

The Rev. Michael Burke
August 15, 2021

St. Mary's Episcopal Church
John 6:1-21



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In the name of God whose Way is loving, liberating, and life-giving,
Amen.

When you were younger, did you ever play a version of the game, "What would you wish for, if you could be granted any wish in the world?"

I know, you'd wish for three more wishes, right? Clever...

Another version of the same game asks, "If you had a million dollars, what would you buy?"

Hold that thought for a moment. In the Scriptures for today, we continue along with the Old Testament readings following the death of King David. We haven't had all that much to say about King David, as we have been reading snippets of his story each Sunday as part of the first reading. We've recounted a number of his terrible misdeeds, among them how he spied the young woman, Bathsheba, bathing on the roof, arranged for the death of her husband, violated her, and then took her as his own.

But David repents and turns back to God, praying, in the words of Psalm 51, "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me." By the time of today's passage, David has died and sleeps with his ancestors. The second child born to him and Bathsheba, Solomon, ascends to the throne, a youth just barely old enough to marry. Tradition holds that he was raised by the prophet Nathan, and the text tell us that Solomon loves God.

So one night, the young Solomon dreams that God says, "Ask what I should give you." And Solomon replies: "... O Lord my God, you have made your servant king in place of my father David, although I am only a little child; I do not know how to go out or come in. And your servant is in the midst of the people whom you have chosen, a great people, so numerous they cannot be numbered or counted. Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil; for who can govern this your great people?"

Solomon does not ask God for power, or for military victory, or for great wealth, but like his deeply flawed and yet repentant father David before him, he asks only for wisdom,

God is pleased. Wisdom, in the wider biblical narrative is the ability to discern good from evil, to listen deeply and well, and to judge rightly.¹ It is a gift from God, but given not only to royalty, but to all who seek after it and pursue it.

Wisdom is given for the benefit of all, not simply to prop up one person, but to impart a servant heart. It does not mean that God magically equips us for service and ministry, but that a heart that seeks wisdom first, and God's direction, is one open for preparation for ministry.

The final verse we read today of Psalm 111 begins; **"The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom."** This, I believe, needs some explaining.

The "fear of the Lord..." is one of those biblical phrases that has caused many to stumble or be misled. The word translated "fear" here is *yirah* (יִרְאָה), pronounced yir-ah). It has a very broad range of

¹ See: Proverbs 2:1-6,8:1-17; Job 29:7-25; Proverbs 9::10

meanings in the Bible. The classical sages, when speaking of *yirat HaShem*, would talk about three progressive levels of understanding²:

In the most beginning level, fear motivates you to **avoid unpleasant consequences**. In this sense, it is a good and important thing. We are afraid of bears and mother moose guarding their young. Good. Bears can eat you. In this context, fear is necessary. It is a survivor skill. We recognize the potential for pain and we instinctively move away from it. But fear can also arise from a concern about what *others* might think of you. Sometimes we follow and obey societal norms simply because we do not wish to incur and stand up against the anger or judgement of others. Plato, in *The Republic*³ points out the problem with this approach is that people will not act justly because they *love and value* justice, but only because they are “too weak to do injustice with impunity.” If you wonder if you are operating on this beginning level of “fear of the Lord,” as simply avoiding any negative consequences, ask yourself, honestly, what would you do if you had an “invisibility cloak,” and could do anything you want without *any* repercussions, legal issues, or anyone ever seeing, knowing, or finding out...

The second level of fear that the ancient scholars speak of, is fear that **God**, not other people, will punish you for any infractions, either in this life or the next. Again, in this level, we do good simply as a means of *self-preservation*. As popularly understood, or misunderstood, “karma” is like this. “What goes around, comes around, as they say.” Or in the Hebrew Scriptures, “You shall reap what you sow.” It’s true. Of course, up to a point.

