

**Westminster Presbyterian Church + 533 S. Walnut St. + Springfield, IL 62704**

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**Gratitude: A to Z**

Psalm 111:1a

Fear can be an overpowering thing. Every year, about this time, I cannot help but remember the fear with which I began my freshman year of high school. My town's high school was huge, around 2,500 students. It was made up of several big buildings and there was a street that carved a line between the two main parts. The school was full of lockers and gym showers and boys who already had mustaches and girls who fought in the hallways. I was terrified. My mother, being my mother, spent the entire summer driving me up that street and parking in between those two buildings. "See," she would say brightly, "there's nothing to be afraid of here. High school will be fun." All the while I would sit in the passenger seat and sweat. I would beg her to keep going so I didn't have to think about what would happen in the fall. We must have gone through this little exercise at least 15 times that summer before 9<sup>th</sup> grade, my mother and I sitting in the car as she tried to ease me into the next step of life.

By now you can probably tell, I had a lot of fears. It took years, of course, to find out that other kids were feeling nervous too. It's taken years, as well, to learn that the fear does not go away. As people, we are afraid of so many things, some real and many imagined. In our psalms today we are reminded that we need only have fear for one thing and that is God. This is a strange concept for us to hear when we so often speak of loving God and relying on God. Fearing God doesn't seem like the kind of relationship we want to have with our Creator. Really, do we need one more thing to fear?

But this is not what it means to fear God. To fear God means to recognize God's amazing power and work in this world and to be in wonder and awe at that work because as Psalm 111 sings, those works are full of honor and majesty. In fact, the root word in Hebrew for "fear" is the same root word as "awesome." So when we stand in that place of realization, when we stand and realize the awesomeness of God, then we are "fearing" God. Now, a little bit of shaking in our boots might still happen when we begin to grasp the overpowering might and mercy of our Creator. We should not deny *that* part of fear that comes with healthy respect either. But the thing is, we learn in these psalms that once that fear is grounded into our lives, once we stand in awe of God and recognize the power of that, we do not become more fearful people. Instead, we lose all those other fears. They cannot touch us now. We are too filled with wonder and gratitude to have fear take hold.

It may be strange to have these two psalms as our readings for this morning but they belong together. They have parallel patterns with the second one building on the first. Psalm 111 is all about the character of God: about God's mercy and power and graciousness and faithfulness. Psalm 112 is about the character of humans once they fear only God. It is about how strong and merciful and faithful *they* can become when they only have one fear in their life; when only God is given that kind of power. These two psalms are also acrostic poems. This means that the poems each have 22 stanzas and each stanza begins with the next letter of the Hebrew alphabet. By the end of the psalm, the writer has worked his way through the entire alphabet which, in the case of Hebrew, means from aleph to tav. You could say it's a much more complex version of "A is for Apple."

This is quite a feat for the poet and even of mild interest to us but this acrostic style has its own meaning behind it as well. Any acrostic psalm is telling us that God has all areas of our life covered, from A-Z. In the case of our psalms, they are teaching us why we should be grateful to God and then how that gratitude will change our lives. So, here in these two songs we learn that gratitude should be the grounding of our lives. It should be our A to Z.

Remember how the songs led us there? In our first Psalm we learn our place in God's creation. We are in awe as we wonder at the way God has shown us mercy and provided for us in the past. We are amazed at the deeds God has been able to accomplish in our lives. We cannot help but stand in gratitude for that. Then Psalm 112 follows and shows the powerful life we can have when we stand in that place of gratitude. It can, not only begin us down the path of wisdom, but also it can also give us happiness. This life of gratitude will not keep us from difficult times. As the writer shares "evil tidings will come." What a life grounded in gratitude will do is it will give us the strength to stand in those times, as the psalm says, "to rise in the darkness as a light."

I wish I could stand here and tell you that I no longer fear anything but God but, sadly, I am still afraid of many things. There are days I wish my mom could drive me up some street somewhere and help ease those fears. Very few of us wouldn't appreciate that kind of help. These songs from our scripture are that help. They remind us that each day is an opportunity to stand in awe before God. Each day we are called to be fearful of the right things; to be stunned by the real power. If we can do that, then gratitude will take over and not the fear.

Let's be really honest about fear for a moment. Frankly, when I sat in that car, fearful of the high school years to come, I was not afraid I would not be wise enough. Please don't hear me saying I think I'm an Einstein. This simply was not the root of my fear. It is not the root of many of our fears. No, I had let fear take over because I did not know if there was any happiness to be found down the road. I wasn't sure I could ever be happy in high school. Even though that was many years ago, it still holds true. So many of us are afraid of things because we just don't know if happiness can be found if and when those fears come true. Can there be happiness if I don't have a job? Can there be happiness when the kids leave home? Can there be happiness if my body begins to fail me? We are certain that our joy will end if our fears come to pass and so those fears hold us back.

That is why it is a wonderful gift that our psalms tell us not only does wisdom begin when we live in gratitude to God but, as Psalm 112 begins, those who fear the Lord are also "happy." They live in delight. Our true happiness will be found, not when we give into our fears or run from them or live under them. Our true happiness will be found when we have only one fear and we allow the blessings of gratitude to take over the rest. Amen.