

Lent: A Time For Renewal of Godly Fear

Romans 8:15

March 28, 2012

Lent 6

Every week, we come into this church and see this big cross. We think it is a nice decoration for our church and we like it. However, if you were a criminal living 2,000 years ago, you would fear the cross. The cross was a tool (way) for the government to execute people, much like an electric chair or hangman's noose.

The Roman government crucified many people. Two robbers were crucified with Jesus. They were probably filled with fear when they went to the cross. But they tried to hide their fear and appear brave. What did they do? They begin to mock Jesus. After all, the people, the soldiers, and even the religious leaders were mocking Jesus. So they joined in.

But then one of the robbers noticed something: Jesus was different. Jesus was not afraid. And, when people mocked Him, He didn't get angry and shout back. The robber heard Jesus say, "Father, forgive them because they don't know what they are doing."

Now, the robber began to become really afraid. This was a different kind of fear. It wasn't fear of pain, suffering, and dying. He began to get afraid because he began to understand who Jesus was. He wasn't a criminal. He was an innocent man. He was also very special - not an ordinary man. The thief realized that *He* (Jesus) was the Holy One of God. If He was the Holy One of God and dying, why was it happening? Was it because Pontius Pilate said, "Guilty! He must die!"? No. It was *God* Himself who said, "Guilty! He must die!"

The robber began to fear God. He shouted to the other robber, "Don't you fear God because you are now dying just like Jesus? We are receiving punishment fairly. We are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong." The robber thought, "If God would punish His Son who had done nothing wrong, then what will He do to me?" This robber had wasted his life, doing wrong and breaking the law. Now he was dying and would face God. What would God say? What would God do?

Then the robber's fear began to change. Maybe he thought, "The Holy One of God is dying here *with* me. Perhaps the Holy One of God is dying *for* me." What was the robber to do? He had no time to change, improve, and become a better person - he was near death. He couldn't save himself from death. He could only trust in this One who was crucified with him. He expressed that trust, saying, "Jesus, remember me when you come into Your kingdom." Remember *me!* Let Your kingdom claim *me!*

How would Jesus respond? This man had lived a very sinful life. This man had mocked Him before. And, now, because he was afraid, he expected help? You and I would probably reject him, but God's love is greater and stronger than our love. Jesus said, "I tell you the truth: today will be with me in paradise." His load of sin was lifted. His guilt was gone. He would die soon and face God, but without fear. Soon this robber would hear the Father say, "Welcome! I know you. You are mine. Come and receive the place prepared for you from all eternity."

People in this world are the same as that robber. We all have our fears. We fear the future. We fear our problems. We fear death. The robber knew he would die. We also know we will die, but we don't know *when*.

But do we fear God? Many people do not fear God. Maybe the reason people don't come to worship God very often and instead devote more time earning more money, accumulating more things, and experiencing more enjoyment for themselves and their family is because they don't fear God. Maybe people engage in premarital sex, live together, and divorce so easily is because they don't fear God's Law. Maybe so many of the bad things happening in our world today - rape, murder, theft, and so on - happen because people don't fear God's punishment.

Why this attitude of not fearing God? Our world says judging someone's behavior is wrong. Our world doesn't want people to feel guilty. Psychologists try to free people from guilt by saying they shouldn't feel guilty because they are not bad. Awhile back there was a book called "*I'm OK, You're OK*" It was a very popular book.

Maybe people don't fear God because preachers have been weak in their preaching. Many preachers speak about sin in a very general way so that people think sin means what other people do (however, I'm pretty good). Or, preachers talk very little about sin but talk very much about God's love. People may then think that God loves us and doesn't care what we do. Our behavior is not that bad.

Maybe people don't fear God because they think God doesn't notice them and their behavior. Sometimes, people try to hide their sinful behavior from me, the preacher. It's funny, but sad because they feel that if they fool me, then they have fooled God. But God is not that stupid. He knows all things.

We must understand very clearly: God has established His Laws of right and wrong. All of us have broken His laws in a variety of ways. Maybe we should have another book called "*I'm Not OK, And You're Not OK*". We cannot hide from Him. Everything we say, do, or think happens in His presence. He is aware of it. Sinful behavior, through the breaking of His Law - He doesn't like and cannot accept. He punishes sin with death and hell. That should make us afraid. When we realize that - just like the robber on the cross - we fear God.

But fearing God is not enough. The robber was afraid, but that didn't change anything. Some churches try to use fear to change people. Those preachers use fire and brimstone to frighten people into changing their lives. Some people reject God and religion because of that.

Other people become slaves to fear and they feel guilty all the time, never at peace. I knew a deaf man in California like that. He knew God's Word very well. He knew the Lutheran Confessions (*Teachings*) very well. But he never had peace. Why? Because He knew his sin so well and always felt guilty. When fearing God only means being afraid and guilt and sin are never removed, that is not proper fear of God. That is slavery to fear.

God doesn't want that. In our text it says, "You did not receive a spirit causing you to become a slave again (to) fear". He doesn't want us to be slaves to fear. God wants us to have proper fear of Him so that we repent and He can help us. The robber on the cross feared, but he did not become a

slave to fear. He turned toward Jesus in faith and said, "Jesus, remember me when You come into Your kingdom." Jesus responded, "I tell you the truth: today, you will be with me in paradise."

We do not have to become slaves to fear either. We, too, can turn to Jesus in faith and say, "Jesus, remember me! Not my sins and my guilt. Remember *me!* And what does Jesus do? Ignore you? Forget you? Reject you? No. Jesus went to that cross and died for you. He has already forgiven you, no matter what you have done. He has already removed your sins, no matter how many. He has already accepted you, no matter what your past life has been.

Our text says, "You have received the (Holy) Spirit who makes you God's children. The (Holy) Spirit helps us cry, "Abba! Father." We now have no reason to fear. We no longer hide our fear, sin, and shame. They have been exposed and forgiven. God is no longer angry with us, but loves us. We are no longer His enemies, but His children. We no longer fear to face Him, but address Him, "*Abba!* Father!" Jesus says to you as He said to the robber, "I tell you the truth: you will be with me in paradise."

During our Lent services, we have been considering RENEWal - to make new. Fear seems a pretty odd to renew. Why renew fear? Why not eliminate it? In the English language, fear can mean "afraid" or it can mean "awe" and "respect". We call that godly fear. The robber on the cross - after Jesus spoke to Him - how do you think he lived the short time left. Do you think he had fear - afraid? No. But he lived in fear of God - awe and respect. He knew and believed that He was in the presence of God and would continue so for all eternity.

In the same way, we can continue in fear, but not fear-afraid, but godly fear - awe and respect to God. We respect His holiness and notice our failures. Yet we live in the presence of God without being afraid. We experience heaven already when we gather together to hear God's Word here in church. God is truly present and truly speaks to us. We experience heaven already when we commune at the Lord's Supper for there on our altar Jesus is truly there with His body and blood in the bread and the wine.

Fear can be bad - ignoring God and feeling afraid. But godly fear is good - living in awe and respect of our great and wonderful God. Godly fear means turning to Jesus in faith and saying, "Lord, you remembered me. Help *me* to remember *You!*" God help you to do that during Lent and every day until Jesus says, "Today, you will be with me in Paradise." Amen.