

Hebrew Scriptures

Our lesson from the Hebrew Scriptures is the familiar story of Moses receiving and transmitting to God's People the Law, or at least that portion of it that has come to be called "The Ten Commandments." At the end of the reading are verses 19 and 20 of Exodus Chapter 20:

When all the people witnessed the thunder and lightning, the sound of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking, they were afraid and trembled and stood at a distance, and said to Moses, "You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, or we will die." Moses said to the people, "Do not be afraid; for God has come only to test you and to put the fear of him upon you so that you do not sin." (Exodus 20:19-20)

Moses, in v. 20, seems to be contradicting himself. "Don't be afraid, God has only come to put fear upon you." Huh? The contradiction only shows up in English translation, however, for in the Hebrew there are two different words used. Both are translated as fear: *Yaré* which is better translated as "terror", and *yiru* which is better translated as "reverence".

When Moses is quoted as saying, "Don't be afraid" he is referring to terror.

In Frank Herbert's classic science fiction novel **Dune**, the main character Paul Atreides is taught a Litany Against Fear by his mother, a former member of a women's religious order. The Litany Against Fear says:

I must not fear.

Fear is the mind-killer.

Fear is the little-death that brings total obliteration.

I will face my fear.

I will permit it to pass over me and through me.

And when it has gone past I will turn the inner eye to see its path.

Where the fear has gone there will be nothing.

Only I will remain.

"Fear is the mind killer; fear is the little death that brings total obliteration." This is the first kind of fear we find in this passage from Exodus; this is what Moses tells God's People to let go of, the terror that prevents us from doing many things.

I have a terrible fear of heights and it does prevent me from doing many things. And I

admit that usually, I give into it. But I know that I can let go of it. On our second trip to Ireland in 2007, Evie and I visited Inish Mor, one of the Aran Islands. On Inish Mor is the paleolithic fortress called "Dún Aonghusa" . It sits on a cliff 300 feet above the Atlantic Ocean. The cliff is beyond "sheer" -- the rock face actually angles back under you as stand at the edge. There is no guard rail, no fence ... nothing between you and that 300 foot drop. I walked out to that cliff edge, to about six feet from the edge -- I was scared silly, but I wasn't going to let my fear control me.

I suppose everyone has a fear of something -- it may be one of the dramatic psychological fears, fear of heights, fear of snakes, fear of spiders, fear of the number 13 ... or it could be (and usually is) something less tangible: fear of being alone sometime in the future, fear of not having enough, fear of changes in the world. These fears, dramatic and substantive, or vague and intangible, all fall into the category of the first type of fear, the paralyzing terror that God wants us to turn loose of. "Don't be afraid" means don't let your fear control you.

When Franklin Delano Roosevelt was sworn in as President for the first time in 1932, almost the first thing he said in his inaugural address became a famous catchphrase: "Let me assert my firm belief that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself — nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance." This is not only a political statement, it is a theological one.

The only thing we have to fear is fear itself, and over and over again in Holy Scripture, we are told to let it go, to eschew the sort of fear which paralyzes us:

Here in Exodus, Moses tells the People of God, "Do not be afraid." But from the very beginning, this has been God's word to his people. In Genesis, when forming his covenant with Abram: "The word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision, 'Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.'" (Gen. 15:1)

If you search the scriptures, you will find that the words, spoken by prophets on behalf of God to God's people, "Do not be afraid" are found there 72 times!

Do not be afraid. And in each of those 72 times, the reason we can let go of that paralyzing fear is underscored, but it is nowhere said better than in the Letter to the Hebrews: "We can say with confidence, 'The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can anyone do to

me?" (Heb. 13:6)

The second sort of fear in v. 20 of ch. 20 of Exodus, "the fear of the Lord," isn't fear in our modern understanding of the word at all! It is awe and reverence. It is respect. It is even love.

As we read through Scripture, we find that this "fear of Yahweh" is manifested in keeping God's commandments, walking in God's ways, doing God's will, avoiding sin. Scripture calls it "true wisdom" and assures us that it gives life and blessedness, sufficiency, God's friendship, protection, deliverance, and forgiveness.