But if you strive to grow in your spiritual life, *yirat HaShem*, “fear of the Lord” must be thought of as fruit on a tree, perhaps an apple or a sweet cherry. In the early stages it is small, green, hard and bitter to the tongue, good only for the birds. But if you cultivate it, care for it, water and feed it, it will ripen. Only then it is suitable to eat. Only then is it as God intends, sweet, nourishing, and life-giving.

For this reason, the rabbis teach that *yirat HaShem*, fear of the Lord, in its mature or ripened form, best translates into English as “wonder, awe, reverence, respect, leading a person to be filled with the wonder and glory of God.” Imagine walking up to the Grand Canyon and peering over the edge into the great beautiful chasm below. Your heart rises up within you and takes your breath away. You try to inhale, almost unable to speak. You look around you. You are but one tiny person, in the midst of an awesome and grand landscape. You simultaneously feel small and humble, and yet intricately connected to the vastness and beauty of what is before you. You feel at one with the earth and its magnificence. You are speechless before the grandeur and might and wonder of God’s creation. **THAT** is a full expression, of the “fear of the Lord.” **That** is the fruit that nourishes us. Beyond guilt and shame and mere avoidance of pain and discomfort.

² After the work of John J. at

<https://hebrew4christians.com/Scripture/Parashah/Summaries/Eikev/Yirah/yirah.html>

³ Plato, *The Republic*, 8.554 See: <https://www.openbookpublishers.com/htmlreader/978-1-80064-053-5/ch12.xhtml>

In its fully ripened form, suitable for partaking of, “fear of the Lord” is a sense of awe and wonder rooted in a deep reverence for life itself, and an intimate connection to God present in and through all creation.

We would all be healthier if we had grown up having learned THAT in third grade Sunday school.

In the Gospel, we again are hearing Jesus’s words about being the Bread of Life. In a passage that has strong Eucharistic overtones, Jesus says, “my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink.” Arising out of the Jewish tradition’s backdrop of sacrificial offering made for the reconciliation and healing of all, and to bind humanity with God, and humanity with one another, Jesus foreshadows his own death and imparts it with meaning.

“This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever.” The crowd is confused. Wait... what!? They dispute this. You are flesh and blood, not bread. Are we to eat flesh? What are you talking about?

Even for a crowd accustomed to their rabbis speaking in symbols and metaphor, this is too much.

But Jesus is speaking here of something deeper than a metaphor or simile. He is doing something beyond comparing the attributing of one thing (bread, that which feeds us and sustains us) with another thing (himself). Certainly, just as those in the crowd need daily bread to live so they need God each day. But bread and wine, even Jesus’ own body and blood, aren’t just symbols here. They don’t **just** point to something beyond themselves, as a signpost points the way, or as wise questions can lead us to discover the truth for ourselves. They certainly do that, but it goes well beyond that.

In Christ’s death and resurrection, we are given eyes to see and ears to hear of a deeper reality beyond words, God’s revelation that Love is stronger than death, that Justice and Mercy, though they be long delayed, will embrace, and kiss, and all shall be brought to completion through God and in the fullness of time.

U2 sang:

“I believe in the kingdom come
Then all the colors will bleed into one
Bleed into one
But yes I’m still running⁴”

In the Eucharist, whether it is in the sanctuary of our hearts, in the parking lot, or around the altar of the world or the altar in the church building, is *more than just a symbol, more than just a metaphor*.

The Eucharist participates in the same reality it is pointing towards. In the sacrament, God is present in an incomparable way. In the breaking of bread and the sharing of the cup, we are drawn into the very mystery of participation *with* God, and *in* God. We not only find ourselves swept up into union with God,

⁴ U2, *What I’m Looking For* lyrics © Polygram Int. Music Publishing B.V

but also with all those who have gone before us into that larger life with God, for even in death, life is changed but not ended. And we find that we are not alone, never alone, but re-membered as members of one another, the mystical Body of Christ in the world.

In this Body, as in the Eucharist, there are no “solitary Christians,” no “Lone Rangers,” no leftover pieces or left-behind persons. We all stand in awe, a fully mature, fully ripened sense of wonder filled with Grace and forgiveness and restoration and healing.

