

What Does It Mean to Fear God?

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4th Sunday after the Epiphany

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Deuteronomy 18:15-20

¹⁵ God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you shall heed such a prophet. ¹⁶This is what you requested of your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly when you said: "If I hear the voice of God any more, or ever again see this great fire, I will die." ¹⁷Then God replied to me: "They are right in what they have said. ¹⁸I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their own people; I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet, who shall speak to them everything that I command. ¹⁹Anyone who does not heed the words that the prophet shall speak in my name, I myself will hold accountable. ²⁰But any prophet who speaks in the name of other gods, or who presumes to speak in my name a word that I have not commanded the prophet to speak—that prophet shall die."

Mark 1:21-28

²¹They went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, Jesus entered the synagogue and taught. ²²The people were astounded at the teaching, because Jesus taught with authority that was unlike their religious scholars. ²³Suddenly a person with an unclean spirit appeared in their synagogue ²⁴and the spirits cried out, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God." ²⁵But Jesus rebuked the spirit, saying, "Be silent, and come out of that person!" ²⁶At that, the unclean spirit convulsed the possessed one violently, and with a loud shriek it came out. ²⁷All who looked on were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, "What is this? A new teaching—with such authority! This person even gives orders to unclean spirits and they obey." ²⁸Immediately, news of Jesus spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

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The fear of God is the beginning of wisdom; all those who practice it have a good understanding. So writes the psalmist. Throughout scripture, over and again, many of our biblical heroes and heroines are said to have feared God. Abraham and Sarah; Moses; and many of the prophets "feared" God. Job was a man who feared God. Later in the writings of Paul to the early church, he, too, instructed the fledgling Christians to fear God. What does it mean to fear God?

We have been talking about this question in our Disciple Bible study class. The question actually brought me to the pages of Webster's dictionary. There, two very different meanings are noted. The first is the more common understanding of the word "fear." To fear means to be afraid of, to dread. But it is the second connotation that reflects the biblical understanding of the word fear. To fear is to feel reverence and awe, astonishment and wonder. Our God is not one to be afraid of. Our God is one to be worshipped with awe and wonder. Yes, the fear of God – the awe of God – is indeed the beginning of wisdom. All those stand in awe of God have a good understanding.

One of the aspects of God that causes us to be filled with awe is the authority that God has over the powers and principalities of this world. We know from our own faith story that it is God's authority that claims the victory on Easter morn. What appeared to be the victory of death on Good Friday was reversed by God's authority of Love and desire for Life on Easter morn. And to this day, we are filled with awe at God's authority to redeem each of us as well as the whole world through Jesus Christ.

This morning's scripture lessons teach us what it means to "fear" God. In the lesson from Deuteronomy, we find God promising to raise up a prophet for God's people. Who is this mysterious prophet of whom the text speaks? One might assume that it is Joshua, the heroic warrior. Or perhaps one could look further in the narratives to find

Samuel, the first person who actually functions like a prophet. Or then again, it could be Elijah, the prophet who hears the “still small voice” of God on Mt. Horeb. Could it have been Huldah the prophetess, the woman who helped inspire the reform movement during the time of King Josiah? Or perhaps it was the prophet Jeremiah? Ultimately, with the coming of Jesus Christ, Christians read this passage as an anticipation of the Saviors birth and life and death and resurrection. Jesus is the fulfillment of God’s promise to raise up a prophet who will be among the people and speak for God.

But when we meet Jesus in today’s Gospel lesson, we meet him early in his ministry. He is in Capernaum with his newly selected disciples. There, he taught the people, impressing them with his authority. It wasn’t so much what he said, but the way he said it. People were impressed with his conduct but they couldn’t figure out where the power and authority was coming from. After all, this was Jesus’ first visit to the synagogue. It takes time for people to figure things out. That is why the Christian year calls this time between Christmas and Lent the time of Epiphany.

