

^{139:1} O LORD, you have searched me and known me! ² You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from afar. ³ You search out my path and my lying down and are acquainted with all my ways.

⁴ Even before a word is on my tongue, behold, O LORD, you know it altogether. ⁵ You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me. ⁶ Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high; I cannot attain it.

¹³ For you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother's womb.

¹⁴ I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; my soul knows it very well. ¹⁵ My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth.

¹⁶ Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them.

¹⁷ How precious to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them! ¹⁸ If I would count them, they are more than the sand. I awake, and I am still with you.

. In last week's sermon, we danced with the question: When scripture is so powerfully clear as to the importance of Hospitality, then ***why is it that we don't really follow the scriptural exhortation to practice hospitality?*** **A:** ***We are more AFRAID of being assaulted unaware than we care about entertaining angels unaware. F.E.A.R. is the problem.***

And we also learned from scripture last week (1 John) that **LOVE** casts out **FEAR**.

Given all that, then it seems ludicrous that we could have a ***sermon title*** like today's: **God: Fear or Love?** I mean, ***if Love casts out fear, and if God is love, then how can we put God and Fear into the same side of the equation?***

But, believe it or not, some people do that very thing.

Part of it is simply related to **poor Bible translation**, e.g. ***"The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom."*** (Psalm 111:10) and ***"The fear of the Lord is the beginning of Knowledge."*** (Proverbs 1:7)

In passages such as this, the phrase ***"The fear of the Lord"*** is a **specific idiom** that is **NOT EQUAL** to "being afraid" + "God."

Think of it like this: In the sentence, "When the price of concert tickets nearly doubled, music fans ***voted with their feet*** and didn't go to the concerts," 21st century Americans would understand that this did ***NOT*** mean ***"People voting with their feet"*** are

a. using their feet to ***write on ballots*** **OR**

b. going to vote on foot instead of driving

Rather, we clearly understand that the meaning is that *people are using their actions to express their preferences.*ⁱ

“Fear of the Lord” is also an idiom. And the people of the time in which such expressions were put into the Bible would just as easily understand that the person is not nor should be not afraid of God, rather that God is awesome; people should be in awe of God’s love and power.

But I suspect that there has been, even as recently as in the personal history of people sitting in this congregation, a very unhealthy usage of religion that exploited this misunderstanding of “fear of the Lord.”

I spoke with one person, who is an active member of this Church, who is recovering from the toxic usage of religion practiced during her childhood. She told me of how her church experience growing up caused her to have recurring nightmares. In these nightmares, ***a bell would ring, and the God-man in a dark shroud would come looking for her, and she'd been taught that she had better hide. And just about the time when the God-man would be just about to get her, then she'd scream and wake up.***

Yes, surely, we can see how such a “fear of the Lord” was NOT the beginning of wisdom nor of knowledge – at least knowledge of any good type.

But such “fear” tactics were very helpful in getting people to toe the line, of giving people in church leadership much power over people who were afraid.

Such “fear” tactics have been unfortunately used by practitioners of fear based, **TOXIC RELIGION** for far too long.

If you look at the first 4 verses of Psalm 139, with a notion of a God that needs to be feared, then it is quite a scary thing. ***“You’d better watch out; you’d better not cry; this scary God is coming to get you, and there’s no place where you can hide, no place at all.***

However, when I read this psalm to folks on their death beds, or folks who are in a hospital bed facing difficult times ahead, and they have a notion of a God Who knows us and LOVES us and longs to DRAW/HUG/HOLD us to HIMSELF, then it is one of the great comforting influences available. **THIS God is an awesome God, in whom we can trust.**

The great illusion, which Christianity is meant to overcome is that of SEPARATENESS. The Bible calls that state of SEPARATENESS “SIN.”

However, for many people that little word SIN connotes NAUGHTY BEHAVIORS and UNWORTHINESS. But those are merely SYMPTOMS of the state of separation from God!

