

The Fear of the Lord

Psalm 33:8-22; 1 John 4:16-19

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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Today marks the beginning of our 2025 Faith Questions sermon series, the series where your questions set the preaching agenda from the time roughly between Epiphany (which was Monday) and the first Sunday of Lent (which this year is March 9).

This is the seventh year that we have done this. I always like to begin these series with some introductory comments and caveats.

First, I want to state the obvious after seven years of doing this series. I think questions are important in the life of faith.

Again, probably obvious. Why else have a series on questions of faith if I didn't think questions were important and valuable? But it's worth stating explicitly.

I suspect many of us have been in church contexts where this wasn't the case. Where questions may have been viewed with some suspicion, where doubts were perhaps kept secret, where too much questioning was a sign of weak faith.

I've always liked questions. Questions are how we move forward. They can be like a little pebble in your shoe, something that demands attention or it's going to get painful! Sometimes a good question is as good as (or better than) a good answer.

Now, I hasten to add that when it comes to the life of faith, not every question can be answered in a comprehensive way that fully and finally resolves the matter.

Sometimes, we must be content with mysteries, points at which the human mind and reason can go no further.

This is not some kind of deficiency of faith; it simply reflects that we are often dealing with matters far bigger than what our minds can comprehend, and some humility is appropriate to the task.

This is true of every worldview, every ideology, every religion. Even the most hardened atheist or non-committal agnostic steps beyond what can be proved every day, whether they realize it or not.

Ultimately, the most important things to us as human beings—the things that really *matter*, our conceptions of what is good, true, and beautiful—lie beyond the realm of proof and certainty.

But we can hopefully come to some more fruitful (or helpful) ways of thinking about things.

Second, a word about questions as the basis for a sermon series.

I do at times feel awkward about locating these questions in the contexts of sermons and in public worship. There is a sense in which these *might* be more appropriate in a small group context.

But I also think that public worship can be a good place for questions. For starters, it communicates that questions are welcome in our community—not just in January and February, but throughout the year.

It's ok to say, "that passage has always baffled me" or "what on earth is going on with that?" or "what do we even mean when we say x or y?"

Indeed, I not only think it's ok, but it's healthy. If we're not asking questions, we're not really engaged.

Some parts of the bible probably *should* baffle us! Some of the things Jesus said *should* make us scratch our heads. Sometimes the question of what faith requires of us in our particular time and place with our particular issues really *is* hard to figure out.

And I think it's good to surround all these questions with prayer, with community, with and with praise. There is a sense in which we are collectively lifted, even when we may be perplexed or frustrated or uncertain or not feeling particularly faithful.

Third, a word about timing. In the secular calendar, of course, the Faith Questions series more or less kicks off a new calendar year.

In the Christian calendar, our series takes place during the season of Epiphany, which began on Monday and stretches out until Ash Wednesday. This is a season for celebrating the light of Jesus Christ being spread to the Gentiles (us).

(Our visuals today reflect this and remind us that we are in the season of Epiphany!)

And I hope that this will be at least in part reflected in our Faith Questions series, that it won't just be about scratching intellectual itches (important as this is) but about pointing to the mystery and the hope of Jesus Christ.

I'm going to do my best to remember this throughout this year's Faith Questions series. Because I do believe that Jesus is always there, lurking around in all our best and hardest questions.

Lastly, I'm going to keep the source of each question anonymous. This isn't because any of them specifically asked me to, I just think it's probably the wisest strategy.

On to today's question.

This Advent, we focused on the first chapter of Luke, the story leading up to the birth of Jesus. Twice, the angel Gabriel appeared, to Zechariah and to Mary. Both times his visit brought surprising news of an unlikely birth. Both times this news was preceded by four words: **Do not be afraid.**

I drew attention to these words throughout Advent. I referred to other parts of the bible where these words show up (I counted eighty-one in the NIV translation). I even used these words as the title and theme of one of my Advent sermons.

