# Ode to Fear

# Psalm 111

# A sermon preached in Page Auditorium on August 16, 2015 by the Rev. Bruce Puckett

“Praise the Lord. I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart, in the company of the upright, in the congregation.” Praise the Lord with the people of God. This is a top of the line Sunday school answer if I’ve ever heard one! The writer begins Psalm 111 with this proclamation of praise. And why not? Why wouldn’t the psalmist praise the Lord? Why wouldn’t we do the same? It’s simply the right thing to do. But if we’re honest this morning, I bet we would all confess times that praising just seems like the last thing we feel up to doing, maybe the last thing that feels right to do. Of course, praising and giving thanks to the Lord is a natural response to who God is and what God has done, but hearing a standard reminder about praising the Lord, just seems simple at best and naïve at worst. And of any psalm of praise, this one really is elementary. The psalm writer even uses a common alphabetical ordering, beginning each verse with the next letter in alphabetic sequence—this psalm is as ordinary and uncomplicated as the ABC’s. One scholar classifies psalms such as this one as “psalms of orientation,” shaping our basic expectations about life and God. A psalm like this lacks the conflict of lament, the drama of penitential psalms, and the glory of outright celebration.

So we hear the psalm today, nodding along in sleepy accent to what we all already know and believe about God. Of course we believe all that is being said. “Great are the works of the Lord.” Of course we know what the psalmist writes is true. “Full of honor and majesty is his work.” Of course, “God has gained renown by his wonderful deeds.” Of course, “God provides food for those who fear him.” Of course, “God has shown his people the power of his works.” Of course, “the works of God’s hands are faithful and just.” Of course, of course, of course.

But what happens when our “of course” gets interrupted? One of the preaching professors at Duke Divinity school often encourages students (through an assignment as all divinity class encouragement best happens) to read a biblical passage in unfamiliar locations. He calls it “dislocated exegesis.” We often think of reading the Bible as something to be done in the quite of our home, in our bedroom, at church, maybe even in a study. But this practice of “dislocated exegesis” encourages readers of the scriptures to read and listen in places that might enable them to hear or see in a new way. Listening to the biblical stories in malls, on city buses, at parks or graveyards, or in any number of places creates avenues of connection to and deeper insight into the wisdom and truth of scripture.

This practice of reading scripture in unlikely and unfamiliar settings disturbs the “of course-ness” of our psalm. Imagine sitting in a courtroom with a Durham family awaiting the court proceedings of the man who killed their son. “Praise the Lord! I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart, in the company of the upright, in the congregation.” Of course? Imagine standing at the end of a long food line at Urban Ministries hoping you’ll receive enough food to feed your family. “God provides food for those who fear him; he is ever mindful of his covenant.” Of course? Imagine sitting in a waiting room watching the TV with a newscaster reporting again on the murderous persecution of Christians in a land far away. “God sent redemption to his people… Holy and awesome is his name.” Of course? We’ve witnessed too much in the world around us, and we are wise to the ways of the world. How can we possibly proclaim praise? How could we shake our heads in simple affirmation of this psalm?

Perhaps there is no need to leave our homes or rooms of study for the “of course” to be challenged. Perhaps our multitude of fears complicates the “of course” of praise. Well developed as mechanisms of survival and encouraged by those who profit from them, our fears are legion. And why not fear? Have you all watched the news recently? It’s bad out there! Just this week you might have seen how the stock market is falling because of China devaluing its currency. Police have been searching for an armed and dangerous suspect nearby near our city. El Nino is likely to be historically strong this year, causing dramatic weather shifts, and potential devastation. Forget the news! All we need are advertisements to remind us of our fears. Surely you’ve heard how you should fear your identity being stolen, your house being robbed, your skin wrinkling, or a certain candidate being in a particular high office of our country. There is just so much for us to fear!

