

Bethel AME Church
Insights from the Rabbis 2B
Class Notes 11/7/21

We have been talking about the fear of the Lord specifically in relationship to God's holiness. We saw that holiness does not primarily refer to goodness but rather to the difference between the divine reality and the human world. Holiness means distinct, separate from ordinary life, super-natural. There is a dangerous element to holiness, and a strangeness. In a word, God is weird.

God's speech to Job emphasizes this point as a way of telling Job that he will never fully understand God's ways. God holds out as examples the bizarre and inscrutable nature of some of the earth's creatures as a way of illustrating the bizarre and inscrutable nature of their Creator. In many ways the book of Job challenges our comfortable ideas about God. We may pay pious lip service to the Lord's declaration that "My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways" (Is. 55:8), but we don't really take that seriously. We act as if we think we understand just how God operates.

In his discussion of the awesome and mysterious nature of God's creation, Rabbi Heschel says that God is a mystery but the mystery of creation is not God. God is the meaning behind the mystery (p. 66), but as we see in the book of Job, humans do not have full access to that meaning. We can only recognize that it is there, that it is greater than us, and that it has a claim on our lives. God will always remain mysterious, beyond our comprehension.

The passage of blessings and curses in Deuteronomy with which we started this topic hints at this same truth. There are still secret things that only God knows (Deut. 29:29). Israel has been given Torah to establish the covenant relationship and teach them how to live, but our knowledge is always incomplete and we will never fully be able to explain God's acts of blessing and cursing.

That, of course, is the main point of the book of Job. Many people misread its "happy" ending, where Job's prosperous life is restored to him. We read it in terms of the oft-repeated claim, "Weeping may endure for a night but joy comes in the morning" (Psalm 30:5). Sure, Job has had to go through bad times but in the end because of his faithfulness God makes everything allright for him. But the text does not say that, and such a reading ignores what has actually happened to Job. The restoration cannot possibly make up for what Job has had to suffer. Nothing can replace or compensate for the deaths of his ten children. Job has suffered terribly and that experience will remain with him for the rest of his life.

In addition, if we take the teaching of the book of Job seriously, if we have learned anything after wading through its lengthy debates, then we will see that Job no more deserves the renewed prosperity that comes to him in the end than he deserved the suffering that was inflicted upon him in the beginning. Job is not being rewarded for his faithfulness any more than he was being punished for his unfaithfulness. Our knowledge of why such things happen remains incomplete, and Job himself never finds out what it was all about.

Elsewhere, the Bible affirms that God's system of governing the world is to a great extent hidden from human beings (Eccl. 11:5). The apostle Paul agrees. After wrestling with the complex and puzzling issue of God's plan for the salvation of all Israel, he concludes: "O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord?" (Rom. 11:33-34). We naturally fear what we don't understand, and so our fear of the Lord in part comes from the realization that God is beyond our understanding, beyond our ability to put into words. The fear of the Lord helps us understand the limits to our understanding.

That is why one of the biblical responses to God's holiness, one of the ways of worshiping God, is simply being quiet. Like Job, we stop talking. "The Lord is in his holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before Him" (Hab. 2:20). A real sense of God's mysterious presence, a real sense of being confronted with the Holy One of Israel, would cause people to shut up. When you stand before royalty, you wait for them to speak. "Guard your steps when you go to the house of God. Go near to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools, who do not know that they do wrong. Do not be quick with your mouth, do not be hasty in your heart to utter anything before God. God is in heaven and you are on earth, so let your words be few" (Ecclesiastes 5:1-2). Our silence is an admission that we are in the presence of a reality that is ultimately beyond words. The divine presence makes us speechless.

These are not passages we spend a lot of time meditating on at church. Bethel, like most churches, doesn't do silent worship. A few years ago, at the end of his sermon, Pastor Bob asked the congregation to stop and spend two minutes in silent prayer right then. But during those two minutes, Pastor Bob continued talking. Susan asked him afterwards why he didn't allow us to have two minutes of actual silence and he said that it would have made people too nervous. Sometimes you need to silence all the racket around you, even in church, even the preacher's voice or the praise and worship music, in order to stand in worshipful awe, in radical amazement, in the presence of the Creator of the universe.

So while God's power and holiness may produce fear in the sense of being afraid, the awesome mysterious God of creation also instills fear in the sense of reverence and awe, fear that is the basis for worship. How are those two aspects of the fear of the Lord connected?

Rabbi Shai Held, commenting on the curses in Deuteronomy, asks the question: "If fear and awe are so different, why does the same Hebrew word convey both meanings?" The answer he gives is profound. "Awe is what happens to fear when it stops being about me....Fear becomes awe when I forget about myself and focus only on God." That is precisely what happens in the book of Job. Job is utterly obsessed with his own personal situation, understandably so, but only when his heart and mind are redirected outward, towards the creation and the Creator, does his fear become reverence and awe.

Rabbi Held goes on to comment that the same is true of the Hebrew word *todah*, which in modern Hebrew means "thank you" but in the Bible can mean either thanks or praise. Thanksgiving, gratefulness for what God has done for me, becomes praise when I stop thinking about myself and direct my worship to God (pp. 268-269, *Heart of Torah*, Vol. 2).

Worship is not about me and what I am getting out of it, what kind of “worship experience” I am having. Worship focuses on God and ultimately should simply stand in silent amazement as we stop talking about ourselves and stop thinking about ourselves and try to listen to the still, small voice from Heaven, even if it makes us uncomfortable.

In the Bible, then, true fear of the Lord, proper reverence for the Holy One of Israel, leads to worship. In ancient Israel, sacrifices were an experience of awe and fear before the Lord, coming close to God and yet being reminded of the danger of being close to holiness. Worship was a joyful act and a perilous one. Rabbi Sacks points out that the first acts of worship in Torah, the sacrifices of Cain and Abel, lead to the first murder. We looked at the story of Nadav and Avihu, the sons of Aaron, who die tragically as they are coming to worship. Biblically, worship encompasses both aspects of the fear of the Lord.

But as the rabbinic tradition insists, a mature spirituality worships God for who God is, not for what God can do for or to you, either positively or negatively. As we saw earlier in this class, rabbinic tradition teaches that one who observes God’s commandments out of fear of punishment or love of reward is someone who does not worship for the right reasons. Although the rabbis speak regularly of the rewards that come to those who are faithful, especially in study of Torah, they also recognize that such motivation in and of itself does not lead to a mature spiritual life. *Pirkei Avot*, the ancient collection of rabbinic wisdom sayings, begins with this quote: “Do not be like servants who serve their master on condition of receiving reward, but be like servants who serve their master not on condition of receiving a reward; and let the fear of Heaven be upon you” (*m. Avot* 1:3; Antigonos of Sokho, 3rd century BCE).

Maimonides, the great 12th century Jewish philosopher, labels worship out of desire for blessings or fear of punishment as “unworthy” and says that “this is not at the level of the prophets or the wise....The only ones who serve God in this way are the uneducated...and children, who are trained to serve from fear until their knowledge grows and they come to serve out of love” (*Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Repentance 10:1). For the rabbis, one of the main goals of the spiritual life is a deep reverence for God, the fear of Heaven that worships and serves God in love.