

October 11, 2015
Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost

“All Access Pass”
By Mary Anne Biggs

Hebrews 4:12-16 ~ Mark 10:17-31

What are you afraid of? What scares the fool out of you? Who intimidates you the most? A little bit of fear is a good thing ... it's a healthy impulse. You ought to be afraid of some things enough to respect them ... not the least of which is God. The Bible encourages us to this kind of awe filled fear of the majesty and might of God. *"The fear of God,"* declares Proverbs, *"is the beginning of wisdom."* I think sometimes, in our familiarity with God in the church, we may lose some of the wonder ... overlook the power ... forget whose name we are tossing so indiscreetly from our lips. Have you ever had somebody talk about you in your presence as if you weren't even there? We should always remember that the One we are so blithely discussing is in the room with us.

We forget sometimes, that religion is a serious business, or perhaps we prefer not to take it seriously, at least until we have to. Did you know that the root of the word "religion" is the Latin *ligio*, "to bind," ... the same word from which we get the word "ligament?" Religion is about connection ... about being bound to God and to one another. As long as life is moving along smoothly, it's easy to play at faith or even to disregard it altogether. But life has a way of reminding us of its danger ... its tragic dimension. And suddenly, we are dealing with raw fear, the terror of what might happen, and we are unprepared, suddenly seeking God, bargaining, longing for connection, needing community. And we are afraid.

What I'm trying to say today is that the Bible recognizes and affirms an appropriate fear of God based on our reasonable fear of life. A little bit of fear, like a little bit of guilt, is a good thing. We should not lose that healthy fear, no matter how insulated from life's terrors we may be for now. Like the rich young ruler in his search for God ... our wealth not only distracts us ... but often insulates us from real life reasons for connecting with God.

An American tourist in Jerusalem met up with a monk. The monk offered to show him around the monastery of which he was a part. On their tour they came to the monk's room ... and the tourist noticed no TV or radio, only one change of clothes, a towel and a blanket. He asked, "How do you live so simply?" The monk answered, "I imagine that you have in your hotel room only enough things to fill a suitcase; how do you live so simply?" To which the tourist replied, "But I'm just a tourist, I'm only traveling through." To which the monk said, "So am I, so am I."

We think about our stuff a lot ... we think about our money a lot, but the more we think about it, the less we understand it. The paper it's printed on isn't worth a red cent. There was a time you could take it to the bank and get gold or silver for it, but all you'd get now would be a blank stare.

If the government declared that the leaves of the trees were money so there would be enough for everybody, money would be worthless. It has worth only if there is not enough for everybody. It has worth only because the government declares that it has worth and because people trust the government in that one particular thing ... although in every other particular thing they wouldn't trust it around the corner.

The value of money, like stocks and bonds, goes up and down for reasons not even the experts can explain and at moments nobody can predict, so you can be a millionaire one moment and a pauper the next without lifting a finger. Great fortunes can be made and lost completely on paper. There are people who use up their entire lives making money so they can enjoy the lives they have entirely used up.

We never really hear how things turn out for the rich young ruler. We do know that he goes away from Jesus very sad, because he had great wealth. What we do not know is whether or not he later follows the command that Jesus gave him. Whether he does or doesn't is never mentioned and at one level it is not important for us to know. But Jesus does say something after the young man goes away that astonishes and perplexes his disciples. He says to them, "How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God."

Jesus says that it's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God. Maybe the reason is *not* that the rich are so wicked that they're kept out of the place ... but that they're so out of touch with reality that they can't see it's a place worth getting into. But Scripture tries to move beyond fear and our love of money to better reasons and a healthier means of access to God.

"The word of God is living and active," says the author of Hebrews, *"sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And before God no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account"* (Hebrews 4:12-13). This classic text says nothing about using the Bible as a sword to cut our opponents to pieces with creative proof texting in authoritative *tours de force*. It is talking about how God uses the Bible to cut us to pieces and lay us bare before the Divine eye. As Hebrews says elsewhere: *"It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God."*

My supervisor during my clinical pastoral education internship in a large Chicago hospital was a master in combining theology and psychology as healing disciplines. He was one of the most insightful intellects I have ever known, and his comments would cut deeply in two directions ... both into the intellectual weaknesses and the psychological miscues of a student pastor in those pastoral care dialogue papers called "verbatims." For those of you unfamiliar with that term, a verbatim is a word for word documentation of pastoral encounters with a patient that interns present to fellow interns and the supervisor for discussion and feedback.

