

## **Psalm 111**

Praise the Lord!

I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart, in the company of the upright, in the congregation.

Great are the works of the Lord, studied by all who delight in them.

Full of honor and majesty is his work, and his righteousness endures for ever.

He has gained renown by his wonderful deeds; the Lord is gracious and merciful.

He provides food for those who fear him; he is ever mindful of his covenant.

He has shown his people the power of his works, in giving them the heritage of the nations.

The works of his hands are faithful and just; all his precepts are trustworthy.

They are established for ever and ever, to be performed with faithfulness and uprightness.

He sent redemption to his people; he has commanded his covenant for ever.

Holy and awesome is his name.

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; all those who practice it have a good understanding.

His praise endures for ever.

### **“Faith for the Fear of It”**

**Rev. Charles Schuster**

**February 1, 2009**

One of the things that we are going to try to do, depending on if we're able to do it, is, beginning next Sunday, to have a children's sermon in this service. We're beginning to have some children actually attend, which is very exciting, and I wanted you to know that we will do this. I know that the congregation at 10:45 will appreciate that, and we will be doing that next week. I also want to, on behalf of the congregation, thank the Stover Street Stompers for leading us in worship. Thank you again, very much.

If there are college students in the congregation, university students, we have a lunch after the service this morning. Hilary Parsons, sitting right there, is the director of our college ministry here, and you're invited to have lunch with us in what we call the Bride's Room, which is right out the door there. Finally, I'll announce something that Pam can't announce, or probably wouldn't, but she was interviewed by the members of her Board of Ordained Ministry team this past week, and they are prepared to recommend her for ordination in Elders Orders to the Executive Session. All the clergy get to vote on her, that's the final thing that happens, and then she, I'm sure, will be ordained in June at the Annual Conference Meeting in Grand Junction. Congratulations to Pam.

The text this morning: “Fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom” is an interesting text. Those words given to us from an ancient song, part of Israel's worship. Fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. They flow off the page like it's truth, because it is. There is an element of fear. It's a part of our faith. It resides in conscience. It's the voice inside us that tells us that we'd better pay attention. It's that tinge of guilt when we've done something wrong. It's the way in which we feel that we have lost, even when we've won, because we, and only we, know that the way we won was the way of a loser without

honor. It's knowing that we are judged when there is no judge beyond ourselves and the voice within that comes from beyond. It is the fear of the Lord. It comes to us through conscience.

Fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. It is. Moses saw God face to face and lived. If we think we are isolated, and all to ourselves, if we think there is nothing to what we do beyond the consequence to ourselves, it is not a bad thing, it is a good thing to reflect upon that, and to be called upon that, with the impulse of fear. The idea that God will get us if we act in a way that's inappropriate creates a certain amount of introspection, and sometimes we all need to have some intervention from some higher authority so that our lives don't begin to drift out of control. And it comes to us at any age. Children feel it most because they're programmed by their parents. But it comes to us at any age or stage. Even veteran clergy are susceptible. Even this veteran preacher, who has, over the years, preached, railed against the idea of being driven by fear in faith.

Friday, I was giving some people a tour of our sanctuary. Our church organ pipes have a particular fascination for me, because there are various places in the sanctuary where there are these little boxes that have buttons, and I can push these buttons and I can change the color of those pipes. I can make them red (go ahead, Louis, if you want to – can you change the color of the pipes, or is that something that's only reserved for the ordained? Stone silver. A little turquoise there. Is that all you got? Yes, there's a little pink, a little turquoise again..... See me after worship.)

And so I was showing people around the sanctuary, I was changing the color of the pipes, red and gold and turquoise and stone silver. The organ is twenty-two years old. It gets kind of tuned every year, but it hasn't probably had the maintenance that you'd maybe like, that it might have. And the university says, you flew these folks over from Denmark to move the organ that they have from the School of Music to the new School of Music, which is the old high school, and then to retune it, and since they were there, and they're the same people, in fact one of the people is one of the ones who built the organ here. Then we decided, since we were going to do it in a year, we would do it now, let's get them over here and let them look and do maintenance work and retune the organ. And so they came, and they were here last week, two men with perfect pitch, flown in by the organ company in Denmark, paid for, this part, by the church, we've got to find money to pay them back, but we will, working on the pipes. Two men with a kind of assertiveness that borders on fascism, working on the pipes here at our church last week. A staff member sitting over there, back where those folks are, where they change the words, in fact setting up the words, a staff member, a staff member... I'm on this tour, giving these people a way to look at the colors and the organ pipes, and I say to them, "I can change the color of these pipes, watch this." And I push a button back there. I push a button and the lights come on, it's Number 2 lights, and Hoffton and Olaf come unglued. Screaming at me from behind the pipes. I thought it was God. "You idiot, turn off those lights and do it now!" The staff member, who's sitting back there, maintaining a level of support like is often found in dysfunctional families, stood behind the sound board pointing at me, saying, "He did it. Reverend Schuster did it. He turned on the lights." And I felt guilty. I

