

“Faith Greater Than Fear”
Pentecost 11, Proper 14C – August 8, 2010
Isaiah 1:1, 10-20; Psalm 50:1-8, 23-24;
Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16; Luke 12:32-40

Introduction:

In the Old Testament there is a definite theological understanding that part of our relationship with God involves fear. For example, Proverbs 9:10, says: *The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom*, and 1:7, says: *The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge*.

The fear of the Lord has to do with who He is. God is holy and His holiness makes him different from us. God’s holiness separates Him from us. His holiness is like a consuming fire. It is like the fire that burns out all the impurities from gold ore leaving only the pure metal. In our own selves we cannot approach God because of His holiness; therefore, God has given us means of grace by which we can become holy (even if temporarily) so that we can enter into the presence of God, and have God’s presence – His Holy Spirit – enter into us.

In the Old Covenant, God set up a system of sacrifices whereby the sin of his covenant people was covered for a season. The system was fairly elaborate, involving different animals, birds, grains, and so forth;

each offered for designated sins. The ritual had to be performed by a priest, and the people bringing the sacrifices were suppose to be ritually clean in their bodies, and contrite in their hearts due to the awareness of their sinfulness in the presence of a holy God. Fear was there because of the need for the sacrifice to be done correctly and the attitude of the sinner to be humble and thankful towards God. God had given Israel laws, rules, and rituals to faithfully observe in order to demonstrate that they loved the Lord, and that their hearts, minds, souls, and bodies were committed to faithful, obedient living.

Over time the axiom “familiarity breeds contempt” became true in Israel’s relationship with God through the sacrificial system. Although the priest’s were probably still performing the sacrifices accurately, too many sinners’ hearts had begun to harden towards God. They had lost their ‘fear of the Lord’. Their relationship had moved from one of faith in God informed by a healthy fear to a ritualistic faith based upon sacrifices and ceremonies. Their condition can also become our condition if we do not remain spiritually sensitive to God and to our own condition. I think God chose fear as part of our relationship because

To Live In This World Is To Face Fear.

Fear, how we handle it, how much power it exercises in our lives, can be either a bad or a good thing. The fact is, there are many things, events, people, and circumstances that give us legitimate reason to fear. Obsessive fear can be debilitating in a person's life, such as the fear to leave one's house that turns a person into a hermit. Being afraid, in and of itself though, is not automatically a bad thing. For example, I learned to be wary of electricity when, as a small boy, I stuck a screwdriver in a kitchen electric outlet. To this day I remember riding across the linoleum floor on the seat of my pants with an awful pain in my arm. That day I developed a healthy fear of the power of electricity.

In a similar fashion we are to have a healthy fear of God – “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom”. Yet, we sometimes get so familiar with God that we loose that healthy fear which helps us remember, God is the creator, and we are the creatures; God doesn't exist to please us, we exist to please God. If we loose that perspective – and many in our country now have – it ruptures our relationship with God. We have

An Example of This Principle From Isaiah:

By the time of Isaiah, the nation as a whole had abandoned faithful living. They were still keeping an

external appearance of faithfulness. They were coming to the temple with their sacrifices, keeping the appointed festivals throughout the calendar year, and doing enough charity to ease their consciences. A high altitude fly-by, and Polaroid pictures, would have given the appearance that all was well between Israel and God. However, things are not always as they appear to be. The reality was different than the pictures.

God had been speaking through a series of prophets about his displeasure with Israel's attitude and their fractured relationship with Him. One such prophet was Isaiah, the son of Amoz. God gave Isaiah a vision about the nation of Judah and the holy city of Jerusalem in order to strength him for his prophetic ministry. In the vision God showed him the current status of the nation; how in disfavor they were with the Lord because of their unfaithful living. It is interesting, to me, that God begins by speaking to the "rulers of Sodom", to the "people of Gomorrah". Why would God mention them now; and why would God compare Judah to Sodom and Gomorrah?

