

Sermon for the Third Sunday after Pentecost

‘Rather, fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.’

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We do not know the God we worship. We throw about niceties concerning Him, framing Him to be nothing but honeyed dripping sympathy, raining down from the sky, sweetening your tongue, that you might speak mellow, kind words to your friends, and pass on good feelings and positive thinking.

Such is a God that we would like to dream of, but it is not a God that you fear.

Endless Bible studies try to wipe away the term found throughout the Scriptures a thousand times, that we must *fear the Lord*, for *the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom*. They tell us that fear is just an odd idiom for respect or reverence, that it has nothing to do with the fear one feels when one is surrounded by darkness in the depth of the wilderness, where vicious beasts prowl.

Yet our Lord speaks to His disciples *in the dark*, and demands that we hear His *dark sayings*.

We fear the beasts of untamed land because we know they can, and even will, kill us. It [fear] is not an idiom. We do not show [the darkness and its host] them simple reverence or respect. We think of them, and tremble; even as we would if we were left alone on the top of a breathless mountain peak; even as we would if we were trapped beneath a collapsing mining shaft; we shudder, for such things shall destroy us; we cower, for under the power of such things, we are helpless. They have reign over us, and we, as slaves, quake.

The prophet Jeremiah proclaims the dread dominion of the Lord. *'O Lord, you have deceived me, and I was deceived. You are stronger than I, and you have prevailed, and I have become a laughingstock all the day.'*

He is no soft God, Our Lord Almighty, the God of Angels. For even the prophet shivers in fear before Him.

And why? It is as the Christ says in our Gospel reading: the Lord is *He who can destroy both body and soul in hell.* *Therefore, fear him.* Fear Him who destroys, not only all things visible, all you hold dear, your body and health, your possessions and titles, your career and accomplishments, but erases your being, that may torture your soul.

See now the Lord, who imprisons souls and deceives minds, who breaks the unrighteous and *makes the nations His footstool.* Him who made *the darkness called night, and the light called day.* Who *blinds that His power may be shown.* Who, *causes the sun to stand still* that armies may be slain.

This is our God, whose power is endless, *whom none can judge,* who *breaks the heathen with a rod of iron,* who *dashes them to pieces like a potters vessel.*

This, again I tell you, is *the beginning of wisdom,* to fear this God, the God whose *breath melts the earth.*

We are trained, in our civilized society, to think that whatever is dangerous is bad. Whatever can do harm is evil. But when someone is backed into a dark alley, With [the] murderous and maddened eyes [of another] fixed upon him, he does not hope to see [in the background] turning the corner a harmless man. He hopes to see a man that he can fear. A violent man. But a violent man that is on his side.

Only the stronger man can subdue the strong man. And only the most deceptive God can break the neck of the *great deceiver.* You see we fear God, because in Him lies every power. We love Him, because His every power He works on behalf of those whom He has *first loved.*

The prophet Jeremiah, after declaring the cunning and terror of the Lord cries out *'but the Lord is with me as a dread warrior; therefore my persecutors will be cut down.'*

The *beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord*, but the end of wisdom is *faith*. That trust in the Lord that knows beyond all contention that the endless power, the unending imperium of God not only exists, but exists to save you, even from the every shame and evil, even from the devil, the *accuser*, even from the *prince of the power of this world*.

Great then, and fearless, is the Christian, for he looks upon this world in every seeming sorrow and persecution, and, even as Wisdom herself, *laughs, for the Lord is with me, as a dread warrior. Him whose breath melts the earth.*

'Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one falls to the ground. But even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not therefore.'

Ye who first must fear the Lord [as the beginning of wisdom], fear not [as the end of faith], for the Lord is *with you, even unto the end of the age. 'A dread warrior.'*

Christ, who would not let one sparrow, *bought with half a pence, fall to the ground, apart from the will of the Father*, shall never let His friend, you, baptized Christian, who bears His name and shares His shame, whom He bought [not with a *half pence, but*] with the wholeness of His blood, [you, he will not let] fall, lest it be the *will of the Father*, lest you fall into the breast of Abraham, into all the glory of God. And there, you shall know peace.

For the Christ of God, who *breaks the nations*, and *rebukes the demons*, who brings violence unto all the evil of hell and shatters the citadel of Satan, 'is surely coming,' and [this Christ, having slain His enemies, in love] speaks a promise to you:

'I will acknowledge you before my Father, who is in heaven.'

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Preached by Pastor Fields

Sermon Texts: Jeremiah 20:7-13; Romans 6:12-23; Matthew 10:5a, 21-33.