

## THE BEGINNING OF WISDOM

TEXT: Proverbs 9:7-12

*Preached by Rev. Anne Robertson on January 9, 2022*

At one time or another, we all know what it feels like not to be prepared for something. And it's not a In FDR's 1933 inaugural address he famously said, "We have nothing to fear but fear itself." That's a concept we're going to talk about in a minute, but I want to point out that the idea was not original to FDR. In his 1851 journal, Henry David Thoreau said, "Nothing is so much to be feared as fear." But Thoreau didn't originate the idea either. If you go back two additional centuries to 1623, Francis Bacon said, "Nothing is terrible except fear itself." And, for the oldest known occurrence of the idea, you have to go back one more century to Michel de Montaigne where the idea, translated from the French, comes to us as "The thing in the world I am most afraid of is fear, that passion alone, in the trouble of it, exceeding all other accidents."

The thought keeps popping up in different context across the centuries because it's true. Fear feels awful. In fact, it feels so awful that we want to be rid of it more than just about anything else. Fear is the emotional equivalent of physical pain and works for the terrorist the same way that physical torture does for the sadist. It's a powerful motivator to get people to do what you want. In fact, I think fear is the second most powerful motivational force in existence, second only to love.

With all of that said, the fact that we will do almost anything to avoid feeling afraid, makes us vulnerable to a giant mistake. Fear is essential to our survival. Like physical pain, fear is deeply unpleasant—"terrible" as Francis Bacon put it, using the English word derived from terror. But we were created by God with an almost subconscious fear response because we could not survive without it.

God hard-wired into us a survival mechanism that responds to threat with a feeling that we hate so much we'll do just about anything to get rid of it. And if we are under threat, sometimes "just about anything" is what's required. We might have to run faster than we've ever run in our lives or take some other drastic action that otherwise we would never take, because it's the only way to safety.

Gaining a sense of safety is where the fear stops; and we're programmed to do whatever it takes to get there. If we succeed in reaching safety, we can reassess our situation more clearly and decide how to deal with the threat. None of that is bad. Most of us would not make it to adulthood without the ability to feel and respond to fear in the same way that a person's inability to feel physical pain is considered a life-threatening condition. Fear, like pain, is a gift to help us identify and address threats to our survival.

Can fear become disordered and debilitating? Absolutely. I've had an anxiety disorder for 30 years and know whereof I speak. Fear can also be manufactured and used to control and destroy people, institutions, and nations. That's what terrorists and authoritarians, both secular and religious, have done pretty much since there have been people on this earth. Fear is the favorite weapon of evil.

But to be able to overcome those problems, we first have to recognize that fear is not the enemy. Fear is a gift from God to keep us alive when danger is near. Fear is the emotion that wakes us from slumber, slaps us around and says, "Don't just sit there—the house is on fire—DO SOMETHING!!" And it will nag at us and disturb us until the misery of being afraid compels us to find a way to make it stop. There are also a million ways that we can mess up that response, which is why I'm going to be talking about fear and courage for a few weeks. But the starting point—the beginning of wisdom, if you will—is to recognize that fear plays a critical role in our survival.

There are tens of thousands of dead people and millions of sick people right this minute who are only dead or sick because someone they trusted told them not to be afraid of a deadly and debilitating virus. Many of those trusted people were well-meaning Christians who believed fear was bad and that faith was a literal cure-all. They were tragically wrong. Fear is not the thing we need to overcome—fear is what God gave us to keep us alive. The threat that causes the fear is our actual challenge. We'll go into that more in the coming weeks.

But for now, as odd as it sounds, there is a way in which we have to befriend fear and recognize it as the gift that it is before we can correctly assess a threat and respond appropriately. That's not easy. Threat assessment is an entire industry these days. But assessing the threat is impossible if we're spending all our energy fighting with the fear of the threat. That's a straw man. I think that's the meaning at the core of FDR's quote and all the rest that came before him. The first and most important threat to overcome is the fear of being afraid. Once we've made peace with the unpleasantness of fear and recognize that it exists to help and not hurt us, we can stop fighting it and look at and fairly assess the threat to which it points.

Without that understanding of fear, as a necessary and life-saving discomfort, we'll never come to grips with the whole pile of places in the Bible that tell us the same thing that Proverbs 9:10 tells us—that the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom. Many have agonized over and twisted that sentiment to say, "Well, it doesn't really mean to be afraid of God; it's more like awe, or reverence."

That's almost right; but the idea needs to be flipped. You know me and words—especially Hebrew words in the Bible. The word for fear in that verse and the others like it is *yirah*. The most common meaning of *yirah* is to be afraid. That's how it's translated in the vast majority of instances where it occurs in the Bible. It can mean respect and reverence, but the root meaning of the word is to be afraid, which means that respect and reverence spring from fear and not the other way around. There's no way to understand the seeming paradox of being afraid of a loving God as long as we insist on seeing fear as the enemy.

