

Kirby Lawrence Hill

Abington Presbyterian Church

Mark 1:29-39

Psalm 147:1-11

February 7, 2021

FEAR AND HOPE

When you hear of someone undertaking a search these days, you are likely to wonder whether it is a physical search for something that is lost or whether the search involves an online search engine like Google or Bing. “Everyone is searching for you,” Jesus was told by his disciples. The Gospel of Mark tells us he had been staying at the house of Simon and Andrew, two of his disciples who were brothers who lived in the small town of Capernaum. Jesus had taught in the synagogue on the previous day and had healed a man there. Afterwards, it was found that Simon’s mother-in-law had a fever. Jesus then healed her. Word must have spread about this healer in town, because all kinds of sick people came to the house searching for this person. The stories they heard about him filled them with awe and hope. They crowded around the door of the house seeking what he could offer them. We are told that he healed many with various diseases that night.

As stories of the amazing ways that Jesus was revealing God’s power spread, more people gathered at the door of the house the next morning. But Jesus wasn’t in the house. Simon and Andrew did not know where he was. They must have gone out looking around the small town to see if he was out for a walk. Capernaum was right along the shoreline of the Galilean Sea, so they must have looked there too to see if he was visiting with some of the fisherfolk who were up at the crack of dawn. Finally, they found him in a nearby deserted place to which Jesus had gone even before the sun was up in order to pray. “Everyone is searching for you,” they told him.

We search for Jesus still as the One whom we affirm most clearly reveals to us who God is. In our search of the scriptures in our search for God, we often find something that makes us scratch our heads, as we do in our psalm reading today, where it affirms that “the Lord takes pleasure in those who fear him, in those who hope in his steadfast love.” It is understandable for us to place our hope in God, but the English word ‘fear’ in relation to God can possibly lead our search for the

divine astray. For as that word is most commonly used, it is something like what happens to our family's dog, Sophie, when she hears loud fireworks or thunder and quickly retreats to the basement of our house trying to get as far away from the scary sounds she doesn't understand that leave her trembling.

Merriam Webster dictionary lists as its first definition of the noun fear: an unpleasant often strong emotion caused by anticipation or awareness of danger. I don't believe the Lord takes pleasure in provoking this kind of human response. The third definition of the word fear fits much better: profound reverence and awe especially toward God. ¹ That is much more in keeping with the meaning of the Hebrew word 'yare' which is what the translators often put into English with the word 'fear.'

There are some preachers, politicians, and parents who seek to use fear as a motivating force. Fear is a powerful human emotion which can lead to action, but those who use it in non-emergency situations may well damage their relationship with others. The youngster who repeatedly cries 'Wolf, wolf!' to get the attention of others is soon understood to be untrustworthy. I don't believe God wants or needs to scare people as a grab for the spotlight or in order to feel more powerful. I don't think God wants us cowering in the basement when we sense the divine presence.

It has been almost a hundred years since a German theologian named Rudolf Otto wrote about the holiness of God using the Latin phrases 'mysterium tremendum' and 'mysterium fascinosum' – the mystery that is tremendous and the mystery that fascinates. ² In our search for God, we might be attracted to focus more on the latter than the former, but scripture indicates that the identity of God calls for both awe in response to God's power and hope in response to God's love.

We do not always take time to recognize the appropriate awe which comes from an awareness of who God is and what God has done. My wife, Nancy, and I first met on a Presbyterian Peacemaking Program trip to Israel and the Palestinian areas which was designed to help our group grow in understanding the possibilities and challenges of moving toward a just peace. The plans for our group's return from being in the Middle East, had us scheduled for a layover in Amsterdam, where we would have the better part of a day and a good night's sleep before our return to the

U.S. A number of folks on the trip who had never been to that city planned to go to the Van Gogh Museum there, where over 200 of his paintings are displayed. However, weather delayed our flight and it was mid-afternoon before we touched down at the Amsterdam airport. We quickly got to the hotel and then caught a taxi to the museum. When we arrived at the museum it was about 4:15 and staff there discouraged us from paying to enter since the museum closed at 5:00. With it likely being the only opportunity we would have to see many of the artist's great masterpieces, we insisted that we wanted to go on in to see all that we could. I remember the joy and the frustration of seeing these inspiring great works of art and having only ten or fifteen seconds to take it in each one before I rushed to the next great painting.

The good news is when it comes to God's great works, you and I live in and get to spend our whole lives in the museum of the greatest artist. But we have a capacity to busy ourselves with less fulfilling searches. Will we take our time to notice, to be filled with awe when God's artistic hand paints before us an inspiring changing sunrise or sunset? Will we relish the awesome sense of the wonders of our vast universe along with the marvel that the God who is bigger than the universe delights in the amazing birth of each little baby? Will we allow our hearts to be filled with gratitude when we recognize the incredibly balanced ways God provides for the needs of all of the creatures within our world? Will we pause enough to take note that God has given humanity the capacity to research illnesses and manufacture vaccines that evoke a response in the masterpieces of our bodies that will protect us and others from the frightening corona virus? We have a God who is more powerful than even death, whose love runs deeper than even our worst moment in time!

Such indications of who God is and what God is doing are awesome, bordering on being so much greater than our understanding. Yet, we do not need to be afraid of what is beyond our capacity to understand. For there is plenty of reason to be filled with hope that God indeed seeks to embrace us with steadfast love even when we find ourselves too busy or too hurried to conduct our own search of God's awesomeness.

When we use an online search engine to search for information about one thing or another, we may get an overwhelming list of thousands of web addresses where we

can go to find out more. I hope that we can develop a spiritual search engine of our own that diligently relishes and delights in the many indications that we need not fear our awesome Creator, our loving Redeemer, our caring Sustainer! Such a focus will lead us to a hope that is stronger than our greatest fears because it is based in who God is and what God does. Thanks be unto God. Amen.

¹ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/fear>

² Rudolf Otto, The Idea of the Holy, Oxford University Press, 1936