

“...Because They Feared God...”
Sermon by Pastor Tom Warren
Peace United Church of Christ
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I want to talk a little bit about fear this morning. Fear is an appropriate topic in our world today. Fear has been an appropriate topic in our world perhaps from the beginning.

When I was growing up and going to elementary school up in New York State, I learned to fear. I learned to fear because once a month or once every couple of months, our classes in elementary school would trot out into the hallway, get down on our hands and knees and bury our heads to protect us from a bomb. Do you remember those drills? They stopped that sometime in my elementary school years, but we had it for a few years. It was always kind of vague to us exactly what we were covering up for because they were not really explicit about it but, of course, we learned over time that it was to protect us from an atomic bomb or other kind of a bomb, probably from the Soviet Union.

In college, superiors were a little more articulate. It was, if you remember the words of Ronald Reagan, the “evil empire” that was out there and was going to get us. Those were really tense years in history.

When the Soviet Union fell apart, there was a lull just for a moment, in our fears. There were talks, if you remember, about a peace dividend. That didn’t last very long. Of course, in “9/11”, when we really found out that we, in America, are a vulnerable people, fear was back front and center. In the immediate few years after “9/11”, we had terror alerts on our T. V. screens all the time so we are, as human beings, scared people, and we have many reasons to be scared. Some of them are real reasons and some of them are imagined reasons.

I want to talk about fear of God because, in this wonderful story of Shiphrah and Puah, the Hebrew midwives, it talks about their motivation for saving the male children after being told to kill the male children. Their motivation is the fear of God. Now I, and all of us, have been taught to fear many things but I, in particular, have never been taught to fear God. God, to me, has always been understood and taught to me as God of love, God who is intimate with us in our lives, God who is “warm and fuzzy”, if you will, and in seminary we had long discussions about scriptures where it talked about the fear of God. Many of us know Proverbs 9:10, where it says “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom”.

In seminary, at least when I was there 18 years ago, we didn’t like that word for God. We didn’t want to have a God that we should be fearful of, so the conversation went about translations and how we get from Hebrew to English, and perhaps a better translation for the word “fear” would be the word “awe”—to live in awe of God, to be respectful of God. So, that sort of fit better for a lot of us, to think about God and our relationship to God as being one of being in awe of God, but the word “fear” is used in the Bible, both in the Old and New Testaments, over 300 times. It is used quite often. Sometimes the word “fear” is used in reference to God like in the text this morning that the Hebrew midwives were fearful of God or that “the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom”. Sometimes it is used like that.

Many other times the word “fear” is used in reference relating to the world. If you remember one of Jesus’ phrases that he says again, and again, and again in the gospels, when he is talking to the disciples, he says again and again “Do not be afraid”, so this language about fear permeates the Bible and is used in a whole variety of ways, and if there is a problem with talking about being fearful of God, it has to do with some very good reasons. One is that the fear of God has been used throughout history to frighten and control people. The church, with its Catholic and Protestant expressions, has used sort of the fear of God to keep its people in line--increase your tithes by 25%

or God is going to get you! I would never say that, but that is the truth of the church. We have used the fear of God to try to make our people do what we want them to do.

There is also a sense when we talk about God and fearing God, referring to God as an angry and interventionist God, that God has really got a temper, that God will come down and zap us if we are not good or if we are not faithful or whatever, and that it is the God who smacks us with a ruler when we step out of line. For many people, this vision of God as a disciplinarian or as a “father God,” if you will, didn’t really work. There is a whole variety of reasons why the angry “father God” doesn’t work for people. One of the reasons is that it doesn’t square with our experience of God. Now maybe some folks here have experienced the angry God. It is possible, but for most of us, when we experience God, we really experience God in different ways, ways meant to be more subtle, more loving, and gentler. It just doesn’t square with the way we experience God and God’s spirit.

When I was a young teenager and quite confused about life, one of the attractions to church for me at that stage (which is really the stage when most kids really opt out of church) was that our priest, a woman priest, presented the loving God. It is not that she just talked about it, but she embodied, for me, this loving God, even motherly God, that I really needed at that point in my journey. That has always been the more palatable and attractive understanding of God for me because at a time in my life when I really needed and sought out God’s love, my priest was talking about the loving God.

The fearful God, this angry God, probably as a motivating factor for the way we live, we have not been able to replace that God, and Shiphrah and Puah are motivated by this fear, and I think in the text it wasn’t just awe. It was fear of God, and what that had to do with it was a fear of judgment. God would judge them. God would render judgment upon them. The idea of a judgmental God permeates our scriptures and is hard to get away from. We find that kind of interventionist judgmental God kind of embarrassing. We have a hard time imagining God intervening with judgment. That kind of God image sort of smacks up against our cultural ethic of tolerance which is a good habit. We want to be tolerant of other people, tolerant of other ways that other people live and other ways that people worship and so forth and so on, so the idea that a God would come down and smack us or give judgment upon our lives just doesn’t quite fit in the mix, but I think that is where this text really hinges, on the issue of how do we think about God as a judging God. I don’t believe that God punishes us in that way.

I have never experienced God’s wrath, as it were, coming down upon my life in a bolt of lightning, but what I do think is this and see if it works for you because I think the idea of judgment is very prominent in the scriptures. It is a notion of God that was with the earliest people of faith, and I think what the world is revealing to us, when we have so much to be fearful of (and as we talked about in our Sunday school class today) and there is so much chaos in the world, is that God’s judgment is always at work. That is to say that God’s judgment does not come upon our lives in a lightning bolt, in a moment and then disappear, but God’s judgment is always being revealed in the consequences of our lives. This judgment is subtle and slow. It is revealed in the currents of history. It is revealed in the tedious nature of day-to-day living. God’s intent for the world is blessing and life so that God’s judgment enacted in the consequences of our behavior, if that is how God acts in the world, then every single thing we do, every moment that we live, every decision that we make and the ways that we live, every second of our lives is critically important to how our world comes into being. So, if that is true, what we do is critically important. How we act, the consequences of our lives are really important.

Shiphrah and Puah did that little task of saving children. It was a task of faith that had enormous consequences, but if you think about those two midwives, those two women, that story cannot go on without faith. There is no Moses without Shiphrah and Puah, and Shiphrah and Puah are never, ever again mentioned in the scripture, yet there they are. They are named, and their little act of defiance against Pharaoh allows for that story of faith to go on, and that is our story. All it does is states simply that the little things that we do in life, the kind words that we share to a neighbor, or a friend, or a coworker, or a church member, those little things are very, very important and they could, in fact, be

critical to the way the rest of the story goes forward, so faith is, of course, being interested in the big issues, and we need to be about the big issues as much as we are able, but more importantly is what we do every single day of our lives—how we reach out to the people around us, how we show love, how we live life, and how we live in reference to God. Shiphrah and Puah is a great story, an inspirational story for all of us to reflect upon and to motivate us, not to be scared of God but certainly to shape our lives so that we are always living in reference to what God would have us do, so we give thanks today for Shiphrah and Puah who cause us to do small tasks of great significance in our lives. Thanks be to God. Amen.