This is not just “strength for the journey” as if Holy Communion was only a filling station for souls running on fumes. It’s an integral part of the journey itself,

It is a mystery beyond language,
a celebration of new creation,
communion with the life-giving God
in whom we live and move and have our being.

It is holy ancient wisdom
in the language of hope and mercy and redemption,
in the key of inner peace.

So how can I keep...
How can I keep...
So how can I keep from singing?



Gibeon as seen from Nabi Samwil

Scripture for this week:

The Collect

Almighty God, you have given your only Son to be for us a sacrifice for sin, and also an example of godly life: Give us grace to receive thankfully the fruits of his redeeming work, and to follow daily in the blessed steps of his most holy life; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

Old Testament - 1 Kings 2:10-12; 3:3-14

David slept with his ancestors, and was buried in the city of David. The time that David reigned over Israel was forty years; he reigned seven years in Hebron, and thirty-three years in Jerusalem. So Solomon sat on the throne of his father David; and his kingdom was firmly established.

Solomon loved the Lord, walking in the statutes of his father David; only, he sacrificed and offered incense at the high places. The king went to Gibeon to sacrifice there, for that was the principal high place; Solomon used to offer a thousand burnt offerings on that altar. At Gibeon the Lord appeared to Solomon in a dream by night; and God said, "Ask what I should give you." And Solomon said, "You have shown great and steadfast love to your servant my father David, because he walked before you in faithfulness, in righteousness, and in uprightness of heart toward you; and you have kept for him this great and steadfast love, and have given him a son to sit on his throne today. And now, O Lord my God, you have made your servant king in place of my father David, although I am only a little child; I do not know how to go out or come in. And your servant is in the midst of the people whom you have chosen, a great people, so numerous they cannot be numbered or counted. Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil; for who can govern this your great people?"

It pleased the Lord that Solomon had asked this. God said to him, "Because you have asked this, and have not asked for yourself long life or riches, or for the life of your enemies, but have asked for yourself understanding to discern what is right, I now do according to your word. Indeed I give you a wise and discerning mind; no one like you has been before you and no one like you shall arise after you. I give you also what you have not asked, both riches and honor all your life; no other king shall compare with you. If you will walk in my ways, keeping my statutes and my commandments, as your father David walked, then I will lengthen your life."

The Psalm - Psalm 111

1 Hallelujah!; I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart, *
in the assembly of the upright, in the congregation.

2 Great are the deeds of the Lord! *
they are studied by all who delight in them.

3 His work is full of majesty and splendor, *
and his righteousness endures for ever.

4 He makes his marvelous works to be remembered; *
the Lord is gracious and full of compassion.

5 He gives food to those who fear him; *
he is ever mindful of his covenant.

6 He has shown his people the power of his works *
in giving them the lands of the nations.

7 The works of his hands are faithfulness and justice; *
all his commandments are sure.

8 They stand fast for ever and ever, *
because they are done in truth and equity.

9 He sent redemption to his people;
he commanded his covenant for ever; *
holy and awesome is his Name.

10 The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; *
those who act accordingly have a good understanding;
his praise endures for ever.

or

Old Testament - Proverbs 9:1-6

Wisdom has built her house,
she has hewn her seven pillars.
She has slaughtered her animals, she has mixed her wine,
she has also set her table.

She has sent out her servant-girls, she calls
 from the highest places in the town,
 "You that are simple, turn in here!"
 To those without sense she says,
 "Come, eat of my bread
 and drink of the wine I have mixed.
 Lay aside immaturity, and live,
 and walk in the way of insight."

The Psalm - Psalm 34:9-14

9 Fear the Lord, you that are his saints, *
 for those who fear him lack nothing.

10 The young lions lack and suffer hunger, *
 but those who seek the Lord lack nothing that is good.

11 Come, children, and listen to me; *
 I will teach you the fear of the Lord.

12 Who among you loves life *
 and desires long life to enjoy prosperity?

13 Keep your tongue from evil-speaking *
 and your lips from lying words.

14 Turn from evil and do good; *
 seek peace and pursue it.

The Epistle - Ephesians 5:15-20

Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, making the most of the time, because the days are evil. So do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit, as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The Gospel - John 6:51-58

Jesus said, "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh."

