

When my mother was a girl on the farm in Edgefield, she was out one day doing some work in the pasture. She was there walking with John Henry, a man who had worked many years for my family. On this particular day, Mom came across a large snake, sunning itself in the corner of the pasture, and this was a huge problem. You see, my mother suffers from acute ophiophobia, the fear of snakes. So, her natural reaction was to turn away from the snake and run as fast as she could back toward the safety of the house. But, my mother had scarcely run 20 feet before she glimpsed John Henry streaking by her left shoulder. When mom arrived at the house John Henry, who was standing there panting on the front porch asked her, “Miss Gladys, what are we running from?” You see, John Henry did not know the root cause of my mother’s fear that day, but he certainly had sufficient respect for my mother to know that if she were running from something, then he’d best be running as well – and, to be safe, running maybe just a tad faster than my Mom! 😊

That kind of fear is central to the message for today. The collect is a prayer that God will give us a perpetual fear of his holy name. In the Gospel passage from this morning, Our Lord advises us to fear the God who can destroy our body and condemn our soul to Hell. The Bible’s Wisdom Books repeatedly tell us that “Fear of the Lord is the beginning of all wisdom.” (See Ps.111:10; Prov.1:7, 9:10) What can this mean for you and me, this ‘fear of The Lord’?

In today’s Gospel reading, the Greek word which Mathew uses to describe this emotion of fear is *Fobeeoh* from which we get our various irrational fears we call “phobias.” That much is probably clear to the casual reader of the Bible. But things start to get really interesting when you go onto explore the other places in the New Testament where this Greek word *Fobeeoh* is used. In Luke Chapter 18 with the parable of the persistent widow we meet a wicked judge who has no fear of God and therefore feels no compunction to practice justice. (See Lk.18:1-5) So here we gain the understanding that this fear of The Lord is in some way linked to a commitment to the justice. In Acts Chapter 10, we meet the Centurion Cornelius who does fear God, and we are told that this Roman officer is both devout and kind. (See Acts 10:1-4) Hmm...so this fear of The Lord is necessarily part and parcel of what it means to be a humble servant of the Lord, devoted to God and charitable to our fellow man. The link between fear of The Lord and humbleness in service is born out in Paul’s writings too. In Colossians Chapter 3, Paul instructs those serving in a household to obey their masters sincerely and whole-heartedly in the same way that they fear The Lord (See Col.3:22). And there’s that Greek word *Fobeeoh* again, and once more we see that a sincere fearing of The Lord is at the very core of what it means to be a humble servant who devotes himself to his work in all sincerity.



But the most well-known, the most glorious use of this word in the New Testament must be at the beginning of Luke’s Gospel. When Mary is greeted by her cousin Elizabeth who confirms what the Angel Gabriel has said regarding the miraculous child growing in her womb, Mary bursts into ecstatic praise in her beautiful *Magnificat* with the words “My soul does glorify the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my savior...for the mighty one has done great things for me and holy is His name, His mercy is on them that fear him.” (Lk.1:47, 49-50). And so we come to understand that this fear in the Lord is inextricably linked to God’s infinite mercy.

Loving justice, and practicing mercy, and persisting in acts of heart-felt humility; that's all wrapped up in fearing The Lord. My goodness, but what a big word is this kind of fear, when we speak of "fearing The Lord!" And, you may not have noticed it, but this kind of fear – the fear of The Lord has nothing to do with worry. Those anxious, worrying states of mind are as far removed from fearing The Lord as you can possibly get. In fact, Jesus instructs us in this passage NOT to be afraid, not in any earthly sense. He points out how the Creator God loves every creature, even the sparrows that are sold in the market place. So how very much more does he love you? Even the tresses of your hair that fall on the barber-shop floor are precious in God's sight. (See Mt.10:30-31) Think about that! How much this Creator God must love his children!!

And God loves *all* his children, you know. That's one of the lessons of the beautiful Old Testament story from Genesis 21 that we heard this morning. Yes, God has selected Abraham and his descendants to receive a special blessing, and to bless the rest of God's children through the example of Abraham's faith. But did you notice how God still demonstrated his love for the other children in this story? We all experience moments of abandonment in this life, just like Hagar experienced when Abraham sent her out into the wilderness of Beer-sheba. But God never abandons any of His children. In our rebellious pride and selfishness we sometimes wander away from God's love, and every time we do that we break The Father's heart. But God is always there to receive and to aid us, just like He protected Hagar and Ishmael in this account from Genesis of this morning. (See Gen.21:14-21)

In the Psalter, Psalm 86 is surely similar to what Hagar must have prayed when she sat a bowshot's distance from her crying child in the burning desert sand after the water had run out. We are told that she sat there sobbing, in absolute desperation as she prayed to God. (See Gen.21:16-17) And sooner or later we all come to moments of absolute desperation when our situation seems completely hopeless. It is in those moments of sobbing torment that we turn to God, the only force in the universe whose awesome might alone can save us from impending ruin. But isn't it curious that for the rest of our time, we would much rather not have to look upon or talk to this type of awe-inspiring, mighty, fearsome God. We would, as C.S. Lewis says, much rather have not Our Father who art in heaven, but rather our sweet, somewhat doddering Grand-daddy in heaven who is always ready to spoil us with too much of a good thing – *that's* the kind of God that we would create for ourselves. It seems that in our times of desperation, we are quite willing to turn to the all-powerful creator God, just as long as we are not required to recognize his fearsome persona during the rest of the time when the waters of our lives are calm and the sun is bright. No, we're not really comfortable about fearing God, are we? We would much rather not go there.

Paul is very fond of reminding us that we were bought with a price. (See 1Cor.6:19-20, 7:23) And all you have to do to understand the price that was paid for you and me – all that you need do to understand what God was willing to give in ransom for his precious children is to look at that cross up there on our altar and think of the blood that flowed down it one day on a certain hillside. And all He requires from you and me to receive that pardon and safe passage to His Kingdom, all we need do to truly understand the height, and depth, and timeless embrace of God is to fear The Lord. And how do we do that? For me, the answer to that question is best summarized by the prophet Micah: "With what shall I come before the LORD, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?" He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?" (See Micah 6:6-8) That's all that's required of us, to truly fear The Lord. Amen. JWB+ 6/18/14