

Mark W. Hanna
Roland Park Presbyterian Church
Ordinary 4 (Year B09)

Psalm 111
Mark 1: 21-28

Life-giving Fear

If you've been to London recently, you may have noticed that the very existence of God is being debated on the advertisement space on the side of city buses. Apparently it began when a Christian group purchased space on buses to advertise their website. The ads seemed fairly mild: a passage from the Bible and the web address. However, when Ariane Sherine, a British comedy writer, took the time to visit the web site, she was offended to learn that by this group's standards, she and most of her friends were going to "spend all eternity in torment." So she rallied her friends and others, raised a good bit of money and formed a group she named the "Atheist Bus Campaign." They purchased their own ad space on the sides of buses and put out their own message. It reads, "There's probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life."¹

It is interesting, if we think about it, that the thing that offended Ms. Sherine was not the mention of God or quoting of Scripture, but the tactic used by this Christian group: the use of fear of spending eternity in hell to promote belief in God.

It reminds me of a woman I talked to once. Upon finding out that I was a pastor she said something to the effect of, "Oh, yeah. I used to go to church."

"Used to," I inquired. "What happened?" "Oh, I am still a God fearing woman," she told me, "I'm just not too sure about his people."

¹ http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/07/world/europe/07london.html?_r=1&scp=1&sq=United%20Kingdom%20atheist&st=cse

The Psalmist tells us that “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.” That has never really sat well with me. If God is loving and gracious, what have we to fear? And what does fearing God have to do with wisdom? “Fear,” psychologists tell us, “is a wake-up call. It arouses awareness of danger; it puts us on high alert. Yet it can also do just the opposite, overwhelming us and diminishing our alertness.”² In other words, fear can be a positive or negative factor. Without fear, we would lose the ability to know when we are crossing over into dangerous territory. At the same time, if fear overtakes us, it can throw things out of proper perspective.

Fear is a major topic in the Bible. It is mentioned no fewer than 300 times. In most cases, the message is one of reassurance: “Fear not” is what the angels often say. However, today’s message from the Psalmist seems to stand in stark contrast: “Fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.” But what type of fear are we talking about here? Many scholars prefer the translation of “reverence” as opposed to “fear.” Reverence for the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. And I think there is something to be said for that translation. It helps us to get past a purely negative impression of fear. After all, it is quite clear from the rest of the Psalm that the writer is not telling us of the importance of being scared of God. This is a Psalm of thanksgiving. It recounts the positive deeds God among the people. God is gracious and merciful. God’s ways are just. God has blessed the people with redemption. Does this sound like a God we need to fear? Does this sound like a God we need to worry about or that would stand in the way of us enjoying our life? Not to me it doesn’t. So why does the Psalmist throw in this line about the fear of God being the beginning of wisdom?

² Peter L. Steinke, *Christian Century*, February 20, 2007, p 20.

Over the past decade or so a new version of the Gospel has become immensely popular. Even if you have not heard of it per se, I can almost guarantee that you are familiar with its message. It has become known as the prosperity Gospel, and its preachers have become so popular they fill arenas on Sunday mornings and write best-selling books on how to live the good life. Their basic message is this: God wants you to be healthy and prosperous. The way to health and prosperity is simple too: religion, specifically their version of Christianity. There's only one problem; it doesn't work that way, no matter how passionately someone preaches it or how badly we want to believe it. God does not reward or punish us based on our faith. Our faith is a gift that helps us to deal with the circumstances of our lives, whether good or bad. Yet, the prosperity Gospel draws people in with a simple, easy to understand world-view. It gives a sense of control over life that is false. I wonder, what Gospel are they reading?

In our Gospel lesson for today, Jesus isn't trying to sell easy answers. He simply teaches with authority. I mentioned last week how succinct the Gospel writer Mark is in his description and storytelling. Notice how in today's passage he doesn't even bother to tell us the content of Jesus' teaching. He just tells us his audience's reaction: they are astounded. And then, all of a sudden, into the story pops this man with an unclean spirit. Was he there already listening to Jesus? Had he just entered? Mark does not tell us. All he tells us is that he had an unclean spirit, which could mean mental illness, disease, or any other host of problem—in short, anything that could not be explained any other way. But Mark doesn't dwell on how the man came to be this way. He is only interested in the result: at the sight of Jesus, the unclean spirits become afraid and at his command, they leave this man.

If you are like me, your mind keeps coming back to this idea of unclean spirits and how to make sense of that, but Mark makes it fairly clear that that is not the point. The point is what this story reveals about Jesus. Jesus has power over the unclean spirits and he chooses to use his power, his authority to heal. Notice also what effect this power has on those who witness it. We often imagine that if we could only see a miracle ourselves, firsthand, it would produce unwavering faith in us. You know the old saying, "Seeing is believing." But notice the reaction of those who witness the healing. It produces not certainty of faith, but questioning and awe. They aren't quite sure what to make of it. In a sense, they are afraid.

You see, there are two sides to fear. There are the fears that paralyze us and prevent us from living in the awareness of God's kingdom and God's love, and then there is the life-giving side of fear, the fear we need to keep things in proper perspective. In a very real sense, it is this side of fear that gives us our best chance to make sense of and enjoy life as it is. When the Psalmist talks about the fear of God, it is this life-giving fear that is being talked about. In short it is the understanding of who is God and who is not. We are not God. The world is not designed for the sole purpose of your happiness or mine, no matter how much we wish it otherwise. We are not in charge of the world. God, the one who lovingly created all that is, is the only one who can speak or act with ultimate authority. That is the common theme of these two passages. And this is good news, for you, for me, for all of us. It is not a guarantee that everything will turn out the way we want. But it is a promise that no matter what happens, God is trustworthy; that in the end, God's ways are better than ours.

Yet, we still have such a tendency to make it all about us don't we? It is hard for us to see much beyond our experience of the world to know and understand that there are countless others out there who understand and experience the world differently than us. If something happens to us, good or bad, we want to make it all about us. We interpret it as being punished or rewarded. But the Psalmist reminds us that there is a bigger picture out there that we might not always be able to see. And remembering that we don't always see the big picture, far from making us anxious, can actually be quite a comfort. We don't have to be God. We don't have to have it all figured out. It is okay for us to struggle and mess up. We are limited. But in acknowledging our limits, we are also invited to remember that there is one who loves us completely, that can see the big picture, and that wants to free us from whatever may be plaguing us and preventing us from living in the full awareness of God's grace, whether it is our fear of failure, our fear of not measuring up, our fear of not being worthy or lovable, our fear of the unknown, our fear of those who are different from us, our fear of non-existence, our fear of not being in control. Not giving into these fears, not allowing them to overtake us and being willing to step out in faith and trust in God more than our own limited perspective, that is, the Psalmist tells us, just the very beginning of wisdom!

Let us pray: Bless us, O God, with a reverent, life-giving awareness of your grace and power. Help us to trust you more than anything else; that we can release our own fears; that we may be free to live faithful and joyful lives that honor and glorify you. Amen.