Epiphany means that it is the time in the life of Jesus when the identity of Jesus becomes visible. Epiphanies happen when that which is hidden becomes visible, when that which is confused becomes clear, when there is a pulling away, and a pushing back the covers to reveal what has been blocked from sight.

One commentator uses the computer age to help unpack the meaning of the Epiphany season. It’s like downloading a large picture on a dial-up internet connection with a 28k modem on a 486 computer. You literally watch it develop before your very eyes. There is the first wave, in which you get blocks or squares of color. Maybe you can discern shapes and forms, but there is little detail and no recognition of the subject. Then another wave of information and the resolution increases, then there is another layer of detail leading to something recognizable. Slowly and gradually as the information comes along the phone line, the picture takes shape, and you have a clear detail picture of what was at first only very vague and confused. The whole process is an epiphany.

The story of Jesus coming to the synagogue with his disciples and teaching them is the first wave of information. The revelation that this is the Holy One of God, the Savior, the prophet for whom everyone had been watching and waiting is only beginning to develop.

On this particular occasion, Jesus went to the synagogue in Capernaum on the Sabbath. Jesus chose to participate in the service. The reaction of the people was one of awe, wonder, delight – but they didn’t recognize that what they were feeling was “fear of the Lord.” Mark doesn’t even report a single teaching of Jesus in this story, but states that it was the poise, the authority, the confidence, the power with which he taught that impressed the people. He spoke *for* God as if he *were* God!

Notice who did recognize Jesus for who he really was. It was the unclean spirit who knew where the power came from and like all unclean spirits its primary concern was simply for itself. “What have you to do with us? Have you come to destroy us?” the spirit cries out. “I know who are you, the Holy one of God!” Immediately, Jesus silenced the unclean spirit and cast it out of the person. The possessed one convulsed violently as the spirit came out.

Now the onlookers are truly in awe. Not only does this Jesus teach with authority, he uses the authority to heal. Jesus not only says; he does. Jesus not only knows; he is. Jesus not only proclaims; he brings into being. There is consonance between his words and his deeds.(Willimon, p. 23 *Pulpit Resource.31.1*)

With this authority, Jesus also challenges the Law and takes all sorts of risks by breaking it. Instead of avoiding the one who approached him with an unclean spirit, Jesus stops and engages the person in conversation, therein risking contaminating himself simply by his associating with the one considered ritually unclean. This unclean person was allowed to stay in the synagogue. Jesus chose to heal rather than throw the person out of the synagogue. Jesus claims an authority in which the unclean and disenfranchised and marginalized are allowed to be seen and heard and even healed. In Jesus day, this is scandalous!

But perhaps most importantly, the onlookers that day in Capernaum witnessed a cosmic battle being played out on the small Capernaum synagogue stage. And in that drama they actually witnessed the outcome that people in

oppressive, authoritarian contexts often dream of but too rarely see in this life: the forces of God and the sound defeat of the forces of the demonic and of evil.

No wonder these people are filled with fear – with awe and astonishment. This man Jesus has just used his authority to boldly proclaim the whole truth of God, the good news that God is among them, proclaiming victory over that which is demonic and evil.

Now this is both good news for us this morning, but it is also news that should fill us with the fear of God. Let me be bold and suggest that we all come to church this day with unclean spirits. They have many different names. Who knows which spirit lives within each of us. There are many different spirits, many different possibilities.

It could be the spirit of depression or the spirit of greed. It could be the spirit of fear or the obsession about our own security. It could be the spirit of unfaithfulness or the spirit of arrogance or anger or maybe the spirit of hopelessness. It could be the spirit of manic depression or the spirit of addiction. It could be the spirit of working too much or the spirit of laziness and sloth. The list goes on and on. Only you know what spirit resides within you, what spirit it is that keeps you from being the whole person that God intends for you to be. **But one thing is for certain; the unclean spirit within each of us knows that Jesus has the power and authority to cast it out.** And therein lies the Good News because if we but ask God to make us whole, God will be on the side of Life and Love and will cast out that which threatens our having abundant life through Jesus Christ.

