

Pastor Jonna Bohigian
Light to Fear God
Psalm 111

The summer of 2009, I returned home from teaching English in the Czech Republic. It was the middle of the Great Recession, and *not* an ideal time to return to the States to find work. I had my undergraduate degree and had applied to nearly 100 jobs, and was coming up with *nothing*. My work life was going nowhere, and my social life was almost nonexistent. My friends had either moved out of the area or had gotten married, with little time for friendships. I had been shaped by my time abroad, but wasn't sure what that meant now that I was back. I had to start over. *Again*.

I felt deeply alone, and couldn't seem to find God *anywhere*. I *cried out* to God, and all I felt was emptiness. A familiar feeling of depression began to creep in, and I knew that if I didn't take steps in the opposite direction, I would fall into a dark, familiar hole.

I called my American roommate, Laura, (picture) who was still living in the Czech Republic. I described to her the darkness and near despair that I felt, alone and lost, and worst of all, unable to find God. My wise roommate responded, "When you can't find God, listen to the stories of those who are seeing and experiencing God." And she proceeded to tell me a story of how *she* had recently experienced God.

Laura was wise beyond her years, and I *deeply* respected her. She knew that faith is *not* a solo journey, and she knew that God's character is understood and remembered *in community*.

In American society, it is tempting to think about faith as a *private* endeavor, because we live and breathe a predominantly individualistic culture. It seeps into our bones, and shapes

everything about us. Faith is then seen as something between Jesus and me. Faith, and the point of my life, become concerns for *my* happiness and *my* personal salvation.

When we begin to see this leak out from us, many of us are rightly *convicted*. We *know* there is something wrong when we claim to love God but only love those who are similar to us. We *know* there is something wrong when our thoughts have a lot of the word “my” in them – *my* truth, *my* future, *my* rights, *my* possessions. You and I *know* there is something wrong when we define God in our terms, saying, “My God wouldn’t do that,” or “My God is like this.”

We are *all* guilty of this inward focus in one way or another. We *want* to know God on our own and we want to then *control* how God works. This is precisely *why* we need one another and why we need Scripture, a truth which is outside ourselves.

In Psalm 111, we hear the voice of someone in the congregation, praising God with all their heart. They sing praise to God for the great and *specific* ways God has acted in history.

It might not be easy for us to recognize the specific events that are alluded to in this psalm, but I’ll read verses 4 – 6 to see if any biblical events come to mind. (verses) “He causes us to remember His *wonderful works*. How *gracious* and *merciful* is our LORD! He gives *food* to those who fear Him; He always remembers His *covenant*. He has shown His *great power* to His people by giving them the *lands of other nations*.”

The psalmist praises God for saving his people from slavery in Egypt. He praises God for His mercy after they created and worshiped a golden calf, for feeding them manna and quail in the desert. He praises God for remembering His covenant given to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, that they would be His people and He would give them the land of Canaan.¹ He sings that God

¹ James L. Mays, *Interpretation: Psalms*, 356.

is powerful, just, gracious, compassionate, and faithful to His promises. He is unlike any other god, and He is worthy of praise and obedience.

The psalmist includes one more thought that is *critical* to this psalm – and you probably didn't miss it. It is mentioned in verses 5 and 10, and alluded to in verse 9. *Fear*. (verses) “He gives food to those who *fear* Him” (Ps 111:5). “What a holy, *awe-inspiring* (or fear-inspiring), name He has!” (Ps 111:9c). “*Fear* of the LORD is the foundation of true wisdom” (Ps 111:10a).

You likely *didn't* miss this word, because fear is *not* often a positive word we hear in relation to God. Often, when we think of the word “fear” in Scripture, we think of something that is encouraged *against*. “Fear *not*,” said the angel Gabriel to Mary (Lk 1:30). “Fear *not*,” said the angel to the shepherds (Lk 2:10). “Perfect love casts out fear,” says John (1 Jn 4:18).

But there are also Bible verses which *encourage* fear. (verses) Proverbs 1:7 “Fear of the LORD is the foundation of true knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and discipline.” Job 28:28 “And this is what He says to all humanity: ‘The fear of the LORD is true wisdom; to forsake evil is real understanding.’” Psalm 34:11 “Come, my children, and listen to me, and I will teach you to fear the LORD.”

