

## “The Fear of the Lord”

Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20; Psalm 19

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It is difficult to know how to preach in the times we are living in right now. With a month to go before the election, with all the chaos surrounding the voting process this year, with the reality that our President and ten of his top advisors and allies have tested positive for the coronavirus and the President himself has been hospitalized, with the status and formats of future presidential debates in question, with all the tensions and frustrations that surround the CDC’s health and safety guidelines, with the successful legal challenge to our Governor’s Executive Orders, with schools and sports and the economy all in disarray, with so much uncertainty, with so much fear and anger and resentment and outrage, it is difficult to know how to preach right now. I found myself earlier this week asking the question, “What is my *job*?” Well, the answer is pretty clear: my job is to preach *the Word of God*.

So I turn to our lectionary passages that are appointed for today. If we’re looking for a word from the Lord, well, here it is. The question I find myself wondering is whether anybody’s *listening*.

Let’s start with the Psalm. “The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.” Ordinarily when I hear this verse, I think of the majestic grandeur of creation, of the sun and the moon and the stars, the beautiful sunrises and sunsets, the turning of the seasons, the majestic beauty that can be found all over this wide world of ours. There is *so much beauty*, *so much glory*, to enjoy and celebrate and wonder at. But as the Psalm continues, it becomes clear that the Psalmist is not just – or perhaps not even – talking about the beauty of creation. He has a different purpose in mind. He wants to talk about God’s *word*. He wants to talk about God’s *law*. He makes six strong affirmations in quick succession: “The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul; the decrees of the LORD are sure, making wise the simple; the precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the LORD is clear, enlightening the eyes; the fear of the LORD is pure, enduring forever; the ordinances of the LORD are true and righteous altogether.” These all pretty much follow the same pattern. There are six subjects: the *law* of the Lord; the *decrees* of the Lord, the *precepts* of the Lord, the *commandment* of the Lord, the *fear* of the Lord, the *ordinances* of the Lord. Five of those are basically synonyms for one another – law, decrees, precepts, commandment, ordinances – those are all different ways of speaking about the various laws in the Torah, either in whole or in part. But what is “the *fear* of the LORD” doing in that list? Let’s set that one aside from now and come back to it in a bit.

So we’re talking about the *law* of God, broadly speaking; the *rules* or *instructions* that God had given to the people of Israel. Sometimes we think *rules* and *instructions* are restrictive; sometimes we rebel when we are told we have to do something a certain way. (Like all those people who have rebelled against wearing masks.) But clearly, this Psalmist did not find God’s rules *restrictive*. No, on the contrary, he found them *life-giving*. He says the law is “perfect,” the decrees are “sure,” the precepts

are “right,” the commandments are “clear,” and the ordinances are “true and righteous altogether.” He doesn’t question God’s law; he simply *accepts* it for what it is: divine wisdom from above. But he does more than just *accept* it. He *rejoices* in it. The law “revives the soul.” The decrees “make the simple wise.” The precepts “rejoice the heart.” The commandments “enlighten the eyes.” God’s Law, says the Psalmist, is not *life-draining*; it is, on the contrary, *life-giving*. It brings him *joy*! He articulates this further: “More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey, and drippings of the honeycomb.... By them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward.”

In short: he *loved* the law of God. He loved *following* God’s law. It was a source of *joy* for him.

So what, then, does he mean, when he talks about “the *fear* of the LORD”? Was he following God’s law out of *fear*? Because he was *afraid* of what God would do to him if he *didn’t*? It sure doesn’t sound like that. No, I think what he was talking about is *awe*. *Reverence*. A tremendous amount of *respect* for what is *holy*. “The fear of the LORD is pure, enduring forever,” he says. Taking a step back, bowing down on bended knee, marveling in wonder at the *goodness* and *rightness* of God’s words.

Is that what we do? Take a step back, bow down on bended knee, marvel in wonder at the *goodness* and *rightness* of God’s words? Live by God’s words with a genuine sense of *love* and *joy*?

Let’s turn now to the Exodus passage, the revealing of the ten most essential instructions to the Israelites, in thunder and lightning and trumpet blast and smoke, on Mount Sinai. We get here not only most of the commandments themselves – some of the longer ones have been slightly abbreviated – but we also get the Israelites’ immediate reaction to them. The way the Bible tells the story, Moses is down at the base of the mountain, with the rest of the people, when God speaks all these words. *Everyone* in the Israelite camp hears them. They are not just given to Moses. *Everyone* sees the thunder and lightning and the thick cloud; everyone hears the loud trumpet blast. God had descended upon the mountain in fire, and the Israelites trembled in fear. They trembled *before* God spoke the words; they trembled *after* God spoke the words. They were so afraid that they asked Moses to mediate between God and them. Fear of the Lord? They had it, in spades. But Moses tells them not to be afraid. He says to them, “God has come only to test you and to put the fear of him upon you so that you do not sin.”