"Ok," this morning's questioner said. "But what about the parts of the bible that talk about 'the fear of the Lord?' **How does 'Do not be afraid' fit with 'the fear of the Lord?'**"

Good question. Perhaps you were wondering this even as we heard two very different passages of Scripture read this morning!

There is a relatively simple response and a deeper one. The first has to do with some of the limitations of language, the second with far weightier matters of who we think God is. These two aspects of the question will kind of weave together throughout my sermon.

Let's start with the first. The English word "fear" (at least how it is most often used) is perhaps an inadequate translation for the Hebrew word that is often used in the phrase, "the fear of the Lord."

The Hebrew word *can* mean "be afraid." But it can also mean "to stand in awe of" or to "reverence, honour, respect" or "to cause astonishment and awe."

Some translations of our Psalm this morning use the word "awe" or "honour" instead of "fear" here (e.g., the Common English Bible, which is the translation of the forthcoming Anabaptist Bible to commemorate the 500th anniversary of Anabaptism this year).

I think the broad meaning behind the phrase "the fear of the Lord" is the "otherness" or the transcendence of God. So, when you hear or read this phrase, don't think "terror," think "awe" or "reverence."

On this understanding, I wonder if perhaps in our time we could use a bit more of "the fear of the Lord."

According to many sociologists of the twenty first century West, most people's default religion is what's referred to as Moral Therapeutic Deism.

1. God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other.
2. The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself.
3. God does not need to be particularly involved in one's life except when God is needed to resolve a problem or to affirm one's sense of self.

This is how many people—even many Christians—think about God. On this view, God is like a therapist in the sky, a nice warm divine hug.

And while I would never want to deny the truth that God does indeed wrap us up in his loving embrace, this doesn't tell nearly enough of the story.

God is also the shattering, transcendent force that spoke life into existence, the one who upholds the universe, the one in whom we live and move and have our being. The one to whom we will one day give an account of our lives.

As one article I recently read put it:

We are not the center of the story, the point of the story, or the writers of the story—we are *participants* in the story that God has written and is writing.¹

We would do well to remember this.

God is not a tool to be used to achieve our best life (God’s vision for what our “best life” looks like might at times clash with our own!). God is not whoever we happen to think he is or prefer him to be. God is not synonymous with “the universe” or “energy” or “spirituality” or any of the other terms we use to avoid a God who might make a claim upon us.

“The fear of the Lord” is one of the tools we are given in Scripture to be reminded of the otherness and the particularity of God.

It reminds us that God is God, and we are not.

So, that’s the language part (with a bit of theology). I now want to move to what I think is the weightier part of this question.

Many people are afraid of God.

The person who asked this question spoke of people they knew for whom this was the case. I suspect many of us have had moments in our own lives where God seemed fearful to us, whether because of how parts of Scripture portray him or what he allows in the world and in our lives.

Throughout Christian history, fear has often featured prominently in faith. Many medieval portrayals of the fiery torments that awaited unrepentant sinners seemed to be almost

¹ https://mereorthodoxy.com/the-christian-in-a-therapeutic-age?utm_source=pocket_shared

trying to outdo themselves in creating an image of a terrifying God who demanded compliance.

And anyone who grew up in the evangelical world will probably have, at some point, come across an enthusiastic preacher, often at a funeral, using the threat of hell to attempt to produce conversions.

It's an effective strategy, at least on a superficial level. It works in producing at least a *kind* of response, although likely not the response God desires (as we'll see).

But now that I have told you to think "awe and reverence" and not "terror," I am also going to say that fear (properly understood) in the context of faith isn't entirely inappropriate.

