

“Should Our Sermons Scare You?”  
1 Corinthians 2:1-5; Psalm 111  
4<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Epiphany

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Westminster, Greenville  
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A number of years ago, at the Lyman Beecher Lectures at Yale Divinity School, the Rev. Dr. Tom Long told a story that’s been debated by church historians for decades, a story about the Reformer Martin Luther.

When Luther was 23 years old, he officiated as a priest over the Eucharist for the very first time.

To preside at your first communion in those days was a big deal. It was an event similar to a modern-day wedding celebration:  
lots of fanfare, family in town...

As was the custom, a celebration was planned for Luther, but Luther’s father Hans was one of the family members in attendance that day, and Hans was still brooding and angry that his son had entered the priesthood AGAINST his advice.

So Luther was a bit nervous on this festive occasion,  
and ultimately—while the service was not a disaster—  
it did not go as smoothly as Luther had hoped.

When Martin Luther started to say the prayer over the elements:

“Therefore, O most merciful Father...”  
he had a moment of PANIC, stage fright, if you will...  
and he forgot what came next.

At that moment, Luther tried to quit.  
He tried to walk away from the altar in the middle of the liturgy!

But there was someone there with him called the Prior.  
The Prior was there to help novices like Luther for just such a moment.

And the Prior gently pushed Luther back to the elements,  
and the moment was over.

Now...the debate about what happened comes about because of Luther's own interpretation of what happened. After all was said and done, Luther did NOT reflect back on that day and say, "Yeah, I just got a little nervous."

He described his stage-fright as an ENCOUNTER WITH THE DIVINE.

He said he had been "utterly stupefied" and "terror struck" by the notion that he was speaking to God.

"I thought to myself, 'With what tongue should I address such majesty...I'm dust and ashes...speaking to the living and eternal and true God!'"

Luther claimed that he was PARALYZED by his fear of the Lord!

Hundreds of years later, the psychologist Erik Erikson took a different view.

He said that the real problem was that Luther's father was there.  
And Luther was still nervous in front of his father,  
that he still had (to use modern vernacular)  
very DEEP ISSUES with his father—

and *that's* why he froze.<sup>1</sup>

What do you think?  
 How many of you think Luther was truly scared of God?  
 And how many of you think he got nervous because he was scared  
 of his dad?

Right.  
 Me too.

Now fear of the Lord may have been an acceptable answer back in Luther's day. But it strikes me that "fear of the Lord" is not really emphasized in Presbyterian churches in our day. And I'm glad about that!

It's not a good marketing strategy for a growing church.  
 Nor does it really align with our vision.  
 Welcome to Westminster!  
 A church of Open Minds Open Hearts.  
 And a church where you will be TERRIFIED of the Almighty!

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No, no, no...but that's our topic this morning.

As we continue our sermon series, "The Fabric of Faith," we are looking today at faith...as fear of the Lord.

Why?  
 Because even with our resistance to it, scripture says faith has something to do with it.

We heard it in our Psalm this morning:

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas G. Long, *Preaching from Memory to Hope*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009.

***“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom...”***

We heard it from the Apostle Paul, writing to the church in Corinth:

***“...I came to you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling...not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of... the power of God.”***

So what do we do with those passages?

Do we just ignore them as outdated modes of theological thinking?

Let me be the first to say that the obvious reason for shying away from faith as fear of the Lord...is that it conjures up images of fire and brimstone preachers. Theology that says you're either going to heaven or you're going to hell...and you better shape up or—to quote an old Seinfeld episode—it's NO SOUP FOR YOU!

The problem with that line of theology is that it's got more in common with Dante than it does with holy scripture...

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Perhaps the most common suggestion I've heard is to treat that phrase, “fear of the Lord,” as something closer AWE before God, REVERENCE in our relationship with the Almighty.

I remember a story that the Pulitzer prize-winning novelist Scott Momaday once told.

When Momaday was growing up, he was very close to his grandmother.

“My grandmother’s house had just two rooms,” he said.

“One room was the kitchen. After school I’d go by her house and to into the kitchen.

“If I’d had a good day, we ate jam and bread and laughed.

If I had a bad day, we ate jam and bread and cried.

She absorbed all my pain.”

He recalled how one day was running a little late.

He went into the kitchen.

He didn’t see his grandmother.

‘Grandma!’

No answer.

‘Grandma!’

No answer.

“The other room, into which I had never been, was where she slept. The door was ajar and I peeked in and pushed the door open a little bit to see. And I saw my grandmother at the foot of the bed, bowing and having her evening prayers.”

“It scared me to death. I have no right to be in this room.”

Fifty years later, Momaday said, “That was the formative influence of my life. Just two rooms. One where you eat and have fun, cry, laugh, take care of each other, embrace each other. And another one where you’re just silent before God.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> As told by Fred Craddock in his sermon “Does God Have Too Many Children?” in Fred B. Craddock, *The Collected Sermons of Fred B. Craddock*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011.

