

Fearful, But Not Afraid
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Deuteronomy 10:12-22
Mark 6:47-52

It was Franklin Delano Roosevelt in his first inaugural address who uttered the now famous line, “the only thing we have to fear is fear itself.” The year was 1933 and the country was in the depth of the Great Depression; President Roosevelt’s words were meant to be a beacon of hope and a call to action in a world where fear was prevalent. This speech was certainly not the first or the last time that fear would make an appearance in politics, and suffice to say fear itself has had a more prominent place in motivating the masses than President Roosevelt would have liked.

Fear is one of the great individual and communal motivators, for better or for worse. For example, it was Richard Nixon who said: “People react to fear, not love. They don’t teach that in Sunday school, but it’s true.”¹ Sunday schools were obviously doing something right in those days, and hopefully still are! It is true that it is part of human nature to react to fear, but there is a difference between reacting naturally to things that should make us afraid and using fear as a tool to motivate people to respond in a certain way.

Fear is often misused because people will react out of fear, and I do not mean just in political life. Unfortunately, religion and fear have a long history as well, and not all of it is positive. Being “god-fearing” is touted as virtue, and understood correctly it may not be a bad adjective to have attached to your character, but do we really mean “having reverence for God” when we describe someone as “god-fearing”? To my ears “god-fearing” and “reverent” do not mean the same thing. Self-declared “god fearing” people scare me, because I’m afraid they will try to motivate me through fear to be more God-fearing like them.

There is something divisive about god-fearing mentally; it expresses a kind of “us versus them” ideology. Bertrand Russell said “Collective fear stimulates herd instinct, and tends to produce ferocity toward those who are not regarded as members of the herd.” This statement seems as true for religion as any other realm of public life, but I do not want to be so suspicious or ferocious toward those who hold different beliefs from my own.

Using fear as a motivator in religious life is not good practice. But, in Christianity, our biblical texts can be confusing and seemingly contradictory about fear as a motivator, leaving us more susceptible to believe that there is much more to fear than fear itself. Furthermore, we oversimplify our scriptures and create two Gods, the God of the Old Testament who is wrathful and very much someone to be afraid of...or else!...and a God of the New Testament who is loving and kind and who would never think of motivating us through fear. This inaccurate understanding of our texts being divided into a “God to be feared” and a “God of love” is the beginning of trouble and if this misconception is not corrected it leads quickly to bigger theological problems.

Let’s take the two passages we heard today as examples. It seems at first as if this passage from Mark and the passage from Deuteronomy are speaking in contrast to each other. There are numerous other examples in scripture that parallel both of these texts, but the basic message is on the one hand “fear the Lord your God” and on the other hand, when the presence of God is revealed, “do not be afraid.” So then are we to be fearful, but not afraid?

Looking more closely at Deuteronomy 10, twice we are told to “fear the Lord our God.” The first time is in verse 12, where we are asked that wonderful rhetorical question: “What does the Lord your God require of you?” and here we are told directly that what is required is “Only to fear the Lord your God, to walk in God’s ways, to love God, and to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and mind and soul.” The second time is in verse 20, where after being reminded to love the stranger, we are told, “You shall fear the Lord your God; God alone you shall worship, to God you shall hold fast, and by God’s name you should swear.”

In this context, what does it mean to “fear” God? Are we to be apprehensive, agitated, aware of danger, or filled with dread? No, what is really meant here is to be in awe, to be reverent, to treat with a profound respect and affection. Within the context of these verses, there are some references to “keep the commandments of the Lord” but for the most part this passage is not about rule-keeping, it is about celebration and praise of the might and justice of God. The covenant of circumcising the heart is in direct relation to God’s own heart set in love. If we asked this text the question “What are we to be motivated by in our relationship with God?” it would not reply fear. It would reply love and passion and reverence.

Reverence is not the same thing as fear. Paul Woodruff, the author of the book Reverence and a faculty member at the University of Texas, says of reverence and fear:

Some people use the expression “God-fearing” as if it meant the same as “reverent,” but they are confused. Reverence stands in awe, but awe is not the same thing as fear... In fact, fear of punishment is the opposite of reverence; if all you have to keep you in line is the fear of God, then you have denied yourself all of the virtues, including reverence. Virtues are the source of feelings that make you want to do the right things; but fear of God would merely keep you from doing the evil things you would want to do, if you had no virtue whatever.²

This passage from Deuteronomy is not asking for the faithful to be without virtue. If anything, it is trying to get at those feelings that make us want to draw closer to God; it trying to articulate the reasons why we feel the awe we do toward God. If we were only motivated by fear, there would be no wholeness to this feeling, and I daresay, there would no resonance to these words for us still today.

If we ask the same question we asked of Deuteronomy, “what are we to be motivated by in our relationship with God?” of the passage from Mark, we get a surprisingly similar answer, even though the action and content appears at first to be in contrast to what Deuteronomy explains is required of us.