Let me just remind you of a few more. We fear loss: of loved ones, of health, of power, of jobs, of respect, of financial stability, of conveniences, of property, of comfort, of relationships, of life. We fear other people: poor people, white people, black people, brown people, formerly incarcerated people, physically disabled people, mentally disabled people, sick people, foreign people, all sorts of people. We fear bodily harm. We fear damaged reputations. We fear a ruined image. We fear wasting our lives on things that add up to nothing. We fear failure. We fear our past. We fear our future. Can I be real about the Chapel’s situation? We fear the Chapel being closed for a year. We fear declining worship attendance. We fear that people will stop wanting to be part of our community and will stop funding the ministries of this place. We fear and fear and fear. And our fears bind our hearts and minds and tie our tongues, preventing us from proclaiming praise. Instead of coming “with thanks most grateful,” with our words and our lives, we sing an ode to fear. To change the words to our hymn of response written as a paraphrase of this Psalm, we might more aptly sing, “I come with fears most fretful, to join that company of those trembling and fearful.”

But fear is greater than simply being afraid of something. Fear is often rooted in believing that something has the power to give and to take away; to offer joy, happiness, and blessing and to snatch those things back again. We fear the things that have power to affect our lives, and our fears further empower the things we fear. Many times our fear is grounded in a lack of trust. We fear snakes because we don’t trust them not to bite us. We fear losing our jobs because we don’t trust that the economy is stable or we don’t trust our bosses. We fear sickness because we don’t trust we’ll become well again or even survive the pain. And in our fear, we begin to give authority to the things we fear. We stand in awe of them, give them undo attention and respect. Ironically, the things we fear may even be the things in which we put our hope and, eventually, our trust and faith.

So we hold a litany of fears in hand, and we create a liturgy of fear for our lives that stands counter to this psalm of praise. We hear Psalm 111, this ordinary and somewhat elementary liturgy of praise, and we shake our heads, no longer in affirmation, but now dismissing the naiveté of one who would write such a prayer. But we make an all too easy misstep when we read our psalm either in an “of course” sort of way or in a fear bound and trembling way. We too easily read as though the psalmist and the people of God who have prayed this psalm for millennia lived comfortable, middle-class lives with no worries, laments, or hardships of their own. We read this psalm as if no courage, no faith, no deep understanding of God would have been required to pray this prayer and proclaim this praise. Perhaps on the surface it’s elementary. Perhaps on the surface it seems like something spoken from a person in a place of comfort with nothing to fear. But when we remember the people who have prayed and sung these words and when we listen closely, we come to hear the depths of this hymn.

Let’s attend again to our psalm, wide-eyed, expectant, and listening. When we do, we hear echoes of the stories of God with God’s people. We hear the resonances of God’s presence and care for God’s people in the most precarious situations and trying times. We come to know that it is no happy go lucky naiveté driving this praise. Rather, we realize that the people’s proclamation of praise is always “against the background of recent or ongoing distress.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Let’s take but a couple of phrases from Psalm 111. Verse 4 reads, “God has made his wonders to be remembered.” These wonders are a reference to the wonders God unleashed to free God’s people from Egyptian slavery. I’m sure you remember the story of Moses tending his father-in-laws flock when he came to the mountain of God at Horeb. On the mountain, Moses encountered God in the blazing bush, and God told Moses that God would rescue the people from Egypt. In this mountaintop conversation, God said to Moses, “I know the king of Egypt will not let you go unless a mighty hand compels him. So I will stretch out my hand and strike the Egyptians with all the wonders that I will perform among them. After that, he will let you go.” (Exodus 3:19-20) Praise the Lord! In the times of greatest suffering and bondage, God promised wonders for God’s people. The psalmist’s praise is rooted in God’s promise of release from captivity.

And God’s promises are sure and reliable. Can’t you just hear the Israelites singing in Exodus chapter 15 after being freed from the hands of the Egyptians? “I will sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea. The Lord is my strength and my might, and he has become my salvation; this is my God, and I will praise him, my father’s God, and I will exalt him…. Who is like you, O Lord, among the gods? Who is like you, majestic in holiness, awesome in splendor, doing wonders? You stretched out your right hand, the earth swallowed them.” Praise flows from the memories of real struggles, real promises, and real redemption. Praise passes the lips of the people because God has shown God’s power is greater and God’s promises are surer than the power of bondage and pain. Let me repeat that, God has shown that God’s power is greater and God’s promises surer than the power of bondage and pain.

