

The Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany
Bruton Parish Episcopal Church
The Rev. John Maxwell Kerr, College Chaplain
Sunday, January 29, 2012 (5:30 p.m.)

There is a recurring theme or phrase throughout Scripture which nobody wants to hear and almost nobody understands. In the Book of Proverbs, which we hardly ever draw upon for our readings, and occasionally in the Psalms – as tonight – you come across the idea that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.

Fear of the Lord _ who wants fear? Who wants a religion of fear? Or even uncertainty or ambiguity? No! No! We want definite facts not faith! You must know some approaches to preaching indulge in hellfire and damnation: "Fear the angry old white-bearded God because God's out to get you and he will love punishing you, you wretched sinners!"

You'll have to make the rest of the sermon up from there: I don't know how that kind of blood-curdling sermonizing works. Colorful, yes, all those lurid flames, pitchfork-wielding demons roasting sinners writhing in eternal torment. Demons of the mind that Jesus cast out: he confronted them, and they knew him, and he revealed their unreality, and they went away. Perfect love casts out fear, the Bible teaches, and the love of Jesus casts out demons and the fear of demons. Demons, we read, have a terrible fear of the Lord, and quite right too.

The theory of hellfire sermonizing is, I suppose, that congregations can somehow be terrified into loving God; and that the God they fear is a cruel tyrant. The theory is wrong, of course: if, as Scripture says, God is love, then he can't pour out terror and pain, licking his divine lips as he does so: the God revealed in Jesus is not Nero or Caligula.

Pastorally, and very sadly indeed, I have met individuals who are spiritually crippled by their fear of God. One was a brilliant monk, Fr Harry Williams, CR, now long dead. Harry was the Chaplain at Trinity College, in Cambridge University, and was loved by generations of students, even atheists. One day he had a vision of the God he'd been inwardly cowering before for years and realized that the cruel tyrant of his imagination wasn't, and couldn't be, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus the Christ. He rejected the God of Fear and turned to the God of Love and was transformed psychologically. The fear was real: the God of whom Harry was afraid was not. That God was something he'd conjured up in his imagination. It was like the demons that haunted the man in the Gospel reading. And Harry, rather bravely, wrote a book exposing his experience to others to help them confront their fear too ("Some Day I'll Find You"). But Harry Williams' pathological fear is also not what Scripture means when it speaks of the fear of the Lord.

A former student came along to the office one Wednesday and blurted out that she was afraid of God. It took a lot of work but eventually she realized that her fear was bound up in childhood memories of her abusive father. She could hardly connect the words 'loving' and 'father' together because all she knew was fear. Every time she saw her father she felt sick with fear. "Yes," she said, "I really do love him because he is my father but I am still so afraid of him." She was a College Junior. And, she told me, "Even when we say "Our Father", something twists within me and I wince." The fear was real enough, but was irrational. Getting to the roots of that

fear and seeing it for what it was helped her. That was done by God to whom she turned for help and by a very gifted psychologist, not me, by the way, and hers was quite a long journey towards peace and it began when she faced her fear.

We have enough fear. If you are short of something to be afraid of this evening, you could fear another asteroid strike like the one that wiped out the dinosaurs 65 million years ago. Maybe you could imagine God up there in the Oort cloud right now winding up to pitch another earth-shattering rock at us. Or maybe you could fear accidents, bankruptcy, poverty, disease, earthquakes, hurricanes, tornados... snakes, spiders in the bathtub, terrorists, mad axe murderers lurking outside your Dorm Room, questions on exams that you haven't prepared for. Are any of these fears irrational? How would you connect such things to the reality of the God of Love? Could God drive out these fears? Would you fear a God who could do that?

Not all fears are trivial: throughout the entire lifetime of almost all Americans of your parents' generation, there was the very real prospect of nuclear war. My wife Sue was a schoolgirl in Florida: in the event of a nuclear attack, she and all the other children, were taught to "Duck and Cover." That cynical civil defense slogan instructed them to hide under their little school desks as the blast wave and fire and radiation killed them all. There was even a cheery little jingle, sung by a cartoon turtle called Bert. The online and text versions of this sermon cite the YouTube location where you can see it for yourself:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=IKqXu-5jw60

Ask your parents: even when they were little children they knew better and, except for those with ideologically brainwashed parents, their parents knew the truth too. They knew fear. Seven decades on, there are still enough nuclear weapons to kill every single human and animal many, many times over¹. Why do you think all those senior statesmen are so afraid of Iran building a bomb? The politicians and military were those little children fatuously, hopelessly, drilled to duck under their desks. Fear. Why aren't you afraid? Does anyone think the bomb has gone away just because Bert the Turtle has gone away? Where was Bert the Turtle when you were growing up?

In Britain, every schoolboy knew all about aircraft and rockets, and what our Government pretended was not so: the flight time from launch to impact of Russian nuclear warheads was four minutes. Try evacuating London in four minutes. And then it would be all over. For ever. Way back in 1965, an award-winning BBC Producer, Peter Watkins, made a black and white film, like a documentary, dramatizing what nuclear war would be like for Britain. It was called, "The War Game." The British Government banned the film on release as too horrifying for people to see. They were right: I found it horrifying. Although "The War Game" won the Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature in 1966, it remained banned until 1985.

Do you think our Christian faith has anything to offer to counteract such universal fear? Other than pious platitudes, that is? What would Jesus do? Duck and cover? What might Jesus the Christ call us to do? Ignoring the existence and threat of nuclear weapons directed at you, personally, has not made them go away, any more than pretending earth's atmospheric temperature increase is nothing to do

¹ Schell, J., "The Seventh Decade: *the new shape of nuclear danger*, Henry Holt, NY, 2007.

with human activity. Ignore it! Pretend it isn't real! It will go away: fear not. But then don't expect to find the peace which God promises in God's blessing at the end of this service.

To live with fear and not find ways to address it, turns the mind inward and poisons faith. A people who are endlessly afraid of immigrants, the economy, their fragile retirement funds, turn faith into its opposite. Isn't it strange, or hadn't you noticed? "Faith" has come to mean certainty: to be a Christian is to know answers that are always true. Fear has made an inversion of what 'faith' means in this culture. People of faith are the people who know facts and can quote Scripture, literally. They're no less afraid, just self-righteous and deluded. Such "faith" comes from demanding closure, resolution, clarity but we can only have that at the expense of real faith. It's sort of a mental duck and cover isn't it? And it derives from fear.

Jesus the Christ calls us into a perfect love that casts out fear but not so we shall know for sure that everything will work out and we will all live happily ever after, if we mentally duck and cover, in His name.

Let me remind you: in the post-communion prayer, every single week, we pray:

"Send us now into the world in peace,
and give us strength and courage
to love and serve you
with gladness and singleness of heart."

This is one of my favorite prayers. When we pray it together tonight, *listen* to what we are saying. Listen to what we are *asking*. We are not asking for answers, or safety, but for peace, strength and courage. Listen closely: has God answered this prayer in you? Are you afraid that God might grant you your prayer? ,

The beginning of Wisdom is the fear of the Lord, a matter of proportion and perspective and relationship to God. The fear of the Lord derives in its entirety from the gap between what we timidly ask, and then decline to adventure, and the strength and courage God would give and has made manifest in Christ our Lord. Some have prayed this prayer and realized that, in doing so, their own demons of fear have been cast out. Some have found that perfect love has even cast out the fear of the Lord, replacing Wisdom with that even greater gift of love.