Psalm 139 merely tells us what the whole Bible tells us – from the God who lovingly created us humans in God’s own image, and who placed us into this wonderful Garden, and then who has been reaching out to try to show us the way, even in becoming human Himself, and dying to show us how much He loves us, all the way to the final chapter of the last book, where we see that God wins, and we are reunited with God in the Garden once more – all of it is about **GOD LOVES US** and **GOD WANTS TO RECONCILE US TO GOD**.

- There is **NO SURPRISING GOD**, Who *knows each word we speak before it even forms on our lips*.
- There is **NO GETTING AWAY FROM GOD**, Who *hems us in behind and before and is always present*.
- There is **NOTHING GOD DOES NOT KNOW ABOUT US**, and yet ... and yet: **GOD STILL LOVES US AND WANTS TO DRAW US CLOSER**.

The lesson of Psalm 139, indeed of the whole Bible, is one of AWAKENING, not one of ACCOMPLISHING. It’s about REALIZATION, and not PERFORMANCE, on our part.

You cannot GET there; you can only BE there.

How you think about GOD will pretty much determine how you think about YOURSELF and how you will SEE & TREAT other people.

I got a text message from a young mother in our Church, who told me about a conversation she overheard from her young (translate early school age) child. It went like this:

A friend was visiting the house. The small child said to the friend, ***“You would be welcome at our church. You don’t go to church anywhere, and you would be welcome.”*** Then the child turned to their mother and said, ***“Mama that’s what Monty said, right? Everyone is welcome.”***

Let me tell you: that’ll keep the preacher getting back into the pulpit, when he hears that the children are getting it.

Just think how it would be if we had a whole generation of Church growing up, believing, and sharing the news that ***not only is everyone welcome in Church, but God also loves everyone, and we don’t ever have to do anything to make ourselves acceptable to God; we already are.***

That’s what Christianity is all about. Jesus didn’t come to change God’s idea about our acceptability, but to change humans’ ideas about how acceptable we are to God.

Can you imagine it? I’m telling you: it would not only change the Church; it would change how we treat people in our towns, our country, and our world.

As one of the great theologians of the 20th century, **Karl Barth** was approaching the end of his career, and indeed his life, he was asked if it were possible to boil down all of the books he had written on theology to something simple. And he said, ***Oh yes. When you get through all of the big concepts, it really all boils down to what I learned as a child: Jesus loves me, this I know. For the Bible tells me so.***

When our image of God is true, our self-image also will be true.

If we could really believe that we don’t have to do anything to make God accept us, then we would accept ourselves as acceptable.

We could quit trying to make ourselves feel better by putting other people down. We could quit trying to make ourselves feel better by wearing the right mask. It’s like the Beaver’s Dad said: There’s nothing you can ever do that will make us quit loving you. If Beaver’s Dad, just think how much God.ⁱⁱ

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.

ⁱ <http://www.englishclub.com/ref/idiom-of-the-day.php>

ⁱⁱ The short skit before today's sermon:

NARRATOR (Robin): Leave It To The Beaver, starring,

Lida Widdecombe as May the dutiful wife who always wears pearls even when she is scrubbing the bathroom, ***[who enters bottom level, and exits after all introductions]***

Mark Stotler, as Mort, the wise father who always wears a suitcoat and tie even when he is reading the newspaper in the living room, which he spends most of his life doing, ***[who enters bottom level, and exits after all introductions]***

Jennifer Rhule as Molly, the sister who did not die in Vietnam nor become a police officer in LA, ***[who enters top level, and remains]***

and filling in for Scott Johnson, who went this weekend to be with his father at his death bed, is his understudy, Monty Brown starring as THE BEAVER, ***[who enters top level, and remains]***

NARRATOR (Robin) continues: **This week's episode: Beaver learns about BELOVEDNESS.**

[standing on the raised area of the chancel/choir level]

Beaver: Hey, Molly, you're older than me. Did we ever have any other brothers or sisters?

Molly: Geez, Beav. That's a stupid question. Of course not. Why do you ask such a dumb question?