There’s more to verse 4 from our Psalm. “The Lord is gracious and compassionate.” The psalmist adds to God’s wonderworking both graciousness and compassion. This grace and compassion is rooted in God’s long story with God’s people. Maybe you remember when God’s people had been wandering in the wilderness for years. The people became tired of the wilderness, stuck in their wandering, and were looking for more. These people turned to gods made of gold fashioned by the hands of humans. When Moses descended from his mountain top meeting with God to see the people worshiping idols and violating their covenant with God, he shattered the tablets of the commandments. When Moses returned to the mountain to meet with God again, the Lord told Moses to create new tablets for the covenantal commandments to be given again. The Lord reclaimed his covenantal relationship saying, “The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, yet by no means clearing the guilty, but visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children and the children’s children, to the third and fourth generation.” (Exodus 34:7) After this proclamation, God promptly displayed God’s grace and compassion by forgiving the people and reaffirming the covenant. The psalmist proclaims praise because God’s forgiveness, steadfast love, and faithfulness are greater than humanity’s sins, iniquities, and transgressions.

We could point to more examples in this psalm, but these make it obvious that praise is not what you do when you are blissfully unaware of the problems of the world. And praise is not what you do when there is nothing worth fearing around you. Instead, praise is what you do when you know the God who holds all things in God hands—hands that are strong and mighty, trustworthy and true, even if nail pierced and bleeding.

So how do we come to this posture of praise when witnessing the events of the world all around? How do we praise when paying attention to our real life struggles makes it impossible to imagine a peep of praise, let alone bold proclamation? The psalmist suggests going back to the beginning again. The psalmist reminds us of a different ode to fear than the one we easily sing. “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; all those who practice it have a good understanding. His praise endures forever.” The Psalmist plays the praise trump card. Praise remembers God’s history with God’s people; praise remembers who God is and what God has done; and ultimately, praise stands on the foundation of a different kind of fear: the fear of the Lord. The fear of the Lord is the beginning, the foundation, the starting point of wisdom and understanding. Fearing the Lord is about recognizing God’s power and authority. It’s about acknowledging and living in light of God’s absolute freedom to do whatever God pleases—and trusting that this is for our good. Fear of the Lord is grounded in God’s holiness and awesomeness. Fearing the Lord is true faith and deep trust. Fearing the Lord means humbly approaching God in awe, admiration, and honor.

The Psalmist leaves us with the wisdom of fearing the Lord. But what is this wisdom? It is the wisdom of shifting our hearts, minds, and imaginations from fear of the world to the fear of the Lord. It’s the wisdom of redirecting our focus from ourselves to God. This wisdom is expressed in adjusting our gaze from the urgencies of life to the God of life. This wisdom is when you turn from yourself to God. The psalmist instructs us that the more we practice this wisdom of fearing the Lord, the deeper our understanding will be. From this place of wisdom and understanding, we are free to praise God. Freed from the bondage of fear, and bound to God, praise flows as naturally as our breath. The fear of the Lord reorients us away from the everyday fears that control us and allows us to praise God with our whole selves. Have you experienced the wisdom of the fear of the Lord in your life? Can you imagine all your fears being swallowed up in your fear of the Lord? How much different would your life be if you were more motivated by the fear of the Lord than by the multitude of fears that shape our lives? This is the beginning of wisdom. I want more of this wisdom in my life. Don’t you?

So let’s find opportunities to practice it in our lives together. Look around. You’re in the presence of the upright and in the congregation. Take note of who will journey with you in practicing the fear of the Lord. As we respond to God’s word today through singing, prayer, and thanksgiving, consider one practical action of resistance to the fears that normally control you to practice this week. Maybe it involves going somewhere you don’t normally go, or giving away money you normally keep, or having a hard conversation you normally avoid. Let’s pause right now to think of just one. When our service is through today, find a fellow journeyer on the way of fearing the Lord to share your action. Then through this week encourage one another and pray for one another. As we do, we’ll find more and more reason to return next week, proclaiming: “Praise the Lord! I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart, in the company of the upright, in the congregation… God’s praises endure forever.” Amen.

1. Ellen Davis, *Getting Involved with God: Rediscovering the Old Testament*, (Cowley Publications; Cambridge, 2001), 31. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)