

Bethel AME Church
Insights from the Rabbis 2B
Class Notes 10/17/21

In this class, I have pushed us to reconsider and wrestle with parts of the Bible we generally avoid. When we left off in June, we were in the middle of looking at one of those topics: the fear of the Lord. The Bible proclaims: “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom” (Prov. 9:10. Interestingly, the book of Proverbs begins with the statement: “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge” [1:9], which is not quite the same thing.) Talk about the fear of the Lord runs throughout the Scriptures even though we don’t hear a lot about it in church. We saw that although the word “fear” is usually interpreted to mean “reverence,” in looking at many of the passages in which it occurs we saw that it also refers simply to being afraid. Both ideas are part of that one word.

One of the sources of that fear is the threat of punishment by God. As with children, that fear is only the beginning of wisdom but it is part of biblical teaching. Sin carries consequences, and while God is a forgiving God, God also punishes people from time to time. The hope is that children learn to do what is right for other more noble reasons, but humans sometimes need the threat of punishment to keep them in line.

We don’t like to talk about God this way but the Bible does. Christians like to use biblical language about judgment to talk about people “out there,” non-Christian people in the world. But as we saw when we talked about crime and punishment, the Bible’s message of judgment, whether it comes from the OT prophets or Jesus himself, is almost always directed at God’s people. It is precisely entering into a covenant relationship with God that makes you particularly liable to God’s judgment. The church needs to rediscover a genuine fear of the Lord in order to be able to consider more carefully how we have failed to live up to our calling.

A second source of our fear of the Lord is God’s holiness. We saw that in ancient times, holiness does not primarily refer to moral behavior or being good, but rather to the strange and dangerous otherness of the divine being. At the heart of the meaning of holiness is separation, the sense of being distinct from the natural, the ordinary, everyday life. Holiness means association with the supernatural. It refers to what is unique and beyond our power to control or understand. The opposite of holy is not sinful but common, ordinary, everyday. So the Sabbath is to be kept holy, as distinct from the rest of the days of the week. All of the days of the week are good but the Sabbath is holy. Basically,

holiness means: belonging to God. Certain things are holy, or become holy (like the sacrificial offerings), because they are dedicated to God and therefore must be treated in a different way from common objects. If not, there can be drastic consequences because of who God is. God's holiness is fearsome, and like electricity or nuclear power, is both a blessing and a danger. Approaching God's sanctuary, God's holy place, is scary. Again, we don't really like to think of God this way: God is our favorite friend, our buddy, our sugar daddy whose main purpose is to be our provider and make sure that everything in our lives works out for our own personal benefit. We don't really fear the Holy One of Israel.

3. Fear and Worship

A real appreciation for God's holiness naturally leads to worship. The fear of the Lord is also at the heart of worship, again an idea that is usually ignored in the modern church. Biblically, worship is an act of reverent fear. Let me suggest that one of the most important sources for understanding the connection between the fear of the Lord and worship is the book of Job, even though I doubt that it has ever been part of a workshop on worship or the subject of a praise and worship song.

I am increasingly convinced of the central importance of the book of Job for understanding God and God's dealings with the world. Its main focus, of course, is a challenge to the comfortable idea that God always has to make things work out well for the righteous and that suffering must be the result of sin. This is a very popular conception among some Christians whose God is really Santa Claus, someone who rewards those who have been good all year with lots of stuff. Idolatry, you remember, is one of the main reasons for judgment in the Bible and Santa is one of America's most powerful idols, one that has been enshrined in the so-called prosperity gospel that has infected so much of the church. The book of Job condemns such thinking.

Job also gives us a perspective on the creation story that is different from the traditional one that sees humans as the center of God's creative purposes. Humans are an important part of God's creation but not everything was created for human benefit or consumption. God points Job to vast unpopulated areas of the world that exist apart from and independent of any human need or help. Job also disputes the idea that the world was created perfect and complete and that human sin somehow damaged it. Job shows us a creation that still contains chaos, darkness, untamed aspects that while under God's control are a challenge for humans. Job has revolutionized how I read Genesis.

The fear of the Lord is another central theme in Job. Job helps us understand the complex relationship between fear and reverence for God, and how that is the basis for worship. Job is introduced as a man who fears God (1:1, 8). In that verse the primary meaning of this is that he lives a righteous life out of respect and reverence for God. But the writer immediately challenges that idea with the most important question in the book: “Does Job fear God for nothing?” (1:9). Does Job’s reverence for God come simply because God has richly blessed him? Is Job faithful only because God is his provider? Would he continue to be loyal to God if all that was taken away from him and he was given a miserable life? The whole book serves as a test of Job’s reverence for God.

Once the disasters start to fall on Job, his fear of the Lord takes on a very different nature. Now he voices his dread of God’s presence in his life, the terror he is experiencing because of the bad things God is inflicting on him *even though he is innocent* (9:34-35). He wishes he could escape from God altogether, perhaps in Sheol, in the grave, where he would be safe from any further trouble (14:13). Note that he does not wish to die and go to “heaven.” Heaven is the source of his misery. There is little reverence (or patience) in his angry tirades against the Lord; now he is afraid of the power God holds over his life and prays to be freed from it. God is terrifying him.

