

“The Beginning of Wisdom” / Psalm 111 / 1 February 2015

“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. You've been hearing it for years. The...*fear*...of the Lord...is the beginning...of wisdom”? Well, yes, beginnings can be tough, I suppose. And many good things begin with fear. It's important that we grow past those fears. But it's normal to be afraid in the beginning. Have you ever noticed that people start off frightened of the very things that call to them most deeply? Many a child with a fear of sharks ends up as a marine biologist! What worthwhile pursuit in your life didn't start with a tickle in your palm, a cold sweat, a little tingle of anxiety like a mouse scampering across your scalp, that old feeling of absolute free-fall in your gut? Some of life's best things began with fear. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, but only just the beginning.

Once, very early in his career, a young minister had to talk a bride out of the dressing room where she was hiding. The wedding was already ten minutes late getting started when a bridesmaid came to get the minister. The bride, she said, wanted to talk to him. Now, this bride wasn't a member of his church, just a girl who had asked him to do their wedding. But they'd gone through premarital counseling together, the three of them, and the pastor had gotten to know the couple quite well. He'd come to really care about them. And so he hurried back to the bride's room to see what was the matter. There she sat amid the messy splendor of that room. The bride said she was nervous about how she looked. But she wasn't fidgeting with her hair or gazing into any of the enormous mirrors that surrounded her. She said she was afraid to disappoint her mother, stumble over her lines, or trip over the silk runner. She said she was afraid of looking silly, though she was easily one of the loveliest girls the pastor had ever married—that's to say “married” as a clergyman, not as a groom. She was sweet, too. Kind, thoughtful, playful, gentle, and innocent, just so innocent. She had planned a lovely garden wedding, and it was a perfectly cool summer day. She'd have been radiant, but for the fear in her eyes.

And so, as stringed instruments played the same old songs over and again, out in the courtyard, the young pastor sat in the bride's room and said nice things about her, in an attempt to coax her outside. Of course, if he'd been a little more mature, he'd have seen that the bride wasn't worried about her appearance at all. A blind man could see there were no troubles in that department. No, the thing that truly scared the young bride was the prospect of waking up tomorrow next to the groom, and then again the next day, and the next for years to come. It was the enormity of the vows that scared her, their permanence. This was exactly why she sent for the minister instead of her mother or sister. She wasn't scared of the wedding. She was scared of the marriage. And it's true, the groom was a humorless fellow, nothing at all like her. He was ambitious and far too serious, the kind of man who makes an excellent “provider,” but what bride has ever wished to settle for that? If the minister hadn't been so nervous about creating the perfect ceremony, if he'd been a little less green, he might have told the caterer to go ahead and serve the hors d'oeuvres. He might have told that poor girl to take all the time she needed. He might have said, “Sweetheart, if you're this scared, then let's not do this. We can save the wedding for another day...a day which may or may not come.” They could all dine sumptuously on chicken Kiev and Chablis, and then go home with a big slice of wedding cake for the road. It wouldn't be so bad. “At least you got the family all together in one place,” he might have said. “Besides, which would upset them more, seeing your wedding called off, or seeing your spirit wilt away year by year, as you languish in a marriage that you never really wanted?”

Well, he did not say those things. He had his fears, too. He didn't want to make a scene. He hated shows of emotion. And so, he assured her that everything was going to be fine. In time she smiled, smoothed her dress, and stood up to face the music...of cellos and violins. They went through with the ceremony, and perhaps the bride's hands and voice did tremble. But here's a thing that we sometimes don't learn early enough: fear is not always bad. That sweet girl's fear was a sign of just how seriously she was taking the vows that she would make and the life that would follow. And that woman's marriage is still strong and happy all these years later. It started off with fear, as many good things do, but the fear rapidly dissipated, and the marriage settled into healthy routines of openness,

respect, and sharing.

Fear and desire are so closely linked! It's true that fear can be overwhelming. It's true that fear can be a healthy warning to steer clear. But listen carefully to your fears, for they can also tell you just which things in life you revere and respect. Now, I'm not saying that you should be a window washer if you're afraid of heights. But there's a reason first-time parents want to keep their newborn in the hospital as long as they're allowed. There's a reason they dread the day when the hospital will turn them out with a newly tested car seat and a seven-pound human being. The most meaningful things in our lives cause us anxiety, especially in the beginning. We sense so much at stake. We sense the importance of it all. But fear is only just the beginning.

“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.” This ancient one-liner appears three times in the Bible, so somebody must have liked it. But you and I don't trust any relationship grounded in fear, nor do we trust decisions made out of fear. I must admit that I've looked for ways to tweak this phrase a little. I've looked for ways to equivocate. Instead of saying “fear,” I've tried, “The respect of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom” or, “The reverence of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.” But no. In the Hebrew language, the word is fear, plain and simple. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom...but it's only just the beginning.

The real problem you and I have with fear is the fact that it's not love. In the popular sitcom *The Office*, Michael Scott asks himself if he'd rather be loved or feared. Michael is the manager of a paper supply company in Scranton. He's a bumbler who makes audiences cringe with his complete lack of self-awareness. Michael seems to think he's respected as some sort of leadership guru, when in fact, people mostly just want to get away from him. In one episode, Michael ends up besting his employee, Dwight Schrute, at Dwight's own game, namely karate. Afterward, Michael speaks to you, the viewer, as if to a friend about the karate match. “Would I rather be feared or loved?” Michael asks. Then he answers his own question. “Easy, both. I want people to be afraid of how much they love me. And I think I proved that today.” (*The Office* isn't for everyone, it's true.) Fear can never be love, it's true. And many a tyrant in the history of our world has settled for fear, knowing full well that he can never win people's love. Fear is the basest, most reptilian emotion we've got. It's all about self-protection. How can we even talk about God and fear in the same breath? But let's revisit the phrase that echoes throughout the Hebrew Scriptures: “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.” No one ever said it was the end or the goal of wisdom. The end of wisdom is indeed love. But fear, it's only just the beginning.

Faith often springs from a fear which it must quickly outgrow, for when faith remains grounded in fear, it's hardly faith at all. Most churches in this country were packed the Sunday after 9/11. You'd have thought it was Christmas. But religious impulses based in fear don't stick. Religion itself surely began with fear: a crack of thunder, a flash of lightning, and our primitive ancestors scurried to placate the angry unseen spirits with this tribute or that. But fear can never remain the driving force behind anything good. Relationships, good behaviors, foreign policy, and justice systems and all their machinery: they will all of them collapse if constructed on fear. This is why extremism and hatred will finally fail. This is why terrorism, and bigotry, and greed cannot reign forever, for they are built on the crumbling foundation of fear. There always comes a day when people will get fed up and defy their fears.

A thief, running from the police, seeks shelter inside the cavernous shadows of St. Paul's Cathedral in London. Once inside the church, the thief forgets his fear, distracted by the beauty of the place. Never much of a churchgoer, he's overwhelmed with a sense of awe and wonder at the reds and blues, and the unusual shapes, the otherworldly light, and the sheer size of the place. Instead of hiding, he finds himself wandering the aisles, gazing up at elaborate stonework and intricate stained glass. The serenity and order, the somber loveliness of the place; it all trips a new thing in his criminal heart. Fear is replaced by other feelings that he cannot easily name. He ends up staying. He ends up praying. He ends up promising to change his ways, determining to devote himself to a life of service and love. But

the only thing that could get the man to church...was fear. We must pay attention to our fears. Sometimes they have things to tell us and to teach us. Whom do you fear? What person or group of people? What do you fear, what thing possible or impossible, real or imagined? How frequently our fears become our callings! "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." But only just the beginning. Amen.