The setting for Psalm 111 is a worship service where someone—a priest, perhaps?—speaks on behalf of the entire congregation, not unlike what the choir has done in singing today’s anthem. The psalm is a polished literary and liturgical composition. It begins with an opening “Praise the Lord,” and then follows the pattern of an alphabetic acrostic in which each of its 22 short lines begins with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet.(1)

My initial thought in going with Psalm 111 as today’s sermon text, rather than with one of the other 3 suggestions which the lectionary makes for the 20th Sunday in Ordinary Time, was that it, with its mention of studying with delight the works of the Lord and its emphasis on wisdom, would make for a dandy “Back to School” sermon as the big yellow buses get ready to roll once again and the campus ministry committee prepares to hand out water and lemonade next week when freshmen move into their dorms.

I also thought that one way to get some help with the wisdom theme would be to ask those who were present at our “Gathering Around the Word” discussion the other night to share their memories of particular experiences of study to which they would attach the word “delight.”

They helped a lot. By the time that the hour of discussion had concluded, someone had shared a memory of studying for a statistics final when everyone in the study group had gotten punchy as they conjured up the silliest examples of what the concept might be. Another had talked about the thrill of learning Hebrew in seminary. Someone else had related recollections stirred by reading the obituary of a former algebra teacher. And yet another person shared a memory of turning the lemon of a ghastly, boring training session into lemonade, that is, the class became for him a day-long people-watching session and a lot of fun.

Yes, we all talked about wisdom. But, if the truth be told, whenever we bumped up against verse 10, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom,” our discussion got snagged on the word fear.

I have a hunch that the Psalmist would have been surprised at this.

The Psalmist may have been surprised at the way we got tripped up on the “the fear of the Lord,” but I shouldn’t have been. How many times have I heard someone who has been in a situation of domestic violence share with me that she had been told by a minister that God would judge her if she left her marriage? Will I ever forget a friend telling me that whenever she or her brother accidentally tripped and fell on a sidewalk or ran into a door, her mother would cast a
dagger-like eye, a baleful stare, in their direction, her question, “What have you done now that God would punish you like that?” inflicting a deep fear of God that would linger long after their skinned knees had healed? I wish that I could say that it is rare for me to hear about an experience in someone’s personal life when he or she got a huge, forced dose of darkness and fear shoved down his or her throat in church, it pains me to say, and how it choked the faith right out of them. I wish that I could say that this is rare, but it isn’t. It’s all too common, I regret to say. Perhaps it has even happened to you.

No wonder that our discussion got caught on the fear part of the verse, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.”

And so, in our discussion the other night, we all needed to remind ourselves that the fear of God which chokes the life out of you is not the kind of fear of which the Psalmist was writing. God is the One who helps you to breathe…to breathe in life and light and air and freedom and forgiveness even when the atmosphere is heavy with anxiety and despair and guilt. Someone suggested that a better word for what the Psalmist was getting at is reverence. Or respect. Or appreciation.

Later, sometime after our discussion, I was thinking about “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom,” and I remembered my English 101 professor. Her name was Jo Allen Bradham. She strode into the first class of our freshman year---tall, striking, red-haired, a commanding presence in every way, and, before she spoke a single word, I was scared to death of her. And then she spoke. She started calling the roll of the class, and at every name, she quizzed the student about where she was from and her academic background. She came to my name. And when I said that I was from Columbia, South Carolina (That’s not quite true. I’m really from the rural community of Hopkins, but I knew that no one had ever heard of that), she asked me “Did you go to Dreher or to A.C. Flora?” Back in my day, Dreher and Flora were the “good” schools. Well, I didn’t go to Dreher or to Flora. I went to a high school out in the country, and when I said the name of my school, my professor’s eyebrows arched dramatically upward, and I will swear to this day that I heard her gasp. If I had been scared of her before, now I was flat-out quaking in my faux Bass Weejuns, for I knew that I had been found out for the unsophisticated, unlettered rube that I was positive I was.

As it turned out, English 101 affected my life in profound ways. Jo Allen Bradham’s flair, her voice, her bearing, her demanding discipline, her exacting scholarship, the way that she barked at her students’ heels and stayed with us until we got it…something of her love of literature and her care for the elegance of grammatical structure and her conviction that the hard way is better than the easy way is still in me, I suppose. To tell you the truth, I never totally shed what I would call “fear” of her, but the “fear,” it wasn’t something that shut students down. Rather, it opened us up. It exhilarated us and got our intellectual energy going and drew us out into a whole new world of understanding. (2)

Perhaps this is something of the understanding that the Psalmist intended when he wrote, “the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.”
The purest embodiment of this, of course, is Jesus himself, for as Paul wrote, Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God (I Corinthians 1: 24). And lest we confuse wisdom and intellectual knowledge, we are given a snapshot of the difference between the two in today’s Gospel lesson when Jesus, with Jo Allen Bradham-like intensity, riveted his professorial gaze upon his students, the disciples, while saying, “Do you really want to know who is the greatest in the kingdom? Then, look at these children…Annascott, Sarah, James. They get it in ways that you do not. When you become as they are, then you are truly wise.”

Is fear of the Lord the beginning of wisdom? As long as we catch a glimpse of what lies behind the Psalmist’s use of the word fear, the answer is yes.