

All Who Fear, Romans 8:12-17

Elgin, Ash Wednesday, Feb. 18, 2015

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Introduction

Our temperatures this month are running between 20 to 30 degrees below normal. Be encouraged; there were blizzard-like conditions in late February, 1885 at the organizing meeting of the Evangelical Covenant denomination. A cold February did not keep our denomination from forming, and it did not keep you from meeting tonight to mark the beginning of Lent.

Ash Wednesday worship takes many forms, but one theme in common is the desire to walk in the faith of the cross of Christ, even by carrying a cross. We read in Romans 8 of our obligation to die to ourselves and live for God. For some that means adopting a discipline of doing without something – meat or chocolate-- or learning a new discipline such as reading the Bible daily. These things are good to do when they are done out of love for God as thankful worship; they are NOT good if we do these things because we are afraid of God, thinking that by doing these things we can each atone for our own sins.

That is not faith, it is magic thinking and superstition. So today we will address the Fear of God as we begin this season of lifting up the cross of Christ. Rather than Lent reminding us that God is angry, it should remind us that God is love. Rather than helping us cry out to a distant God, Lent should remind us that God's hands are stretched out to us in Jesus Christ, calling us to return to him.

Let us pray: Lord God, you are as near to us as our lips and our hearts, and yet we blame you for being far away. Remind us of your presence and open our hearts to receive you, that we may live into our promises as co-heirs with Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.

1. The Obligation to Live

The opening worship service at the meeting that organized the Evangelical Covenant was held on February 20, 1885. F. M. Johnson, the president of the Ansgar Lutheran Synod, which was folding itself in order to become part of the Covenant, preached on Psalm 119 verse 63, **“I am a companion of all who fear you, to all who follow your precepts.”** Taken by itself this text seems to suggest that Covenant people are all about fearing God and living under precepts, that is, under law. But that is not really the theme of Psalm 119. In fact, this longest chapter of the Bible does not describe a psalmist cowering in terror. Instead, in section after section, verse after verse, the psalmist expresses personal delight in God’s revealed will. The psalmist even rises in the middle of the night for thanksgiving and prayer, as stated in verse 62. The psalmist is in a personal, loving relationship with the Savior God of Israel.

If that kind of devotion is stirred up in you this Lent, that you take quiet time in the middle of the night when you will not be disturbed, that is very good. But sadly, monasteries made it a law to have midnight prayers. Monks would sleep through the liturgy until their wardens tapped them awake with sticks. I do not think the psalmist is saying that midnight prayers must be said every night. When the psalmist had insomnia that was an occasion to pray and to praise, and that is a great idea. Instead of being anxious about not sleeping, count your blessings instead of sheep, and then you’ll fall asleep counting your blessings.

The passages from Psalm 119 and Romans 8 come together in this way, that our fear of God is rooted in a respect for God’s holiness in which we know, with repentant humility, that we are not worthy of the love that God offers. Our worth is all staked in the value which God places upon us, this manner of love given to us by which we are called the children of God. It is in that stake, in that identity, in that relationship, writes Paul in Romans 8, that we have an obligation to

live accordingly. We do not earn our way into the family of God; we are adopted into it. That adoption is sealed by the Spirit of Christ imprinted upon our hearts, who dwells within the repentant believers to renew our minds and transform our lives into the likeness of Christ.

When we receive Christ we are put under an obligation. Literally we become debtors. One way of talking about the meaning of the death of Jesus Christ is that he paid our debts that our sins accrue against God by going to the cross and paying with his flesh in place of our own. Paul writes that Jesus Christ has put us under a new debt. If no one of us can atone for our own sins, then no one of us can pay Jesus back for dying on the cross, no matter how hard we work, no matter how moral we try to be under our own power, according to our own wills and intellects. This is a debt that we can pay in only one way, and that is, by allowing the Spirit of Christ to dwell within us, converting us from sin and death into righteousness and life.

In other words, we pay our debt to God only by allowing God to give us still more gifts, beginning with his own Spirit. By his Spirit we are given the gift of a new status, we are adopted as God's children; no longer are we slaves to sin and death, we become in Christ the righteousness of God and heirs of his glory. As Christ is formed within us we continue to receive more gifts from our loving heavenly Father. It is a gift that the Spirit puts to death the misdeeds of the body. It is a gift that the Spirit blossoms in each of us for our unique ways of serving God. It is a gift that the Spirit bears the fruits of our consolation in a world filled with disappointments, that we may still find ourselves rooted in love, and joy, and peace, and patience, and kindness. By this we live not as slaves but as heirs.