felt fear. It was the wrath of God, from Olaf, and that stayed with me through the weekend, and I just haven't been right since.

It's not a bad thing, actually, fear of the Lord, conscience telling us to take a look, to turn off the lights, or turn on the lights, or to examine what we're doing and why we're doing it. Just because we think it's right doesn't make it right. Just because it can be done doesn't mean it should be. Just because there's a will and way doesn't mean it must. I mean, when Adam ate the apple, he should have listened to his conscience rather than his stomach, don't you think? And when David took a look at Bathsheba with less than pure motives, it would have been better for him if he's have concentrated on the temple he would be building. I think that is true. And when Ted Haggard met with those young twenty-year olds and his church members, a little bit of fear might have given him a little bit of wisdom.

Even Paul the Apostle had a sense that when he wrote "The good that I should do, I don't, but the bad that I shouldn't do, that's what I do. I've got a thorn in my flesh." And the writer of Genesis said it was original, the sin that was in us, and is there in all of us, and we've got to know it's there, and the fear of the Lord, and conscience, awakens us to it. When human misjudgment takes over our better judgment, it's important to ponder the judgment of God. Every now and then, it's important to examine some aspects of our nature. Every now and then we've got to examine our lives in the presence of God.

I like the Peanuts cartoon, Charlie Brown's baseball team. It's at the end of the year, they're assessing how they've done, and Charlie Brown says, "In twelve games we almost scored a run. In nine games, the other team almost didn't score before the first out. In right field, Lucy almost caught three balls. And once, she almost made the right play." And Linus looks at Charlie Brown and says, "Charlie Brown, we led the league in almost."

The fear of faith, conscience, the beginning of wisdom. Our faith must have some fear in it. Otherwise, it isn't faith, and we go about our lives thinking that there is no consequence, because there is no conscience. And we almost live. An unexamined life isn't worth living. That isn't life. We need a little fear in our faith. But faith doesn't stop with fear. It's not just about conscience. In fact, I would say, if all we have are negative judgments and prohibitions, we become easily controlled by our fears. There's freedom in faith. It's born in our conviction. It's what Jesus said to his friends as he walked past them while they were engaged in their work. He didn't say, "You'd better follow me or else," or "It is God's will that you follow me. Do as I say." He said, "Will you follow me? Will you choose to follow me? Are you with me?" It's a choice.

There's a little boy we babysit for, the son of Kathy's niece, he's two and a half. I love his attitude. He would get into his little plastic car that he propels with his feet and drives around the kitchen and dining room and family room and the hallway of the house. He gets in and says, "I'm going to Starbuck's." Sometimes he says, "I'm going to the liquor store." He does that to embarrass his parents. Once he got up on the couch, I was there, and he leaped up into the air and landed on his feet with his arms outstretched, and he

looked at me and said, "I stuck it." Once he was in his bed, and he did a flip over the headboard of his bed, little kid bed, not very high off the ground, but if it had been the Olympics it would have rated a ten, and when he landed he looked at his grandfather, Kathy's brother, and said to him, "I'm a piece of work." He is. There is in that the faith that is freedom, born of choice. We get to choose. We are a piece of work.

Dorothee Soelle has written a book called *Beyond Mere Obedience*. She suggests that if there is no freedom of choice, it isn't faith, it's just obedience. It isn't faith, and she goes on, to make her point, she cites the words of Rudolf Hoess, who wrote, "I was told it was my primary duty in life to be obedient, to listen to my pastor, to my parents, to my teacher, to all the adults in my world, because whatever they said, I would believe, and whatever they told me to do, I would do. Absolute obedience. Those rules of conduct became part of my flesh and blood." Here was a man who was driven by fear of faith, a man who does what he does because he's told to do it, always. Here is a man who is obedient, and Dorothee Soelle says one other thing about Rudolf Hoess, she says "He's got a strict upbringing, and I want you to know," she says, "it's a Christian upbringing. And one more thing. For three years, he was the director of the Auschwitz concentration camp.