Now...I LIKE that image for “fear of the Lord.”

Maybe we should think of our faith as a house with two rooms.

In one room, there’s the IMMANENCE of God, the closeness of God—the God who lives with us in the kitchen! The God who laughs with us, who weeps with us, the God who is known to us in the relationships that mean the most to us...

And in the other room is the TRANSCENDENCE of God.  
A room that’s always set aside for REVERANCE, for mystery.  
A room where you can be silent before God.

It’s not a bad model for “fear of the Lord”—  
and yet, I wonder if there’s more to “fear of the Lord”  
than reverence and silence and awe...

Let me get at it this way.

The retired Episcopal priest, the Rev. Dr. Barabara Brown Taylor, once imagined what would happen if we started every worship service with...how shall I put it?

With something closer to FAIR WARNING.

How does worship around here begin?  
A pastor comes out and says:  
The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with you.  
You say: And also with you.

So far so good.  
What comes next? Do you remember?

Welcome to Westminster...please sign in on the ritual of friendship...is a way of trying to make everyone feel at home, allow everyone to get settled in...

What if we changed all that?

What if I said:

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.

And also with you.

So good to have you at Westminster to worship God.

And it's not just any God we worship.

We worship the God revealed to us in Jesus Christ.

So let me be brief and to the point.

The God we know in Jesus Christ is not in the business of protecting you from harm, and no amount of good behavior will keep you safe.

Instead, the God we know in Christ is in the business of restoring all us to life, which may involve some painful procedures. If you are willing to go through with it and the operation is successful, your life will not belong to you anymore...and the work that you're involved in around here just might cost you your reputation, your standing, your friends, your family, or even your life.<sup>3</sup>

Because that's what it cost Jesus!

How many of you think I should begin each worship service with THAT?

I'm not going to do it.

But I get what Barbara Brown Taylor was talking about.

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<sup>3</sup> Adapted from Barbara Brown Taylor's sermon, "In Weakness and Much Trembling," in Barbara Brown Taylor, *Teaching Sermons on Suffering: God in Pain*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998.

She was talking about the FEAR that's part of our faith.  
The fear in each of us when it comes to the gospel's promise.

Because what God promises...is not punishment.  
But change.  
God promises to change our lives.  
God promises to change us...so that our lives will look more and more like the life of Jesus.

And the Apostle Paul knew all about this.

"I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified."

That's what he told the church in Corinth.  
That's why he came to them in fear and trembling.  
Because Paul knew that living like Jesus lived,  
and loving like Jesus loved...  
THAT'S a scary thought.

Which one of us REALLY wants our life to end up looking like the life of Jesus?

Rejected because we're loving the wrong kinds of people.  
Crucified because we're challenging the wrong people.

Look, you know this.

Loving like Jesus loved...means loving not just your friends and your family, but also your critics, and your enemies and the neighbor who is driving you up the wall right now.

Loving like Jesus loved means letting go of your deepest wounds.  
And it means giving grace to those who caused those wounds.



It means befriending the forgotten, the friendless, and the poor.

It means turning the other cheek in a very violent world.

It means breaking bread with those who oppose you.

It means feeding and forgiving the very people who fail you.

It means striving not to be first, but to be last of all and servant of all.

And I don't about you, but there's something in me that's scared of the sacrifice that's demanded in all that...

I recall a couple I used to know.

They were members of the first church I served in Texas.

They had a daughter, and then they had a second daughter.

But something happened during the birth of the second daughter. A rare condition, her diaphragm would not automatically move to make her breathe.

So there was a lot of fear and worry,  
and a lot of expensive equipment,  
and a tracheotomy was required as well.

I remember the father coming before the Session, offering his faith reflections one evening maybe a year or two after his second daughter was born.

He said that most people approach him or his wife, and assume that the question that goes through their minds is this:

Why me?

Why couldn't our daughter have been born without all this?

He then said, that's NOT the question they ask themselves.  
He said the question that he and his wife ask is slightly different.  
It's "Why NOT me?"

After all, they had the resources to handle this child,  
to care for their child,  
to give their child the love that child  
would need throughout her life...

### **Why NOT me?**

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It is a question that has haunted me for 25 years.

Because when it comes to God's promise to change me,  
God's promise to make our lives more like the life of Jesus,  
I'll come clean: on my most days, I want to chicken out!

I want to say:  
God, you've got the wrong person.  
I don't have the stomach for all that stuff about sacrifice, servant of  
all and last of all...

When my day is done, I don't want the cross!  
I want to lie on my couch and watch Netflix.

God...go find someone else.  
Go choose someone else.  
Don't choose me.  
Why me?

But just when I'm ready to run, I hear that elder's voice in my head  
and in my heart.

Why not me?

Why not you...and why not me?

Why not be a church full of people who freely ADMIT our fears  
of how a crucified and risen Lord

could really mess with our lives...

AND THEN...we follow that same Lord,

going forward together, in faith?

Amen.