Beaver: I was just wondering if Mom and Dad maybe killed a kid for doing something really bad.

Molly: Nah, they don't really kill kids, even if we might think they will. At least not since I was born. Come to think of it, I don't know if there were any kids before me. Anyway, you must have really messed up this time. What did you do?

Beaver: Well, you know how Dad told me not to buy a lizard from the pet store when we went to town last week?

Molly: You didn't?

Beaver: No, I didn't BUY one. But Lumpy had one that his parents wouldn't let him keep. So I traded my baseball glove to him for his lizard.

Molly: I don't think the issue was BUYING it, Beav. I think the issue was not having one in the house, where it might mess things up.

Beaver: Yeah, I kinda figured that out, Molly. Anyway, I was trying to take real good care of it, but somehow it escaped. And I'm afraid that maybe Mom and Dad will find it, before I do. And then they're going to KILL me.

[Mort and May enter on floor level/downstairs as Beaver and Molly back away toward the door from the choir loft beside the wheel chair lift, so as they cannot hear them]

May: Mort. We're so glad you're back home. Did you remember to bring salt water taffy for the children.

Mort: Salt Water Taffy for the children, and a pearl necklace for you. I put them into my dresser drawer to give everyone at dinner tonight. But we had a bit of a problem.

May: Problem? What kind of problem, Mort?

Mort: Well, it seems like a lizard got into my dresser drawer and ate some of the salt water taffy. Seems like salt water taffy is not good for lizards, and he conked over dead, right there in the box.

May: Well, I certainly didn't get a lizard while you were gone, Mort. What do you think happened?

Mort: You were not at the top of my suspect list, May. Let's ask the children

May ***[yelling, ladylike, up the "stairs"]***: Molly! Beaver! Come here, please.

[Molly & Beaver come back to stage center, "upstairs"]:

Molly: Here we are, Mom. Oh, good, Dad's back from his business trip.

Beaver: ***[in a sheepish, guilty as can be, voice]*** Hi, Mom. Hi, Dad.

May: Your Dad came back home, and brought you children some salt water taffy, just like he promised. But something happened to one of the boxes. A lizard got into it and ate itself to death on salt water taffy.

Mort: Children, I seem to remember that we had a discussion last weekend, when we made our weekly trip downtown to window shop and watch the traffic light changing, somebody saw a lizard in the pet store window. And I remember that I said that someone could not buy a lizard. Does anyone else remember that conversation?

Molly: I sure do, Dad. And I would never, ever disobey you.

May: Beaver?

Beaver: I didn't disobey you either, Dad.

May: Beaver?

Beaver: Well, I didn't BUY it. I traded away my baseball glove to Lumpy for a lizard his parents wouldn't let him keep. So I didn't actually BUY one.

May: Beaver Seaver! Do you really think you didn't disobey? Really!

Beaver: I guess I did disobey, kind of, Mom. *(in a dejected Eeyore voice)* Are you and Dad going to kill me?

Mort: No, Beaver. We will not kill you. There will be consequences. Now, you will get no salt water taffy, and when baseball season comes, you're not going to have a ball glove. But you need to remember this: **YOU BOTH ARE OUR BELOVED CHILDREN, AND THERE IS NOTHING THAT YOU OR MOLLY CAN EVER DO THAT WILL MAKE YOUR MOM AND ME STOP LOVING YOU. DON'T FORGET THAT.**

Beaver: Yes, sir. *(in a dejected Eeyore voice, and then perking up)* Thanks, Dad, for not killing me. And thanks for always loving me, even when I mess up.

May: OK. I think we all learned our lesson from this. Everyone, let's all go to the dinner table now and have a good family dinner. *Molly and Beaver come downstairs for a group hug, while narrator speaks.*

NARRATOR: Psalms 139 says: **You have searched me and known me. Even before a word is on my tongue, behold, O LORD, you know it altogether.** And Jesus said, in Luke 11:33: **"If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father"**

ALL EXIT and sermon begins.