

The Twelfth Sunday of Ordinary Time: The Fear of the Lord

It was the beginning of the sixth century before Christ, about the year 590. The Kingdom of Judah and its capital Jerusalem were terrified. The Babylonians were on the march. They had conquered the Assyrians. Tarsus and Damascus to the North had fallen. All of Mesopotamia, the nations between the Tigris and Euphrates had fallen. Now Jerusalem was threatened. How could the tiny Kingdom of Judah withstand such a huge enemy? What should the King do? He looked to his counselors. They told him to consider treaties with their pagan neighbors. This would mean trusting in the pagans rather than trusting in God. The King looked to God. There was a prophet in Jerusalem whom he respected, the prophet Jeremiah. The king saw him as someone who knew the truth and was not afraid to proclaim the truth. Jeremiah told the King that the Babylonians were agents of God about to punish the Jewish people for adopting pagan ways. The King needed to lead the people in trusting in God rather than in the pagans.

That is why Jeremiah was hated by the King's counselors. Today's first reading, from one of the sections of the *Book of the Prophet Jeremiah* referred to as the *Confession of Jeremiah*, relates how the King's counselors were looking for ways by which they could denounce him to the King, condemn him, even have him killed. Jeremiah is tested. Should he go along with the counselors and preserve his life? Should he get out of Jerusalem with its deadly politics? Or should he give witness to God and chance persecution from those gathered around the King. He decided to fear God rather than be afraid of men.

Fear God. That is a biblical concept that is often misunderstood. It does not mean that we should be afraid of God. It mean that we should respect God, reverence God, and be more concerned with fulfilling the Law of God than with the way others might respond to us.

In the Gospel reading for this Sunday Jesus says, "Do not let others intimidate you." He tells us to keep our priorities straight. He tells us that we should not even be afraid of people who could kill us. "Do not fear those who deprive the body of life but cannot destroy the soul." In one of the most beautiful passages in the New Testament, Jesus says, "Are not two sparrows sold for next to nothing? Yet not a single sparrow falls to the ground without your Father's consent. As for you, every hair of your head has been counted; so do not be afraid of anything. You are worth more than an entire flock of sparrows."

The Lord also says in that passage, "Fear Him who can throw body and soul into Gehenna." This is not a popular concept in our society. We emphasize God's compassion and mercy, and this is good, but we tend to refuse to acknowledge His justice. In our own minds we transform God into an imaginary figure that will not respond to our rejection of His life and laws. So a man commits adultery, leaves his wife and children, and then says, "God understands." Well maybe the *god* of his imagination might understand, but the real God was present when marriage vows were

made to Him and to his wife. God sees the turmoil the selfish man thrust upon a good wife and their beautiful children. God's mercy is always available, but if the man, or if any of us refuse to acknowledge our sins and seek forgiveness, we are committing the deadly sin of presumption, and, in effect, denigrating God to a creature of our imagination.

But if we live with a reverence and respect for the Lord, the biblical Fear of the Lord, if we do all we can to be God-fearing, then we do not have to be afraid of anything. When we live with a reverence and respect for the Lord, then all those concerns that the media delights in frightening us with will diminish. Will the corona virus destroy half the population of the world like the Black Plague destroyed half the population of Europe. We certainly pray that it will not, but we also know that live or die what matters is that we belong to the Lord. Will the world end this year? Everything else seems to be going wrong in 2026, so maybe, but probably not. The end of the world does not matter as long as we are united to God. Will World War III erupt when we least expect? Maybe, probably not. But it does not matter as long as we are united to God. Will Hurricane Mojo devastate the west coast of Florida destroying our homes? Maybe, probably not. But it does not matter as long as we are united to God. Will people attack us for being Christian? Absolutely. In fact there are many people in sections of Africa and India that are being attacked for being Christian every day. Will we be disparaged because we are against abortion, against capital punishment, against euthanasia, against taking children from their parents? We certainly will be attacked for promoting the totality of respect life, but disparagement does not matter as long as we are united to God.

We have nothing to fear as long as we fear the Lord. We are a lot more important to our Loving Father than a flock of sparrows; yet not one sparrow falls to the ground without our heavenly Father's concern. How much more does God value those creatures who are made in His image and likeness? We are worth infinitely more than many sparrows.

The devil has three terrible lies with which he assails us, sometimes directly, sometimes subtly. The first of the devil's lies is: You are not good enough. To that God answers, "I have made you good enough. I became one of you. I died for you; so I could raise you up with me to eternal life." The second lie of the devil is: You are alone. God answers, "I am with you always. I know you. I know every hair on your head. I know what you are going through, Together we can conquer all challenges, all fear." The third lie of the devil is one which all liars try to convince others of, that lie is simply: the other person is lying. In the case of the devil, his third great lie is that God has deceived us. He used this to great effect in the biblical sages' story about original sin. The devil told Adam and Eve that God was deceiving them to keep them from being like God. In our modern times, some people question that there might be other ways to live than that presented by the Church. To the accusation that God lies, God answers, "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life."

"Fear the Lord and do not be afraid of anything." the Lord says. You are worth

more than many sparrows.