Part of an honest Christian understanding of who we are has always involved an acknowledgement that we are sinners who fall short of what we were created to be and to do.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer puts it well in a little collection of Advent readings called *God is in the Manger*:

We have become so accustomed to the idea of divine love and of God's coming at Christmas that we no longer feel the shiver of fear that God's coming should arouse in us. We are indifferent to the message, taking only the pleasant and agreeable out of it and forgetting the serious aspect, **that the God of the world draws near to the people of our little earth and lays claim to us.**²

That "lays claim to us" part is one that we postmodern individualists can often struggle with, isn't it?

So, there is a sense in which a *kind* of fear is appropriate when we honestly face the reality of who we are.

Sometimes, we feel judged because we should, because this is the appropriate emotional response to the ways in which we are living our lives.

But we must always ask, what *kind* of fear?

² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *God is in the Manger: Reflections on Advent and Christmas*, trans. O.C. Dean, Jr., ed. Jana Riess (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 8.

Is it terror in the face of a mean and vengeful God who is looking for an excuse to punish? Or is it more of a sense of dread at the realization that that we have been misspending our days, that we have been failing to pursue what we were created to be?

Is it like the fear of the schoolyard bully who is looking for someone to pick on? Or is it the kind of sinking fear that you have when, as a kid, you hear your parents say something like, “I’m disappointed in you?”

Fear can be useful, in some cases, for motivating correct behaviour. Any parent knows this.

Sometimes a small child must simply be afraid of getting burned to stay away from a hot stove. Sometimes a teenager needs a healthy dose of fear of consequences to avoid risky behaviours.

But we hope that the human journey is a growing out of this stage. We hope that children will eventually come to do what is right and good and true *because* it is right and good and true, not simply because they’re afraid of bad consequences.

And it’s to be hoped that the life of faith will exhibit a similar trajectory—that it will be a movement beyond obedience rooted in fear to love anchored in love.

This brings us to our passage from 1 John 4:16-19. I want to read it again:

God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them. This is how love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment: In this world we are like Jesus. **There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.**

We love because he first loved us.

Perfect love drives out fear.

If we are plagued by fear of punishment from a terrifying God, perhaps it simply means that we have some maturing to do, some repenting and reorienting to do, some loving to do. Some receiving of love to do.

God is love. I believe there are no three truer words in the English language than these.

Every other word we use about in reference to God, whether it's "power" or "transcendence" or "justice" or "judgment" or "forgiveness" or any other word we find in Scripture, takes its place under and is redefined by the only word that is used to describe God's very identity: "love."

Those other words refer to what God *does*. Love refers to who God *is*.

If this is who God is, then we can indeed live our lives not being dominated by the fear of punishment, but secure in the knowledge that the God who inspires our awe and reverence is also the God who loves us in the truest and deepest sense of that word and is ever beckoning us deeper into that love.

I want to close with a quote I've used before. It's from a book by Dale Allison called *Night Comes*. It's a quote that talks about the question that I think nearly every important question of theology comes back to on some level: "What is God like?":

I was once called to jury duty. When I walked into the courtroom and saw the defense attorney, I smiled and waved. He waved and smiled back. He was a friend, and my family's lawyer. The judge quickly sent me home. There was to be no favoritism in his courtroom.

The divine court, on a Christian view, must be radically different. For the judge isn't the detached enforcer of some inflexible law. The judge is rather the author of the parable of the Prodigal Son; and as shepherd and savior, as advocate and physician, **he's wildly biased in favor of all the defendants.**³

Yes, I believe he is.

God is transcendent, majestic, holy. God is the voice howling out of the whirlwind. God is the Sovereign Creator of all that is, the Alpha and the Omega. The final Judge who will ultimately do what is just.

³ Dale C. Allison, Jr., *Night Comes: Death, Imagination, and the Last Things* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016), 67.

God is also Emmanuel. God *with* us. The Friend of Sinners. The Great Physician who has come not for the healthy but the sick. The Father at the gate, longing for his child to return, graciously willing to prodigally pardon.

These things are all true.

So, fear the Lord.

And do not be afraid.

Amen.