If you've ever been to the museum at Dachau, as I have, you will never forget the little sign that is posted. I don't know where it is now, but it was there then – "Never again." Never again abdicate freedom of choice. Never again forget that faith is more than fear, it's also responsibility. "Follow me" was not an imperative, it was an invitation. But we get to choose, because we are free. We are a piece of work, but we've got to choose to be. We have freedom of faith, but we've got to use it. Eleanor Roosevelt was right when she said, "The future belongs to those who believe in the beauty of their dreams." But we have to choose. We have to choose good over evil. We have to choose trust over suspicion, hope over despair, love over hatred. It's all about freedom. It's all about choice.

But faith doesn't end with choice, and it isn't all about freedom. As faith doesn't end with conscience, and it isn't all about fear. There's a covenant of faith. It comes when conscience and choice are working together, and faith evolves into a flow. God is with us, and we are with God. When Jesus met with his disciples at the table, he didn't say to them, "You have heard it said, but I say to you...." tapping into their conscience. And he didn't say to them, "Now that we've been together this long, and you have chosen to be with me...." He said, "Take the bread, and the cup, and the new covenant with God. I am with you, and you are with God." The flow of faith. It's knowing that God has joined up with us, and that we have joined up with God. It's forming a partnership with God, and we can see God working with us and through us. It's as if we have become God's agents on earth, fulfilling the will and mission of the God we worship. It's the belief that God has a much a stake in us as we have in being part of something bigger than ourselves.

There's a cartoon I found recently. It shows these two congressmen walking in front of the nation's capitol, talking to one another. One of them says, "I was cooperating with both parties on the Peace Initiative Bill, and for that, I have been diagnosed as having a

bipartisan disorder.” The flow of faith happens when with the covenant with God, conscience works together with choice, freedom is joined with fear, and there is a flow of faith. The Native American theologian Ambrose Redmoon said it – “Courage is not the absence of fear but rather the judgment that something else is more important than fear.” It is a bipartisan disorder, that ultimately connects to a higher order, to see a greater good, and to live a more abundant life. And we find a wisdom that is larger than we know. Oh yes, sometimes we miss it. We make mistakes. Then conscience kicks in, and we have to reconsider. And sometimes the choices we have are so difficult that we’re not sure which is right, and we make the choice, hoping that we’ve done the right thing. But Irwin Kula is on target when he says, “We all have the potential to raise holy sparks.”

Noah wasn’t sure about the flood, because he built the ark when the sun was shining, but there came a time when he was in the flow, if you know what I mean. And Moses wasn’t sure where the Exodus would lead, when he took his people out of Egypt, but waters always divide when there is a flow. We are not born to die, we are born with a plan in mind and a purpose, and a problem to solve in our time and space. And we are not destined to spend our days worrying about the cemetery plot, or a columbarium niche. We are born to do something decisive with our dash, that one that separates our date of birth from our date of official demise. God has caught up with us. We have caught up with God, and there’s a challenge in that. It’s a covenant, and it carries responsibility to do something important, to live the best that is in us.

Our company can fire us. Our bosses can reprimand us. Old age can deplete our energy and skill. But we are never unemployed when we are employed by the One who always has work for us to do, and the flow in which to do it, and the covenant between us that is our contract, made the day we were born, and confirmed on that day and in those days when we signed on by saying “Yes.” And as for failure, it is not an option. As for opting out, there is no retirement clause, and there are no resignations.

Robert Schuler said of Mother Teresa of Calcutta that she had a dream. She told her superiors “I have three pennies and a dream from God to build an orphanage.” And they smiled at her. “Mother Teresa,” they said, “you cannot build an orphanage with three pennies. With three pennies, you cannot do anything.” “I know,” she said, smiling back at them, “but with God and three pennies, you can do anything.” It’s a covenant. There’s a flow. We must not doubt it. We should not try to stop it. We’d best find a way to get into it. Faith for the flow of it. Faith, yours and mine. Faith for the fear of it, our conscience tells us that. Faith for the freedom of it, our choice to do what’s right. And faith for the flow of it, a covenant with God. It all comes together. Conscience, choice and covenant. It all comes together at the table where he meets us once more, and invites us to follow him.

The Psalmist said it: “Fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.” But we know, we know, to follow him, at least for us, to follow him is taking wisdom as far as it will go.