That's what happened to Millard and Linda Fuller. At a young age, Millard looked like the picture of super success, the kind of success that people dream about having. At 29 his business expertise and entrepreneurial drive had made him a millionaire. But his health, integrity and marriage were suffering. Both he and Linda recognized that unclean spirits were living within them. They turned to God. Through prayer and an intense desire to serve God, they had an epiphany. It led them to sell their possessions and move to Koinonia Farm, a Christian community in Georgia, where people were searching for practical ways to apply Christ's teaching. It was there that Habitat for Humanity was conceived, a ministry of making modest housing affordable to families with low income. Homeowner families invested their own labor into the building of the houses of other families. They took classes and learned how to manage their finances and they were trained in the skills necessary to maintain their new home. Over 65,000 houses have been built through Habitat. And all because the Fullers turned to God to rid them of their unclean spirits so that they might be open to what it was God desired of them to do. And to this day, Millard and Linda Fuller fear God because they have experienced what God can do.

So, offer your prayers to God. Ask God to cleanse you of your unclean spirits and then be ready and willing to see what God has in store for you.

But let us recognize that this morning's lesson speaks not only to us as individuals, it speaks to us as a church. As the body of Christ, God counts on us to speak and act consistently with God's character and purpose – like Jesus did. Jesus didn't make compromises with evil. He acted to defeat evil so that people could be set free for new life. He set them free from what possessed them. He healed them of what ailed them. His authority did not come from military force, wealth or social standing. His authority was from God.

We, who are united with Christ, who call ourselves followers of Christ, share his ability to confront and overcome harmful and destructive forces in our lives, in our communities, in the world around us. As church, I believe that we are called to make a difference, especially in the lives of those who are powerless and marginalized, those who are victims of oppressive systems.

What are the unclean spirits that inhabit our local communities? the schools where our children are educated? the nursing homes where our elders are housed? What ministries are needed to those who are in prison at the Middleton House of Correction or those who are institutionalized at the Hogan Regional Center?

Two weeks from today on February 12th, we will have a brief all church meeting immediately after worship. At that meeting we will discuss and vote on our intentions to support the *Together for Tomorrow* Capital Campaign that our annual conference has launched. And we will also vote to put into place a Visioning Task Force who will create a

process for us, as a whole congregation, to write and implement a vision for Holy Trinity. What an exciting, amazing opportunity this will be for everyone. You will be reading more about this meeting on February 12th in your Trinity Times and a letter with more detailed information will be in the mail to you this coming week.

But what I want to emphasize this morning is that when we embark on a future vision for Holy Trinity, we will do so with awe and the fear of God in our hearts, because we know that with God, all things are possible. Christ's power and authority will cast out the unclean spirits that might keep us from being the church that God wants us to be. We will find ways to use our gifts and talents and financial resources that will build up the reign of God right here, right now! There will be a consonance between what we write as our vision and what we do to make it a reality. "Faith without works is as dead as a doornail" wrote Millard Fuller. But when that doornail is used by God, it brings life and hope into the lives of others.

The fear of God is the beginning of wisdom; all those who practice it have a good understanding. The people of Jesus' day stood in awe, in fear, in utter amazement of the power and authority that Jesus claimed and used. Like those first followers, may we never cease to be amazed and astonished at the words and deeds of Jesus.

May we be bold and daring, full of awe and fear, as we claim and use that same power and authority that is ours through faith in Jesus Christ, for surely it will transform, and convert, and convict us with new visions for our very own community. Thank God we have each other! Thank God that we can pray together, think together, plan together, share our differences together and respect one another.

Yes, to God be the glory. Great things God hath done. God so loved the world that God gave us a Son, who cast out the demons and cleansed us of sin and opened the life gate that all may go in. Yes! let us fear this awesome God and sing God's praises for all that God has done and will do for us!

Alleluia! Amen!