In each of these verses, *fear* is *encouraged* and is *good*. And in each of these verses, the writer is encouraging not a *generalized* fear, but a *specific* fear, the *fear of the LORD*. And the fear of the LORD *leads* to something. The fear of the LORD leads to wisdom.

So what *is* the fear of the LORD? Let's begin with this Hebrew word for fear, *yira*. *Yira* means, (words) “Fear, terror, respect, reverence, and piety.”² *Fear, terror, respect, reverence, and piety*. Frankly, when I consider *my* approach to God, and the approach of *most Christians*

² <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lang/Lexicon/Lexicon.cfm?strongs=H3374&t=KJV>

that I know, the words “fear” and “terror” don’t come to mind. Words like “friendly,” “casual,” “impatient,” “hopeful,” and “dismissive” are sadly more honest words to describe our common approach to God. Why is that? *One* reason is that there is a disconnect between our lives and Scripture.

For some of us who have been Christians for a long time, the stories of Scripture seem far-removed from us and just that – *stories*. We hear the story of the exodus, how God saved His people from slavery, and overlook how *many* died who opposed the Hebrews. We hear the story of King David, a man after God’s own heart (Acts 13:22), and a deeply *human* man. We remember that God forgave him, but quickly forget that David lost his son because of his sin. We hear the story of Jesus clearing out the temple, calling it a den of robbers. We feel victorious and cheer Jesus on, and forget that we are *not* Jesus in the story; we are in danger of being the *antagonists*, the religious people who used religion for personal gain and power.

These stories seem disconnected from our lives for a few reasons, at least. One, we don’t see how we fit into the story. Two, it is by no means simple to recognize a cause and effect to all of the events of our lives, as do some of the Scripture stories. Three, Scripture tells us that “God is love” (1 Jn 4:8), (pause) and many of us have created our own understanding of what *love* means. For example, we may think, *God is love, so He wouldn’t allow me to suffer*. Scripture tells us that God loved the world so much, that He gave His only Son to suffer and die. God *does not* promise that you or I will be exempt from suffering. Another example, *God is love, so it doesn’t matter what I do*. Scripture never says that. It instead speaks of the *importance* of obedience to God, the *importance* of God’s people acting justly and caring for those who are lowly-esteemed in society, the marginalized and forgotten.

So what's the point? Is the point of this a sermon to cause you to feel badly about yourself and to encourage a fall into a downward spiral of self-loathing? No. Shame does not accomplish *anything* good. But a recognition of our *guilt*, our sin, how we have fallen short? Absolutely. You and I and everyone else, are *guilty*, and fall short of the glory of God (Rom 3:23). A recognition of our sinfulness in the light of God's goodness is what Scripture gets at when it says, "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom" (Ps 111:10a).

Lutheran theologian, Alvin Rogness, said it well. (quote) "I must never cease to tremble before [God's] judgment. I must never cease to rest in the overarching mercy of His love. If I lose either, I lose God."³ *I must never cease to tremble before [God's] judgment. I must never cease to rest in the overarching mercy of His love. If I lose either, I lose God.*

You and I are *desperate* for the light of God to shine on us, to reveal to us who *we* truly are and who *God* truly is. We are *desperate* to know the truth, to have wisdom. We have experienced incredible destruction and division and have experienced it in our own hearts. We are *desperate* for God to heal us, to make us new, and to cause our hearts to spring forth obedience and praise!

"Praise the LORD! I will thank the LORD with all my heart as I meet with His godly people. How amazing are the deeds of the LORD! All who delight in Him should ponder them. Everything He does reveals His glory and majesty. His righteousness never fails. All He does is just and good, and all His commandments are trustworthy...to be obeyed faithfully and with integrity...What a holy, awe-inspiring name He has! Fear of the LORD is the foundation of true

³ Alvin Rogness, *Signs of Hope in the Thunder of Spring*, quoted in the *Lutheran Standard*, 6-7-77, page 35.

wisdom. All who obey His commandments will grow in wisdom. Praise Him forever!" (Ps 111:1
– 3, 7, 8b, 9c – 10). Amen and amen!