At the time, I thought my supervisor was the least pastoral person I had ever met. I watched him shred us with his incisive questions, and leave us in pieces on the floor. "Why did you ask your patient that question, Mrs. Biggs? Did that have anything to do with what the patient needed or were you just personally curious?" "Why did you suddenly change the subject there, Mr. Smith?

Are you uncomfortable thinking about death? Whose death were you thinking about when you changed the subject, hers or your own?" And so on. It was a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of this man. But in time I came to realize the tremendous gift he gave us in demanding excellence ... in recognizing our own psychological vulnerabilities and faith issues which we bring to our pastoral task ... and in teaching us a respectful fear of doing damage ... to match our desire to give help. The truth is often painful, but nevertheless helpful, and though it may cut and make us bleed, it cuts away what is damaging and allows us to heal.

"The word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart." This is the healing cut of the surgeon, not the damaging violence of the enemy. And when we are seeking God out of our real life need ... and get past our self-righteous pride and denial long enough to listen to the truth that God tells us about ourselves through the scripture ... our Bible Studies become transforming moments of painful grace ... and our worship becomes an essential connection with God and community. *"And before God no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account."* You can't hide anything from God. God sees you. God knows you. God knows your innermost thoughts, your dreams, your fears, even those things you can't consciously admit about yourself. And that's comforting at one level, to know that someone knows us that well. But it's terrifying, too.

Immediately after reminding us of the power of God to dissect us where we sit, Hebrews also reminds us we have someone - provided by God - to intercede for us in the matter:

Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need (Hebrews 4:14-16).

The picture is the Jewish Temple of the Hebrew Scriptures. Talk about the institutionalization of the fear of God! The Temple was essentially a series of concentric squares successively restricting access to God from the outer courts to the innermost holy of holies. The priests were the gatekeepers, and the only person allowed to enter the holy of holies where God sat upon the ark, a symbolic throne, was the high priest ... and he only once a year, on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement ... when trembling he would slip into God's presence with the blood of the sacrifice to atone for the covenant impurities of himself and his people. Otherwise, contact with God was strictly controlled and essentially forbidden. But Hebrews says, that we have a high priest in Jesus who leads us boldly to the throne of grace to get the help from God that we need, and that we don't need any other priest or gatekeeper to make contact with God.

Like many of you, I've been fascinated with the construction that took place right outside our door. Praise the Lord it seems to be done! Although it was frustrating and noisy at times, I truly appreciated the way that they tried their utmost to make sure that we had access to our church these many weeks. As I thought about it I realized that access is what church is all about ... a place to move past fear and find connection with God and with God's people. And access is

what God has given us. Aside from those gatekeepers of the institutionalized faith who always want to restrict access for the sake of their own power ... or because of their unresolved fears ... the good news of the Christian religion is you that don't have to find some secret mantra or purge your personal imperfections and communal impurities to access God. You can't hide anything from God. God sees you. God knows you, knows everything about you. And still, God loves you.

The God we fear has sent someone to tell us we are beloved of God, every last one of us ... and to open a clear and unfailing access to God. He has sent Jesus to be the perfect priest because he knows us and understands the fears of human life. But he also knows God and understands the love which God pours out upon us from which nothing ... not even our worst fears realized ... can separate, disconnect, unbind us. And we have access to that love ... to that God ... through him.

What are you afraid of? What scares the fool out of you? Who intimidates you most? Charlie Brown says, "Happiness is having at least two things to look forward to and nothing to dread." And the message of the Bible is *dread not* ... let go of your fears ... because the one who holds all the power over you ... the one you that have the most reason to fear loves you ... and welcomes you, and wants to help you. Through Jesus Christ, you have immediate and constant access to God for living every moment of your life ... and for overcoming all of life's fears. You are connected. God wants you to succeed ... God will even help you if you ask and sometimes when you don't.

May we pray?

Creator and Sustainer, God of the Universe, thank you for being available to us for the living of our lives. Teach us to be more available to you that we might accomplish your purposes and embody your love and carry your invitation to this wonderful God-human partnership to everyone living in denial, isolation, deprivation, or fear. Let us show them how wide you have opened the doors to real life in Jesus' name. Amen.