went down to Egypt seventy persons; and now the Lord your God has made you as numerous as the stars in heaven. (Deuteronomy 10:12-22 NRSV)*

Our next reading for today comes from 1 John chapter 4 verses 13 through 19.

By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world. God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God. So we have known and believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world. There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. We love because he first loved us. (1 John 4:13-19 NRSV)*

Our last reading for today comes from John chapter 14 verses 25 through 29.

"I have said these things to you while I am still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your

hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid. You heard me say to you, 'I am going away, and I am coming to you.' If you loved me, you would rejoice that I am going to the Father, because the Father is greater than I. And now I have told you this before it occurs, so that when it does occur, you may believe. (John 14:25-29 NRSV)*

This is the word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

So, the first thing I wanted to address in this new series, “Questions of Faith,” is what exactly fear of God is supposed to be. It can be a rather troubling topic to tackle because there's often this feeling that God in the Old Testament is full of wrath and vengeance while the God of the New Testament is all about love and kindness and mercy. And what we miss from that is all of the times that God's love and mercy is proclaimed in the Old Testament. We also have to take into consideration the way that we read the Old Testament through Christ. The New Testament should impact the way that we read the Old Testament and this can be a problem if we try to read the Bible start to finish and not think about the Old Testament in light of what we know because of Christ. Our first reading for today was a reading that helps us to get a little bit of an understanding of what fearing God is supposed to be like. When the people are given the law, they're asked what God requires of them. And it's only this: fear God, walk in his ways, love God, serve him with all your heart and soul, and keep his commandments. The ones that they're being told to that day. They're asked to circumcise their hearts so that they're no longer stubborn so that they can love the Lord. But then there's talk about how God is mighty. But his might is of the fact that he's impartial and doesn't take a bribe. That he's full of justice because of his love. And part of what we get in this is that fear isn't so much a trembling fear of how we're going to be punished next, but an awesome fear. A question of who is more powerful than God? And one of the things that the fear speaks of is fearing only God. Not because we should be deathly afraid of God at every turn. That God should strike terror in our hearts. But because there's nothing else we need to fear.

This comes into play. In our reading from First John. That God abides in us because of our belief, our faith. And that God is love. Now at this point, you're probably asking “how am I supposed to fear love?” The letter then answers this by saying there is no fear in love. Because perfect love casts out fear. Now, you might think that those are contradictory points. Fear God but have no fear. But the truth is that it's really about a level of faith. That it's a level of faith that goes beyond needing to be afraid of punishment into doing the right thing because of how much you love. Often in the Old Testament, people were struggling with the idea that there were different gods that could impact them, and that they needed to fear some gods and fear others and fear the people who might turn their gods against them. And the idea that we get is that they should fear only God. But if you follow God, trust God, and believe in God, then there's nothing to fear.

And I thought about this in a sense of parental love and fear. Because if you were to ask me “do you fear your father or your mother?” I'd say no, I don't fear them. But in a sense, that

would be a lie. It's not that they strike fear into my heart and that I worry so much about what they're going to do to me that I'm afraid of them. But I can think back to being a child and being afraid of disappointing them by doing something I knew I shouldn't do. And then there was also the fear of how I might be punished for not doing what they said. And the reason I feared punishment was because I knew I wasn't doing what was right. And that's a fear that works in a lot of ways. We can think of times where people don't commit a crime because they're afraid of getting caught and afraid of being punished. Which is better than people doing the wrong thing because they have no fear of what will happen, what the repercussions are. Often today, we hear people complain about the repercussions for their actions and want to blame everyone but themselves. When we hear people talk about "cancel culture," the people who are complaining are the people who thought that they never had to be afraid of repercussions for what they say or do. And when it turns out that there are repercussions, they proclaim that it's everyone else's fault.

One of the things that we might miss in this is that fear isn't always a bad thing to have. But it's the kind of fear that matters. And one of the ways that we can look at this is through our gospel reading for today. When Jesus is talking to the disciples, before he's to be crucified and be leaving them, he tells them that he leaves them with peace. He doesn't want their hearts to be troubled and doesn't want them to be afraid. Because of love. And this goes back to that idea of love that we talked about in our reading from First John. If you don't love God enough to simply want to please him because of that love, then there should also be fear of what will happen if you intentionally do the wrong thing. But we also hear that fear spoken of in the Old Testament, in the same breath, as love. And I think that's a key component to all of this. If Christ tells us that we don't need to be afraid, but we hear that we should fear God, how do we make sense of it? And they make sense of it like this. We have nothing to fear but God. But if we love God with all that we are then we don't even need to fear God because we know that God is good, and God is just, and God is with us. God will help us to do the right thing. But when we falter, when we start to worry, one of the things that helps us to get back into focus is that fear of disappointing God, a fear of letting Christ down. Because instead of thinking about what the right thing to do is, instead of thinking about how we can love one another, we fear what people might do. And we become afraid of doing the right thing. We become afraid of loving the way that Christ loves. We become afraid of having the steadfast love that God has for us. That instead of standing in awe of all that God is and all that God has done for us, we begin to fear the things around us instead of remembering the loving God that is there to guide us and lead us and help us in all things.