The idea might be easier to understand if we pull it out of the Bible and our religious baggage for a minute and think about the powerful forces of nature. Life is impossible without the sun, and there are few things more glorious than a bright sunny day. We run into the sunshine, bask in its warmth at the beach, and delight in the prisms it creates through icicles and rainbows. But there are countless ways that the sun can kill us from skin cancer to dehydration to heat stroke and more. Look too closely and we'll go blind. Elon Musk and Jeff Bezos aren't trying to take space tourists on a journey to the sun for a reason.

And it's not just the sun. The mountains and the ocean and the mighty oak are all both beloved and deadly. The only way to live safely among those marvelous, inspirational, wondrous gifts from God is by learning first to fear them. We coexist safely by recognizing that the forces of nature have a power beyond our own; a power that can end our lives if we don't treat them responsibly and exist in right relationship to them. The current state of our climate is teaching us that our arrogance in believing we are more powerful than the forces of the earth; our lack of fear of the planet and its abundant gifts; has led to abuse and disrespect that is ending with us reaping what we have sown.

We can't love creation if we don't respect it; and we can't respect it until we have learned to fear it. Otherwise, our love is mere sentimentality, an arrogance that believes we are the greater power and that all else exists only to please and serve us. Fear is where wisdom begins by teaching us our place in the created order; we are the keepers, the stewards. The Owner is another—One that is at once more strikingly beautiful than a sunrise over the ocean and more deadly than the eruption of molten lava—God.

If fear is the enemy; if we insist on believing that fear is a bad thing, instead of an unpleasant but life-saving thing, we will insist that God need not be feared. And if we don't begin with a fear of God, we can't move to respect and then onward to a love that can sustain us through all the hardships of life. We fear God first—that's where wisdom begins. That's not where wisdom ends; where wisdom leads will be another sermon in this series, but the fear of God is most assuredly where wisdom begins.

The initial fear—the recognition that, “Woah—this is a power that could crush me like a bug if I’m not careful,” is an unpleasant feeling. And it should be. It is the wake-up call that tells us we need to figure out how to coexist with this force in safety. It’s no different than the first time you swim in the ocean and get knocked down by a big wave or see someone get trampled by an elephant or eaten by lions. Oceans and elephants and lions are some of the most precious and wonderful things on God’s green earth; but they are powerful and, to clean up a phrase, if you mess around, you find out.

In 2004 I took a six-week sabbatical to lead a Methodist church in Stirling, Scotland. It was in the summer and I had rented a car, so I had most days free to tour what I could of the country, as long as I could get back to the house each night. On the outskirts of a nearby town is a little tea and souvenir shop attached to a woolen mill. I stopped there frequently in my travels, less for the tea than for a Highland Cow—or, as they would say it, a highland coo—named Hamish.

If you’re familiar with Highland cattle, you’ll know that they’re long-haired, and the fur often covers their eyes, much like an English Sheepdog. Both cows and bulls have horns. They’re known as the gentle giants of Scotland. Hamish was a lovely red Highland bull with large, wide horns that curled up toward the sky. He was in a large pasture next to the shop and was himself a bit of a tourist attraction. When Hamish died at age 22 in November of 2014, he was the oldest highland bull in the UK and the second oldest in the world. So, he was about 12 when I met him in 2004.

There were a few signs near the pasture fence. One of them said, “Do not grab Hamish by the horns.” Another sign asked that people not feed him cake. But my favorite sign said, “Hamish is friendly and gentle. He is also a bull. You should respect that.” I adored Hamish and stopped to say hello whenever I could. He was indeed friendly and gentle. But I did not pull on his horns, because I did in fact respect that he was a bull. Hamish could have done a number on me if he chose to, no matter how cute his shaggy face.

Because I knew to fear a bull, I came to respect his power. And because of that respect, I was able to love and interact safely with Hamish and he with me. It would be backward for me to say “well, respect doesn’t mean fear.” The respect itself arises from a healthy fear of a power greater than my own—in that case a 1700-pound bull with big, pointy horns.

The fear of God is the beginning of wisdom because it’s also the beginning of spirituality, which is where we’ll begin next week. It’s the initial awakening to the truth that, as glorious as we humans are, we are not the be all and end all in the universe. There are many forces that can be our undoing, including forces within ourselves. But, more than that, there’s the power beyond and within all powers; the One who can know the unknowable and see the unseen; the One who presides over life and death. The Christian word to describe the unbridled power that enlivens all things is God. God is friendly and gentle. God is also, well, God. You should respect that. Amen.