In the end, Job’s original positive reverence for the Lord is restored to him not by threatening him with more disaster nor by promising to bless him, but by God’s dramatic speech asking Job to contemplate the bizarre and mysterious wonders of creation which are beyond human power to control or understand (chapters 38-41). Job’s response to the unfathomable majesty of God and of God’s world is to stop talking, to bow in silent awe and reverence before “things too wonderful for me to understand” (42:2).

I have to admit that I am not a person with a strong appreciation for nature. I am a city boy; nature makes me nervous. I get uncomfortable when I get too far away from sidewalks and paved roads and hot showers. I have no desire to risk my life scuba diving with Pastor Hammond or going into outer space with Jeff Bezos. I don’t really feel sorry for the people who die trying to climb Mount Everest; I just look at it as an evolutionary improvement of the gene pool. To me, the vast expanses of the natural world, whether it be the far reaches of distant galaxies or the unlit ocean abysses, are a source of fear more than reverence.

Humans have always imagined monstrous beings residing in the unexplored regions of the world. Medieval maps of distant oceans contained the inscription, “Here be dragons.” More recently the dark ocean depths have

yielded up horrific looking creatures that live in dark worlds unknown to us. We imagine strange “aliens” living in outer space and fear their encroachment on our civilized earth. These all represent the limits of our knowledge and of our ability to control the world, our fears about what lies beyond. The book of Job points us to these aspects of the world as a way of giving us a sense of God’s power and incomprehensible strangeness, God’s holy otherness.

But one of the most awe-inspiring experiences of my life was visiting the Grand Canyon. It was an experience of both fear and awe, fear because there were no railings and if you were not careful you could fall to your death. (Our tour guide said they lose several people each year, usually people getting too close to the edge taking pictures.) But my primary sensation was wonder and amazement at the beauty and majesty and quiet power of the canyon. Pictures cannot do it justice. You have to be there to get the stunning, mind-boggling sense of its magnificence and scope. And its immense size means that you cannot fully take in the whole thing. It is literally beyond human understanding.

That sense of awe, says Rabbi Heschel, points us to a reality beyond ourselves. It is this overwhelming wonder at the power and beauty and grandeur and mystery of creation that Rabbi Heschel sees as the beginning of our awareness of God (*God in Search of Man*, pp. 33 ff.). Biblical poetry celebrates what he calls the “sublime” in nature, that aspect of creation that we see, or at least sense, but are unable to express in words and theories. The heavens endlessly declare God’s glory even though paradoxically they do not speak (Psalm 19:1-4 NIV/NRSV; the KJV misses the point and adds the word “where,” which is not in the text and which completely changes its meaning). The heavens wordlessly proclaim a reality beyond human language. Looking up and out at God’s creation is overwhelming and gives us a sense of our own insignificance (Psalm 8:3-4). But it also tells us that we like all of creation are fearfully and wonderfully made (Psalm 139:14), that there is something awe-inspiring and mysterious about humanity itself, much more than can be put into words.

For Heschel, awe is more than an emotion: “It is a way of understanding, an act of insight into a meaning that is greater than ourselves” (p. 74). Through awe, he says, we catch a glimpse of a transcendent reality, we become aware of aspects of the world that are beyond our limited abilities to understand and control. We know God not through scientific theories or philosophical abstractions, but in “moments when we are stirred beyond words, [in] instants of wonder, awe, praise, fear, trembling and radical amazement” (p. 131). “To be spiritual,” Heschel says elsewhere, “is to be amazed.” Heschel says that this radical amazement, the wonder not only at what we see but the fact that we can

see it at all, is the root of faith (p. 46-47). Awe, the reverent fear of the Lord, is the beginning of wisdom, the beginning of learning how to see the world from God's point of view.

God, says Heschel, is the invisible mystery behind what is visible. The Bible makes this point repeatedly. God dwells in deep darkness (1 Kings 8:12; Psalm 97:2), beyond human understanding (Job 36:26; Isaiah 55:8-9). Even when God appears to humans, the divine reality is concealed. God speaks out of a burning bush, out of a storm cloud on top of Mt. Sinai. When the Lord appears to Isaiah, the glorious divine majesty shakes the walls of the Temple and fills it with smoke (6:1-4). The bizarre nature of the celestial chariot that appears to Ezekiel includes fantastic fiery creatures who generate lightning, and a brilliant glowing human-like figure who radiates fire and light (Ezekiel 1). The prophet struggles to find the words to describe this vision and the more he sees, the more words fail to capture its reality. In the end he can only speak haltingly of "the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord" (v. 28).

The book of Job ends with this same sense of mystery about God and God's creation. God does "appear" to Job, but Job sees nothing, only hears a voice out of the midst of a powerful windstorm. At that point Job admits that he has no more words to say about who God is or about the wisdom of God's governance of the world. Job is simply stunned by the wonder of it all.