Now I will admit sometimes this can be hard when we're reading the Old Testament, because in that we often see people who are simply afraid. But then I remember that sometimes it's because they still weren't sure what the right thing to do was. These are people who keep turning away from God because of the fear they have of others. The fear they have of other gods. The fear they have of serving a God that they can't see that they can't hold in

their hands. If we remember the Israelites getting nervous while Moses was up receiving the law, they became afraid so they crafted a golden calf that they could worship so that there was something they could touch and feel. And it is because they didn't think about the fact that God was still with them. They let fear of everything else drive them. And if they had just remembered that the only thing to fear was letting God down, those other fears wouldn't have risen up so high.

And so, when I'm reading about the fear of God, I think about it in a few different ways, and it helps me to overcome that idea that I should be terrified of God and I turn it into a respect and an awe. Be in awe of how powerful and wonderful God is. Let it be something overwhelmingly big. Something big and challenging something that is hard to understand. But also know that the fear isn't simply being afraid of what God will do but it's a fear that keeps us from all other fears. FDR famously said the only thing we have to fear is fear itself. And we could take it one step further. The only thing we have to fear is the Lord Almighty. But if we love him with all our heart, then even in that there is no fear. That if we let love guide us and we let our devotion, if we let our faith in God be overwhelming, then we have no need to fear him. Because then we aren't worried about punishment. We're worried about fulfilling that great love. We are living in that wonderful grace. We aren't worried about the repercussions because we're more concerned with making sure that we love the way that God loves us. We remember the salvation we find in Christ. And we turn away from fear and trembling and it becomes reverence and awe, a respect. And we can escape the idea that should be terrified of what God may do to us. That the "fear of God" becomes an understanding of who and what God is. A faithful father who loves his children and offers forgiveness. And it becomes a matter of trust. Because if we trust that God will take care of us, if we trust that our faith in God is not misplaced, if we have faith that Christ is always with us, then we remember that he told us "Do not be afraid" and that we don't need to fear God because we already love God to the point that we have overcome fear. And we let that love be our guide. For God is love. A love so overwhelming and so big that we stand in awe and reverence and maybe even a little fear. Amen.

Prayer of Confession and Pardon: O Lord, the God who saw fit to walk with us, we thank you that you judge us not by the perfection of our actions. We know that we fall short, both in what we do and what we fail to do. Help us, as individuals and as a congregation, to trust you and follow where you lead. Help us to proclaim the Good News and to live it. Help us in our weakness and forgive us. May we remember your love and redemption are forever with us, born to call us home. Amen.

Offering: If you are so moved to make an offering, you may send it to the church treasurer, or you may send it to the PO Box listed below. We are still the church, and the church still needs your support to keep doing all the important work that we do.

Lord's Prayer

Dismissal with Blessing: May we go forth reflecting God's love in our lives as we go forth in the peace of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Our Current Series – *Questions of Faith*

In this series, Pastor Cameron will be answering questions that have been asked of him at various times. If you have a question you'd like him to address as part of this series, just let him know.

Prayer List

Rev Charliam Renner	Bishop Frank Beard	Our Conference	Our Healthcare Workers
Patti Corder and the Greenup Ambulance Crew		Angie Veach	Eric Veach
Cathy Devall	Brock McMorris	Ed & Verna Titus	Henry Catey
Jake Kiser	Cindy Cisney	Nancy Hoke	Don Wells
Tricia Adkins	Don Stewart	Ronnie Winstead	Annie McMorris
Dwight Parsons	Lauren Stewart	Phyllis Gable	Sage Martin
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Jodie Bunch	Gene Laymon	Tom Finley	Family of Jim Nichols
Richard Durham	Kathy Hanks	Wayne Carrell	Gary & Mary Winterrowd
Leo Smith	Bonnie Hite	Greg Williams	Eloise Buffenmeyer
Martha Roberts	Charlie & Charlotte Baxter	Paul Schulte	Sue & Bob Smyser
Family of Bob White	Family of Sonya Bickers	Laura Carlen	Judy McCellan
Adam McMechan			

Rev Camron D St.Michael

<https://stmichael.pw>

cdstmichael@outlook.com

(316)530-3182 (call or text)

PO Box 54, Charleston IL, 61920

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