In the Book of Ecclesiasticus (Ben Sirach), we read:

The fear of the Lord brings honour and pride, cheerfulness and a garland of joy. The fear of the Lord gladdens the heart; it brings cheerfulness and joy and long life. Whoever fears the Lord will be prosperous at the last; blessings will be his on the day of his death. The essence of wisdom is the fear of the Lord; she is created with the faithful in their mother's womb, she has built an everlasting home among men, and will keep faith with their descendants. Those who fear the Lord have their fill of wisdom; she gives them deep draughts of her wine. She stocks her home with all that the heart can desire and her storehouses with her produce. Wisdom's garland is the fear of the Lord, flowering with peace and health. She showers down knowledge and ability, and bestows high honour on those who hold fast to her. Wisdom is rooted in the fear of the Lord, and long life grows on her branches. Unjust rage can never be excused; when anger tips the scale it is a man's downfall. Until the night time comes, a patient man restrains himself, and afterwards cheerfulness breaks through again; until the right moment he keeps his thoughts to himself, and later his good sense is on everyone's lips. In wisdom's store are wise proverbs, but godliness is detestable to a sinner. If you long for wisdom, keep the commandments, and the Lord will give it you in plenty. For the fear of the Lord is wisdom and discipline; fidelity and gentleness are his delight. (Ecclus. 1:11-27)

The Psalter contains numerous instances of such descriptions of the "fear of the Lord." Turn with me to the Psalms in **The Book of Common Prayer** and let's read a few together:

Psalm 25 (BCP 615)

- 11 Who are they who fear the LORD? *
he will teach them the way that they should choose.
- 12 They shall dwell in prosperity, *
and their offspring shall inherit the land.

Psalm 34 (BCP 628)

- 7 The angel of the LORD encompasses those who fear him, *
and he will deliver them.
- 8 Taste and see that the LORD is good; *
happy are they who trust in him!
- 9 Fear the LORD, you that are his saints, *
for those who fear him lack nothing.

Psalm 85 (BCP 709)

- 9 Truly, his salvation is very near to those who fear him, *
that his glory may dwell in our land.
- 10 Mercy and truth have met together; *
righteousness and peace have kissed each other.
- 11 Truth shall spring up from the earth, *
and righteousness shall look down from heaven.
- 12 The LORD will indeed grant prosperity, *
and our land will yield its increase.

Psalms 128 (BCP 783)

- 1 Happy are they all who fear the LORD, *
and who follow in his ways!
- 2 You shall eat the fruit of your labor; *
happiness and prosperity shall be yours.

So then there is "fear" and there is the "fear of the Lord." One is destructive, the other brings life and prosperity.

The Gospel Lesson

In today's reading from the Gospel according to St. Matthew, we heard the familiar story of the Jesus relating the parable of the vineyard, the story in which the landlord sends a servant to collect the rent he is due. Instead of paying the rent, the tenants kill the servant. So the landlord sends another servant, and the tenants kill him, too. Finally, he sends his son ... and what do the tenants do? They kill him, as well.

Now, of course, we know what this story is all about, what the point of the parable is, because Matthew tells us: it is about the chief priests and the Pharisees rejecting Jesus. But why do they do so? Why do the Jewish authorities reject Jesus? Why do the tenants in the story kill the messengers and finally the heir? Well, Matthew tells us that too ... out of fear. Because they have failed to heed all of that Scripture we have just been looking at, all of those admonitions from God to not be afraid.

Fear, that first sort mentioned in our Exodus lesson, produces all sorts of bad stuff. Fear can manifest itself as hatred, jealousy, envy, prejudice, resentment, anger, loneliness, and a hoard of other dysfunctions; fear produces lives full of despair, unhappiness, misery, discontent, dread, and suffering. Fear leads either to paralysis and inaction, or to violence and inappropriate action. That's why the tenants killed the servants and killed the Son. Fear of what the future might hold led in the parable to greed, to violence, to death.

And the truth of it is that there's no need for it at all. "All we have to fear is fear itself." But, "We can say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can anyone do to me?"

Or as a famous bit of Scripture puts it:

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; *

for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me.

Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies;

thou annointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life,*
and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.

Say it with me, "God is with me; I will not be afraid."

Say it again, "God is with me; I will not be afraid."