If you remember, Sodom and Gomorrah were evil cities that God utterly destroyed during the lifetime of Abraham. By comparing Judah to Sodom and Gomorrah, God is saying, "*you are on the same track of destruction*

that befell these once great city-states. Don't assume your relationship with me is solid just because you externally keep ceremonies and festivals. My relationship with you demands a deeper commitment than having parties and killing animals as sacrifices for your sin. The truth of the matter is: 'I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fed beasts; I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats... I cannot endure solemn assemblies with sin. Your new moons and your appointed festivals my soul hates;' I am now turning my back on you; I don't want to see you or hear from you again until you 'cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, and plead for the widow.'" Does any of this sound like a news report any day of the week in our country?

All of Israel's ceremonies reflected a kind of ritualistic faith in God, yet the nation was considered faithless by God because their hearts were not right even though their ceremonies were technically correct. What this underscores is the insight God gave when David was being chosen king by the prophet Samuel. After looking at all of Jesse's tall, handsome, warrior sons Samuel was surprised by the choosing of the youngest, the shepherd boy David. It was in that scene that God informed Samuel

Faith Greater Than Fear

that God doesn't look at people the same way humans do. We look at the external; God looks inside a person. That's how David, though guilty of external sins, could be considered a 'man after God's own heart.' David lived by faith in his relationship with God, and when he sinned, his healthy fear of the Lord always brought him to repentance.

The truth is, fear has a place in our relationship with God, but

Faith Is Greater!

In the lesson from the 11th chapter of Hebrews, we have a definition for faith: *Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen*, and a bit of wisdom in the next verse: *Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval*. Did you hear that? "By faith our ancestors received approval", not 'by fear our ancestors received approval'. If God wanted, God could make all humans so afraid that the entire human race would live in abject fear of God, and simply cower at the name of God.

However, that is not what God desires. God even gave the angels so much freedom of will that the Archangel Lucifer led one-third of God's angels away in open rebellion. They exhibited very little fear of the Lord

which meant their knowledge of God was feeble and their wisdom non-existent. It also meant they had no faith in God and His power, knowledge, and ultimate goodness.

When our relationship with God is limited to fear we cannot possibly satisfy

The Demands Of Today's Gospel Lesson.

“Jesus said to his disciples, ‘Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.’” The actions Jesus lists next in the parable such as selling our possessions, giving alms to the poor, investing in heavenly treasure and not putting our faith in earthly stuff are not to be done out of fear; they need to come from a solid faith-based relationship with our Heavenly Father. For the fact is, we are the servants of the Master who are to be always on the ready for the return of our Lord, the Son of Man, who is coming at an unexpected hour. We live in anticipation of Jesus’ return, not out of fear, for we are forgiven of our sin. However, we all know others who may fear God but as yet do not have the joy of the lord in their hearts. If we are living by fear we will be only concerned for ourselves. If we are living by faith in this wonderful savior God has given us, Jesus Christ, then we are motivated to do all we can to help others also come to know Jesus in a personal way.

Faith Greater Than Fear

This we do not by fear, but by faith. We love others as God in Christ loves us. We pray unceasingly because our loving Heavenly Father has invited us to “boldly come into His presence” and then make our petitions and intercessions. We seek to live in fellowship with the Holy Spirit because we need the counsel and teaching of the living God within our souls, so we are changed from within because that is where God is looking and judging us.

Being a Christian is a call to a radical life and the energy for it cannot come exclusively from fear. Fear doesn't energize us for the long-haul. It wears us out. We need the energy that comes from a faith-filled, loving relationship with God, with others, and with ourselves.

Welcome to the greatest adventure of your earthly life – the saving of souls: yours and others. God bless you in your role as a faithful servant of a coming Master. *How sweet the Name of Jesus sounds in a believer's ear! It soothes his sorrows, heals his wounds, and drives away his fear.*