In Mark’s gospel, the disciples and Jesus are separated by an expanse of water and an adverse wind. Jesus, seeing that they are struggling against the wind, walks toward them across the water, with the intention of passing them by. This action is meant to calm them with the divine presence – throughout the scriptures we hear of God “passing by” as a way of showing closeness – but in this case Jesus’ action only serves to frighten the disciples. Jesus certainly gets their attention, but they are terrified by him walking across the water and reluctant to respond to him with any other emotion. He realizes that they are scared and tells them, “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid” and rather than pass them by as he had intended, he gets into the boat with them; but although the winds calm, the disciples are not calmed, they remain astounded and

afraid. Mark's gospel is critical of their inability to move beyond their fear, saying that their "hearts were hardened."

This narrative in Mark's Gospel is clear that we are not to be motivated in our relationship with God by fear, but it certainly is not fear. There is nothing in the text that makes us think that Jesus is trying to "put the fear of God" into the disciples, if anything he seems sympathetic to their fear, so much so that he changes his original plan to merely pass by and tries to calm them by joining them in the boat. The disciples go from the anxiety of the adverse winds to the anxiety of the thinking they saw a ghost, and even when the winds still, they cannot get their hearts to follow. Fear is no friend to anyone here; it is certainly not a virtue that is upheld.

What is meant to motivate the disciples is a willingness to see things in a new way. There is a reference made near the end of this passage that "they did not understand about the loaves" referring not to this theophany which had just taken place, but to the miracle described just before this one in the gospel narrative, the story of Jesus feeding the five thousand with only a few fish and few loaves. In both of these accounts, the presence of the Divine is not recognized or able to be understood, by the disciples, their fear gets in the way.

Neither this text from Mark nor the text from Deuteronomy is asking its listeners to be motivated by fear. Both of these biblical passages are asking followers to be open and reverent. The words of these scriptures bear witness to the awesomeness of God and the opportunity of privilege we have to be in relationship with the Eternal One.

In 1999, sociologist Barry Glassner, a professor at the University of Southern California, wrote a bestselling book, "The Culture of Fear: Why Americans are Afraid of the Wrong Things." In this book, Dr. Glassner presents the idea that many fears and "scares" in our culture are blown out of proportion. Some things have changed a great deal since 1999, but even with a heightened sense of danger in world, Dr. Glassner argues that the challenge is keep some sense of proportion about our fear. This task is not quite as easy as it seems; there seem to be new dangers everyday, our children's toys being recalled with shocking frequency, thousands of people across our country are in danger of losing their homes, the economy is in flux, our country is at war.

An acute sense of awareness about our own anxieties is needed to keep our fear in proportion. Dr. Glassner suggests: "The success of a scare depends not only on how well it is expressed but also on how well it expresses deeper cultural anxieties."³ This statement is also true of our religious anxieties. With what fears do we come before God on high? And the second question, perhaps even more important, how do we expect God to respond to our fears? We forget the words of our scriptures that we repeat often as part of our confession, that God is a God of love, wanting to show us kindness and mercy. We do not like to admit it, but a God who demands our fear is a God we can understand better than a God who loves us and is merciful. Fearing God gives us clear parameters of what is expected of us and then we can choose: will we follow these rules or will we rebel? A God who demands our fear is someone we can push up against.

The problem is, God does not want to inspire fear in us. God wants us to draw closer, God wants us to set our hearts in love, the way God has done with us, and to not be stubborn any longer. God wants to make the divine presence known to us by passing by and know that we will not be so scared that we are paralyzed. Approaching God without fear, but with reverence is not easy. It is an approach that demands much more from us, for without a scary God, we are much more accountable for our own actions, and much more accountable to each other. We are not

mere sinners quivering before an angry God, we are partners in a divine vision of justice, righteousness, and peace, and that is a big responsibility.

If we ask the question again, “what are we to be motivated by in our relationship with God?” and the answer is not fear, it changes our worldview. If we are not motivated in our relationship with God by fear, we must be more articulate about our own virtue, our own sense of feelings that make us want to do the right thing. We cannot, however, let the adverse winds take control, we must row, like those disciples so long ago, and even in our exertion we must remain open to new ways of seeing God’s vision. For the Eternal One may not appear to us as we expect; justice, righteousness, and peace may not come to us as we have planned.

Perhaps it is the author and lecturer Marianne Williamson, who sums up this shift in understanding our relationship to fear most succinctly when she writes:

“Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous? Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.”⁴

Children of God, go into the world. Go be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, and fabulous. Do not be afraid.

¹ Glassner, Barry. The Culture of Fear: Why Americans are Afraid of the Wrong Things. (Basic Books; New York, NY, 1999), p. xxviii.

² Woodruff, Paul. Reverence: Renewing a Forgotten Virtue. (Oxford University Press; New York, NY, 2001), p. 125-126.

³ Glassner, p. 208.

⁴ <http://marianne.com/book/index.htm>, referencing quote from A Return to Love by Marianne Williamson (Harper Collins; New York, NY, 1996).