

Fear and Awe
Psalm 103
Sermon Series: Fear Not
Feb. 4, 2018
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Last week, our Senior High youth group was meeting for a session of OWL, Our Whole Lives, our sexuality education program here at First UCC, and we were doing a check-in, catching up on life since we'd last all seen each other. And one of the youth shared something that I really identified with, and I have their permission to share with you what was said.

Now, I should say, these youth are in a time of huge transition already: finishing their last years of high school, looking ahead to college and gap years and young adulthood. A lot to have on your plate. And this young person added: "With everything going on in the news, I find myself afraid all the time that the world is going to end. I'm really worried about it."

And I thought, yeah. Boy, do I get that. I've shared that particular fear for a long time. As a little child, I would sometimes lie in bed, staring into the darkness, bug-eyed, worrying about the fate of the universe.

Then, when I was 20 and living in Boston, 9/11 happened. I began having apocalyptic dreams that have never really gone away. I developed an interest in dystopian literature, almost as if I wanted to study gameplans for the end of the world, potential blueprints for survival. (Not my personal survival, mind you; I'm not an action hero; I was thinking about the survival of the species, the continuation of this human enterprise.) I ate up work by Margaret Atwood and Cormac McCarthy and Octavia Butler and so many others and you know? I loved it but *it did not make me less anxious*.

My point is, fear and I have been well acquainted for a long time,

and that's why this sermon series appealed to *me*. (It's true: preachers are always preaching to themselves too.)

I've always wrestled with fear, personally, and I've long regarded fear as a destructive social force: fear seems to be the root of so many of our sins: fear of difference at the heart of bigotry; fear of scarcity at the heart of greed; fear of shame at the heart of violence. So as a person of faith, I feel called to resist these kinds of toxic fears with all my might.

But you know, I'd feel, as a pastor, that I'd neglected something if we explored this theme of fear without acknowledging that fear can, sometimes, be a *good thing*. Counterintuitive as that is, I do believe it. The moral of this sermon series *isn't* that we should learn to glide through life, fearless and serene, ever undaunted.

First of all, that's totally unrealistic. Life completely without fear is impossible. Fear is a biological reality. Turns out fear is also a theological reality, a biblical reality.

We titled this series "Fear Not" because 'fear not' is a recurring phrase in the Bible. Dozens and dozens of times, in both the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament, God—or someone speaking with authority on behalf of God—utters some variation of "Do not be afraid."

And here's another thing: in many of these instances, people are afraid *because* they are in the presence of God. Let's consider that. They're not afraid of something or somebody else. They're afraid *of the Holy*. Think of the Angel Gabriel's first words to Mary, which tell you everything about her state of mind as she receives her divine transmission. "Do not be afraid, Mary." Do not be afraid of me. Do not be afraid of God. Do not be afraid of the incredible, terrifying, life-changing thing God is about to do.

Fear of God is considered a great virtue in many a biblical

character, from Job to Abraham to Moses to Paul. Now, to

modern ears, the phrase “fear of God” has come to have some negative connotations, as if God were a bully, or an abusive parent. And no one is restored by a faith that is founded on fear of damnation or punishment or suffering.

But I don't believe that's what 'the fear of God' has to mean. A better translation of fear, in this context, might be reverence. Awe.

What does it mean to be awestruck?

It means to tremble, not from terror but from amazement and wonder.

It means to fall silent, not due to oppression but out of deep respect.

It means to be overwhelmed by something unknowable, and great, and far more powerful than you, not in the sense of your being humiliated, but in the sense of your being humbled.

The German philosopher Rudolf Otto had a term for this kind of encounter with divine power: he called these experiences “numinous.” Numen is Latin for spirit or divinity. In his 1923 book *The Idea of the Holy*, Otto wrote that a numinous experience is both non-rational and non-sensory, a fearful and fascinating mystery.. This kind of experience “cannot be taught; it can only be evoked, awakened in the mind.”

I think the Psalm that we heard today is about the Numinous. The Psalm writer is full of thanks and praise for God and yes, *fear* as well. God, as described in this Psalm, is powerful *and* scary *and* loving. Human life is *so small* compared to the depth and breadth of this God:

*For God knows how we were made;
And remembers that we are dust.
As for mortals, their days are like grass;
they flourish like a flower of the field;
for the wind passes over it, and it is gone,
and its place knows it no more.
But the steadfast love of God
is from everlasting to everlasting
on those who fear God.*

This Psalm is all about perspective, about removing ourselves as the protagonists of our own personal dramas and putting God, the Creator that came long before us and will long outlast us, at the center.

Now, it's a paradox, but I find this strangely comforting. During those dark nights of the soul, when I'm up late at night worrying about the end of the world as we know it, sometimes the only thing to do is to try and imagine that vast, incomprehensible, terrifying life force, that animating spark that somehow set everything in motion 13.8 billion years ago.

To borrow from the Psalmist's words, God remembers that we are space dust, and to space dust we shall return. Return to *what*? Our faith summons us to trust that we return to our source, our Creator. And so, let this psalm send a shiver up our collective spine—a good kind of shiver—as we remember that life could so easily have *never happened in the first place*.

Yet here we are, each moment a tiny drop in the cosmic bucket, yet so precious and unrepeatable. The late poet Jane Kenyon has a poem she wrote while anticipating her own death from cancer, in which she moves through her most common daily

rituals, repeating the phrase, “It could be otherwise.”

Isn't that a profound truth? Every moment is an “otherwise” waiting to happen, a potential mini-apocalypse, the end of the world as *you* know it.

I'll end with a short passage from one of my favorite books, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, by C.S. Lewis, the allegorical story of lonely British children and Aslan, the magnificent lion and Christ figure who transformed their lives and their world. In this scene, the children are talking to Mr. and Mrs. Beaver about Aslan. They haven't met him yet and they think he is human, and the Beavers are quick to correct them:

*“Aslan a man!” said Mr. Beaver sternly. “Certainly **not**. I tell you he is the King of the Wood and the Son of the great Emperor-beyond-the-Sea. Don't you know who is the King of Beasts? Aslan is a lion—the Lion, the great Lion.”*

“Ooh!” said Susan, “I'd thought he was a man. Is he—quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion.”

“That you will, dearie, and no mistake,” said Mrs. Beaver; “if there's anyone who can appear before Aslan without their knees knocking, they're braver than most or else just silly.”

“Then isn't he safe?” said Lucy.

“Safe?” said Mr. Beaver; “don't you hear what Mrs. Beaver tells you? Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the King, I tell you.”

Not safe, but **good**. I think that's a fine image for God, and one to remember, especially when you are feeling afraid. As someone wiser than me once said, “May you love God so much that you love nothing else too much; May you fear God enough that you need fear nothing at all.”

Amen.

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