A bit of a contrast from how the Psalmist responds to God’s commandments, isn’t it? The Israelites were *terrified*. The Psalmist was *joyful*. They both had *fear* – but it was two very different kinds of fear. The Israelites are so afraid, they think they’re going to *die*. The Psalmist is so awestruck, he knows he has been given the path for *life*. The Israelites don’t seem to understand God’s *intent*, God’s *purpose* in giving them the law. They don’t seem to realize that the Law of the Lord brings *joy*.

What do *you* think of, when *you* think of “the fear of the Lord”? Are you thinking of *cowering*? Or are you thinking of *reverence*? Do you think of *being scared*? Or do you think of *reverence* and *joy*?

This is a hard concept for us to grasp, this concept of *awe-filled reverence* at the glory and majesty of God. Our English word “fear” really doesn’t capture it well. “God has come ... to put the fear of him upon you,” says Moses, “so that you do not sin.” Moses didn’t mean the people should go hide in a corner in terror. He meant that they should have a *proper reverence and respect* for Almighty God, with the result that they will both hear and heed God’s words, so to live in joyful freedom, without sin.

It’s a nice idea. It’s a *very* nice idea, in fact. The problem is, people seem to get it wrong, a lot of the time. Either they cower in fear, the way the Israelites did – completely missing the *point* – or they

have the opposite reaction entirely: no fear of the Lord, no awe-filled reverence, *whatsoever*.

Consider the parable Jesus tells in the gospel passage. There's a landowner, who has lent his property out to tenants. The landlord goes far away for a long time. When he sends his servants back to the property, the tenants beat, kill, and stone them. They have no respect for the landlord, no respect for the *law*. In a broader sense, they have no *fear of the Lord*, in either sense of the word. They are certainly not cowering in fear. Nor are they bowing down in awe-filled reverence and wonder. They just *do what they want* – and they don't care who they hurt, or what laws they violate, in the process.

And I find myself wondering if we're living in a world much like that described in the parable. A world where far too many people just *do what they want*, with no concern about what's *right* or *wrong*, with no respect for the teachings of the Lord, and no *fear* of the Lord – in either sense – *whatsoever*. I mean, let's think about this. The Ten Commandments are some of the most fundamental of human principles, of enormous importance in both Judaism and Christianity, and respected in Islam. Yet there is a tremendous amount of *idolatry* in our culture today ... a tremendous amount of *wrongful use of the name of the Lord* (the words "God" and "Jesus" are both *very commonly* used in the form of expletives) ... a tremendous amount of *murder* ... a tremendous amount of *adultery* ... a tremendous amount of *theft* ... and a tremendous amount of *false witness* ... just to name a few. Indeed, I would say that politics in our country have been filled with a tremendous amount of false witness of late, in the form of outright lies, misleading information, and misrepresentation of what the other party is actually saying. The amount of misinformation that shows up in campaign ads is astonishing. I have found myself fact-checking some of the fliers that have been showing up in my mailbox. Some of them are downright *appalling*. Some of the ads and flyers contain *digitally manipulated pictures* of members of the opposing party. People are deliberately misrepresenting what people are *saying* or *doing* or what they *look* like – and they're getting *paid* to do so. Which means you have to be *really* careful with all those political ads; don't take *their* word for it; do some research and fact-checking *on your own*; figure out who's telling you *truth* and who's feeding you a pack of lies in a deceitful attempt to get you to vote for them. It also makes me wonder – *what has happened to integrity* in our country? Does it even *exist* anymore? Is there anyone with any sense of *honor* and *decency*? George Washington, in his Farewell Address, said, "I hold the maxim no less applicable to public than to private affairs, that *honesty* is the best policy." My oh my, how *far* we have fallen from that ideal, that value, that basic *principle*.

So what *really* concerns me, what *really* troubles me, when I look at the *massive* number of times the Ten Commandments are violated *every day*, is whether anybody even *cares* anymore. I mean, a few people do; you and I are here worshiping together today, and hopefully *we* do. But our society at large? I don't know. Monuments to the Ten Commandments still remain on the grounds of the State Capitols in Texas, Oklahoma, and Arkansas, but have been removed from several other public places. I understand the legal argument, but I do wonder – as Christianity continues to shrink in America – if the Ten Commandments are becoming more of a historical relic than a functioning law from the Lord.

Of course, there's another option. Christianity doesn't *have* to keep shrinking. We could actually go to some effort telling our friends and family members why we believe this faith matters. Telling people why we think Jesus is *important*. No, not just *important*, but also the *Lord of our life*. Sharing with people our *reverence* for almighty God. Inviting them to join a journey that leads to *joy*. What if we were to extend our arms wide, offering the world the bread of life and the cup of salvation?

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