

January 29, 2012

Epiphany IV

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First Reading: Deuteronomy 18:15-20

Second Reading: I Corinthians 8:1-13

Gospel: Mark 1:21-28

### The Beginning of Wisdom

It was a frightening moment in the synagogue at Capernaum. The quiet solemnity of worship was suddenly interrupted by a man raving and flailing and foaming at the mouth. How did he get in here? Isn't somebody going to do something? What if he comes near me? People were upset and anxious. The unclean spirit or demon who possessed this intruder was also afraid. He feared for his own survival. He 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." It's interesting that the demons recognize who Jesus really is long before the people. And they fear the Lord, because they know who he is, and what he is about.

Now most of us have no fear of Jesus. We know he has not come to destroy us, but to save us. We know the compassion, grace and mercy of our Lord. We know the bible verse that says there's no room for fear in love—perfect love casts out all fear. (I John 4:18)

So then, what are we to make of the last line of our Psalm today?

"The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; those who act accordingly have a good understanding."

"Fearing the Lord" sounds like a bad news message from days gone by—news of a wrathful God who is out to condemn and to punish. The expression, "a God-fearing man," used to be a compliment—but to our modern ears it sounds odd, antiquated, even superstitious. We know better than to be afraid of God!

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Yet in more than one place, the bible affirms that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. And in confirmation class we still teach Martin Luther's Small Catechism, wherein he explains the meaning of the First Commandment in this way: "We are to fear, love and trust God above anything else." This is Job #1, the main thing. There is one commandment and nine examples. Luther begins each explanation of the commandments by saying, "We are to fear and love God so that..."

So there it is: faithfulness includes an element of "fearing the Lord"—and apparently it is a significant element.

As Luther is always asking: what does this mean—to fear the Lord?

We can get a clue by looking at other translations of this verse from Psalm 111.

"Respect and obey the Lord! This is the first step to wisdom and good sense." CEV

"The way to become wise is to honor the Lord." TEV

Now we could talk about "fear" as reverence, respect, awe and wonder (all of which are appropriate in relation to God), yet there is more to fear than respect.

In what sense is it appropriate to fear the Lord? Just as there are different kinds of love, there are different kinds of fear.

SERVILE FEAR is the fear of getting hurt or punished or in trouble. This is the fear of

the unclean spirit in our gospel, and the fear of anyone who thinks God is out to get them.

FILIAL FEAR is the fear of offending or disappointing someone you love. Bingo! Filial fear actually goes along with love and trust, while servile fear does not.

The appropriate fear of the Lord is the fear of being unfaithful.

- \* Husbands and wives who are devoted to one each other have a healthy fear of blowing it, of somehow failing to live up to their marriage vows. They do not fear each other—they fear doing anything to damage a person and a bond that they highly value.
- \* As a child, I was not afraid of being punished by my parents—but I did dread the thought of disappointing them, of being unworthy of their love.

So it is with God.

Fearing the Lord is taking the First Commandment very seriously—and so having a healthy fear of letting any person or thing or desire come before or between us and God.

To fear the Lord is to hold God in the highest esteem—to acknowledge that God is indeed the Almighty One, the Source of our lives and all that is, the One with whom we have to deal.

Since God is God, it makes sense to fear giving God anything less than our best.

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Consider for a moment: What is the opposite of fearing the Lord?

- \* Ignoring God altogether
- \* Taking God for granted
- \* Presuming on the grace of God: “God won’t mind if I…”
- \* Assuming God is like a kindly old geezer—nice and sweet, and pretty much harmless.

Not to fear the Lord is to function as a kind of “practical atheist” that is, professing belief in God, but behaving as though God is irrelevant. This attitude is more prevalent than you might expect. A survey taken some years ago found this:

95% of those surveyed believe in God, but only 26% believe God has any personal relation to their daily behavior.

91% are trying to lead a good life, yet 82% admitted that this struggle seldom interferes with doing what they want to do.

The survey concluded that most people are more inclined toward self-satisfaction than fear of the Lord.

This is the real issue: We prefer to make ourselves the center and the measure of all things, rather than having God as the center and measure of all things. The first question that comes to mind is not; “What would God have me do?” but “What do I want to do?”

We all know very well what it is to live with fear. Familiar fears include: fear for our safety, fear of failure, fear of pain and suffering, fear of what others might think/say/do. These fears can be stressful and unhealthy.

And they are unnecessary for those who fear, love and trust the Lord. Jesus once said:

“Don’t be afraid of people. They can kill you, but they cannot harm your soul. Instead you should fear God who can destroy both your body and your soul in hell.” (Matthew 10:28)

So it’s good and right and wise to have a healthy fear of the Lord:

- To have such high regard for God that we fear doing anything less than our best on his behalf.
- To depend so completely on God’s love that we fear doing anything to disappoint him.
- Finding such strength in God’s faithfulness to us that we dread the thought of being unfaithful to God.

But here is a common pitfall: We persuade ourselves that possessing an ideal, like love or faithfulness or reverence, is the same thing as truly living up to that ideal. We are quick to excuse our shortcomings, our lack of faith or love by asserting: “but I still believe in love and faithfulness, I still believe in God.” Those who fear the Lord don’t rationalize or make excuses—they seek God’s forgiveness, and they find it.

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Holy and reverent fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. It’s a primary step on the path to true and lasting understanding. Knowledge can be useful, but knowledge is not the same as wisdom. A wise man has said: “Knowledge sleeps and snores in libraries, but wisdom is everywhere wide awake, on tiptoe.” In this age of technology and unlimited access to instant information, we mistakenly assume that knowledge can save us. Wisdom knows better. Jesus Christ is our Savior—and our wisdom, as St. Paul knew so well:

“We proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to the Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.” I Corinthians 1:23-24

Paul also said on another occasion:

“Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.”

Philippians 2:12-13

Strangely enough, fear of the Lord draws us closer to God—it doesn’t push us away. Or as the hymn puts it so well: “Twas grace that taught my heart to fear, and grace my fears relieved.”

One psalm helps to interpret another: “Fear the Lord, you that are his saints, for those who fear him lack nothing.” Psalm 34:9

Amen.