2. Not as Slaves but as Heirs

A few years after Johnson preached at the Chicago South-side Tabernacle, the Swedish theologian Paul Peter Waldenström finally presented his doctrine of reconciliation in English. He

had the help of J. G. Princell, who was at that time the founding president of our twin-sister denomination, the Evangelical Free Church. Starting on page ten Waldenström addresses what he calls an unholy fear of God, commenting that this is the type of fear that Paul mentions in Romans 8 verse 15; it is the fear that comes with enslavement.

Here Waldenström associates the bondage of the sinful nature to the bondage of false religion and false worship. In most of the world for most of human history various forms of idolatry were based on the notion that angry spirits need to be appeased through sacrifice. The spiritual realm was a terrifying place. Many of the myths of gods and heroes that come out of Greece or that inspired Wagner's Ring Cycle reveal the human notion that higher spiritual beings are full of caprice toward humankind while at the same time being subject themselves to all of our passions and moral failures. The best way to keep the spirits calm and perhaps even favorable was through sacrifices of various kinds. And so we have a fear-based works theology, the best that an intelligent but uninspired sinful human being can discern.

Through Paul God speaks: *Do not think of me as an angry Spirit. Rather, cry out to me as your Abba, your loving Father. See, if you cling to Christ he will be your brother, and you will join him in his inheritance of eternal glory.*

But even the Fatherhood language has been, sadly, tragically, distorted by human sin. Many people who do not think of themselves as idolaters, have even so had fathers or figures of authority in their past, who did not model God's tender love, but a conditional, capricious kind of favor or disfavor that depended on moodiness and egg-shells and unspoken elephants in the room. All of this filled the home or the classroom or the office with an oppressive air, even an air of terror in too many cases, rather than of safety. And so the notion that God is an Angry Father has become a strong theme in traditional Christian faith. It is a theme that millions find difficult

to let go. Waldenström writes that this theme is tied to heathen fears and superstitions of caprice in the Spirit world. To say that our sins have changed God's heart towards us, that God's wrath toward sin is an ill-disposition toward humankind that only Christ could perfectly appease, is to misconstrue the gospel. It is unworthy of God to claim that He required the death of an innocent person in order to satisfy his honor or to exercise his anger. Just because too many people may have experienced such an abusive pattern from authority figures in their past, does not mean it is good theology to project that onto the person of God the Father.

But the gospel is this: That while we were yet sinners, still enemies toward God, God himself wrapped himself in flesh and came seeking us in order that we might be reconciled. God himself makes the purifying, atoning sacrifice for sins, by sacrificing himself. For sin pulled the veil over us, spiritually blinding us to God, and corrupted our hearts. Sin did not corrupt God's heart. God's love for humankind, all humankind, all kinds of humans without exception, has not changed.

Neither did God's love change between the Old Testament and the New. Waldenström describes the Old Testament laws of sacrifice at length. When the sheep and cattle were sacrificed under the Old Testament law, we have it backwards if we think it was to appease an angry God for sins. The animals were offered to the community from God as a gracious exchange, as offerings of peace, that sinners might share in the meat and live, and not die. But if the sacrifices had been for appeasement, than God would have been appeased by them. Yet what do the prophets say? From Samuel, Isaiah, Amos, Ezekiel and Jeremiah, we hear God express loathing that so much animal blood is shed, because the people were choosing to make sacrifices from their flocks and herds when God desired obedient hearts.

At the theological symposium at North Park Seminary in 2010 North Park Seminary ethics scholar Michele Clifton-Soderstrom brought forward another important aspect of Waldenström's theology: Neither has God's wrath toward sin been appeased. Jesus on the cross did not purchase our indulgences; we are not free to sin that grace may abound. Rather as Paul writes in Romans we are put under a debt, but not to the flesh, for we are no longer slaves serving the sinful nature. Cleansed of our sins by Christ's blood, we receive his Spirit, and by his Spirit we live for God. The sinner who rejects the peace offering of God in Christ, the sinner who rejects this only path to eternal life, has no purification from sins. Rather than being reconciled, justified, converted, the sinner is wrapped up in sins, and only wrath remains.

Conclusion

The choice before us is clear. The first choice is that we cling to our sins and reject our freedom from them and spurn the peace which God has offered to us in Christ. The outcome of this choice is that our only share in eternity will be our experience of God's wrath poured out on the sins we have cherished. This would be the choice, as Jesus tells the story in Luke 15, if the prodigal son stayed among the pigs, nursing his personal depravity, rather than going back to his father. This would be the choice of his older brother to stay outside the homecoming party, nursing his personal moral arrogance, rather than embracing as good news that the lost can be found. The second choice, the better choice urged upon us by God our loving father, is that we repent of our sins, our depravity and our arrogance, both alike, and receive our adoption into the family of God, becoming joint heirs with Christ and sharing in his glory forever. This is the prodigal coming home. This is the elder entering the party. This is our reconciliation. This is the gospel of Jesus Christ, the glory of God's love lifted high on the cross. Amen.