The Judeans then disputed among themselves, saying, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" So Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever."

On Wisdom:

Proverbs 2:1-6, 8:1-17

The Value of Wisdom

My child, if you accept my words
 and treasure up my commandments within you,
 making your ear attentive to wisdom
 and inclining your heart to understanding;
 if you indeed cry out for insight,
 and raise your voice for understanding;
 if you seek it like silver,
 and search for it as for hidden treasures—
 then you will understand the fear of the Lord
 and find the knowledge of God.
 For the Lord gives wisdom;
 from his mouth come knowledge and understanding;

The Gifts of Wisdom

Does not wisdom call,
 and does not understanding raise her voice?
 On the heights, beside the way,
 at the crossroads she takes her stand;
 beside the gates in front of the town,
 at the entrance of the portals she cries out:
 'To you, O people, I call,
 and my cry is to all that live.
 O simple ones, learn prudence;
 acquire intelligence, you who lack it.

Hear, for I will speak noble things,
and from my lips will come what is right;
for my mouth will utter truth;
wickedness is an abomination to my lips.
All the words of my mouth are righteous;
there is nothing twisted or crooked in them.
They are all straight to one who understands
and right to those who find knowledge.
Take my instruction instead of silver,
and knowledge rather than choice gold;
for wisdom is better than jewels,
and all that you may desire cannot compare with her.
I, wisdom, live with prudence,
and I attain knowledge and discretion.
The fear of the Lord is hatred of evil.
Pride and arrogance and the way of evil
and perverted speech I hate.
I have good advice and sound wisdom;
I have insight, I have strength.
By me kings reign,
and rulers decree what is just;
by me rulers rule,
and nobles, all who govern rightly.
I love those who love me,
and those who seek me diligently find me.

Job 29: 7-25

When I went out to the gate of the city,
when I took my seat in the square,
the young men saw me and withdrew,
and the aged rose up and stood;
the nobles refrained from talking,
and laid their hands on their mouths;
the voices of princes were hushed,
and their tongues stuck to the roof of their mouths.

When the ear heard, it commended me,
and when the eye saw, it approved;
because I delivered the poor who cried,
and the orphan who had no helper.

The blessing of the wretched came upon me,
and I caused the widow's heart to sing for joy.
I put on righteousness, and it clothed me;
my justice was like a robe and a turban.
I was eyes to the blind,
and feet to the lame.
I was a father to the needy,
and I championed the cause of the stranger.
I broke the fangs of the unrighteous,
and made them drop their prey from their teeth.
Then I thought, "I shall die in my nest,
and I shall multiply my days like the phoenix;
my roots spread out to the waters,
with the dew all night on my branches;
my glory was fresh with me,
and my bow ever new in my hand."

'They listened to me, and waited,
and kept silence for my counsel.
After I spoke they did not speak again,
and my word dropped upon them like dew.
They waited for me as for the rain;
they opened their mouths as for the spring rain.
I smiled on them when they had no confidence;
and the light of my countenance they did not extinguish.
I chose their way, and sat as chief,
and I lived like a king among his troops,
like one who comforts mourners.

Proverbs 9:10

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom,
and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight.

Playlist:

I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For

U2

I have climbed highest mountains

I have run through the fields

Only to be with you

Only to be with you

I have run

I have crawled

I have scaled these city walls

These city walls

Only to be with you

But I still haven't found what I'm looking for

I have kissed honey lips

Felt the healing in her fingertips

It burned like fire

This burning desire

I have spoke with the tongue of angels

I have held the hand of a devil

It was warm in the night

I was cold as a stone

But I still haven't found what I'm looking for

I believe in the kingdom come

Then all the colors will bleed into one

Bleed into one

But yes, I'm still running

You broke the bonds

And you loosed the chains

Carried the cross

Of my shame

Oh my shame

You know I believe it

But I still haven't found what I'm looking for

Songwriters: Clayton Adam / Evans David / Mullen Laurence / Hewson Paul David; I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For lyrics © Polygram Int. Music Publishing B.V.

Closer to the Light

Bruce Cockburn

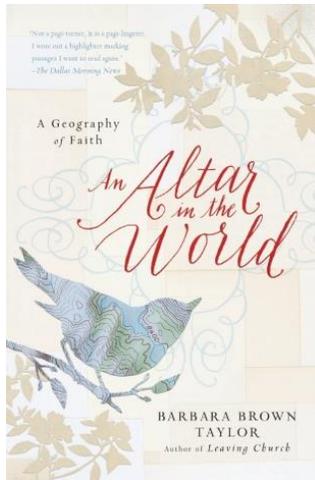
There you go
Swimming deeper into mystery
Here I remain
Only seeing where you used to be
Stared at the ceiling
'Til my ears filled up with tears
Never got to know you
And suddenly you're out of here

Gone from mystery into mystery
Gone from daylight into light
Another step deeper
Into darkness
Closer to the light

Walked outside
Summer moon was nearly down
Mist on the fields
Holy stillness all around
Death's no stranger
No stranger than the life I've seen
Still I cried
Still I begged to get you back again

Gone from mystery into mystery
Gone from daylight into light
Another step deeper
Into darkness
Closer to the light

Songwriters: Bruce Cockburn; Closer to the Light lyrics © Carlin America Inc



Excerpt from

“An Altar in the World: A Geography of Faith,”

By Barbara Brown Taylor

"Waiting is certainly a kind of prayer, especially if you can stand howling, wide-open spaces. Once, between the time my doctor gave me some bad news about my health and the time I was scheduled for surgery to have the bad thing cut out, I found it possible to love my life in ways that had never occurred to me before. I never thought I could value being able to walk around my house and look out all the windows. I never thought of the brickwork on the building where I worked as beautiful before, or the sound of people laughing on the sidewalk outside as welcome signs of life. I never allowed myself the time to take a bath instead of a shower, or to find out how long the hot water lasted if I were not in a hurry. Waiting, I found speechless intimacy with other people who were living in such wide-open spaces themselves. We lived in a whole different world from those who thought they were fine. We could spend fifteen minutes admiring a rose, a whole hour enjoying a meal. Even if my news had stayed bad instead of getting better, I like to think that these simple pleasures would not have lost their power to console me. They constituted an answer to my prayer for more life, even if that life turned out to be shorter than the one I thought I wanted.

"The same thing can happen while you are waiting to learn whether your child will come home, whether your marriage will last, whether the war will end, whether the market will recover. If uncertainties like these are the sort that move people to pray, then that is because they are the ones that remind us how little real sway we have. Our lives are inextricably bound up with the lives of other people. So much depends on things we can never control. A butterfly beats its wings in Beijing, making it impossible to predict the weather in New York.

"We are players, but we do not direct the play. Crucial decisions were made for us before we were even born. Did you decide to be born in Wichita? Was being a girl your first choice? Did you plan on growing up with three brothers, or none, to one parent or two? Even the decisions we make for ourselves seldom take us where we meant to go. I meant to stay married to the same person all my life. I meant to leave the South. I meant to give myself to the service of God until all my sharp edges were worn away.

"None of those things happened. Other things happened instead, many of them against my will. Some of them turned out better than I could have planned and others of them much worse. So far there is nothing that I would make un-happen, if that were within my power. While I pray daily to be delivered from the most awful things that can happen to human beings — land mines, wasting illness, killing poverty, civil wars — I give thanks for even the semi-terrible things that have happened to me, since they have shown me what is really real. They have made me tell the truth. They have quashed all my illusions of control, leaving me with no alternative but to receive my life as an unmitigated gift."