

**Altavista Presbyterian Church  
Rev. Eduardo Soto, Jr.**

**“Fear as Apprehension”  
Matthew 25:1-13  
Amos 5:18-24**

**Thirty-Second Sunday in Ordinary Time  
November 12, 2017**

**Matthew 25:1-13**

“Then the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. For when the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them, but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. As the bridegroom was delayed, they all became drowsy and slept. But at midnight there was a cry, ‘Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.’ Then all those virgins rose and trimmed their lamps. And the foolish said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.’ But the wise answered, saying, ‘Since there will not be enough for us and for you, go rather to the dealers and buy for yourselves.’ And while they were going to buy, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the marriage feast, and the door was shut. Afterward the other virgins came also, saying, ‘Lord, lord, open to us.’ But he answered, ‘Truly, I say to you, I do not know you.’ Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.

**Amos 5:18-24**

Woe to you who desire the day of the Lord! Why would you have the day of the Lord? It is darkness, and not light, as if a man fled from a lion, and a bear met him, or went into the house and leaned his hand against the wall, and a serpent bit him. Is not the day of the Lord darkness, and not light, and gloom with no brightness in it?

I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the peace offerings of your fattened animals, I will not look upon them. Take away from me the noise of your songs; to the melody of your harps I will not listen. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

**“Fear as Apprehension”**

The grass withers and the flower fades, but the Word of the Lord remains forever. Friends, this is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be pleasing and acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

We hear the word “fear” a lot these days. Fear is used countless times to promote or dissuade. A lot of our world is driven by fear. Just look at this last gubernatorial election. Both Northam and Gillespie used fear in their campaigns. One exploited the fear of a violent gang and the other exploited the fear of violent rednecks. We are constantly bombarded with fears. And the common thread in all this is the object of the fear, namely the “unknown other.” I believe there’s unhealthy fear and healthy fear. The fear that is exploited by politicians, by the media, even by some churches and preachers is unhealthy fear. Healthy fear, however, is based on our primal instincts. Back when human beings had to fend for themselves in the wilds of plains and jungles. For instance, some scientists suggest the reason we so easily see faces in things like electrical sockets, or a span of trees, or in the clouds is because our ancestors’ survival relied on their ability to recognize a face as a friend or as a predator. Healthy fear is knowing to jump out of the way of a charging jaguar or a speeding vehicle rather than just standing frozen.

Unhealthy fear, on the other hand, is either based in an irrational assumption or fearing for the sake of fear. This is an unethical fear of the unknown other simply because the other is unfamiliar or different. Now, I want to draw a distinction between hesitation and fear. Hesitation is when you meet someone new for the first time. It's like going on a blind date. You don't open up and pour out your entire soul to a complete stranger. It takes time, anywhere from a few moments to several months to figure out if this person is someone you trust. Nevertheless, hesitation always gives way to openness. Unhealthy fear never moves away from the realm of isolation and exclusion. Unhealthy fear wants nothing to do with people who are different either because it was fed with misinformation and mistrust or simply because the other person is peculiar.

Last week we talked about fear as reverence. We discussed how fearing God means we respect God, much like children respect and fear their parents. We fear God respectfully because God is our provider and sustainer and we fear upsetting God and his love toward us. We also discussed how that same reverential fear is extended to our neighbors. Our fellow human beings deserve our respect as well, especially considering that every person on this earth has within himself or herself the image of God. Well, this Sunday I want us to discuss having a healthy fear of God in apprehension. To help us in this endeavor we turn to Prophet Amos. Some folks like to draw a distinction between the God of the New Testament and God of the Old Testament. As if we worship two gods or the Jews had it wrong and the Christians had it right. The God of the New Testament is the God of the Old Testament. We have to remember that the New Testament wasn't written during Jesus' and the Apostles' ministries. The Old Testament was their Bible. The Old Testament God was their God. Just because we have the New Testament written down today does not mean God has changed.

So we turn to Amos as he asks, "Why do you want to see the Day of the Lord?" Before we can answer why someone would want it, we have to answer What is the Day of the Lord? For Amos' audience, the Day of the Lord is a time when Israel's enemies will be devoured. God promises Israel that her enemies will one day be overcome and God's Kingdom will have dominion over the world. Israel will be vindicated and all nations will bow before God. The Day of the Lord is a time when God "intervenes to punish the wicked, deliver and exalt the faithful remnant who worship him, and establish his own rule."<sup>1</sup> That sounds great, right? Why would we want to fear the Day of the Lord? Why would we want to fear the day when all the world will finally be made right? Another way of understanding the Day of the Lord could be in reference to the Advent of Christ. The great day when Jesus, the Word of God, became incarnate in a man. Or the great day when Jesus, the Christ-child and God-man, hung from the cross on Calvary, his blood shed as propitiation to God the Father. On that Day, God's judgment fell upon Christ, who took upon himself our burden of sin, and bore it so that his followers might be reckoned righteous before God. Why would anyone fear that day? Even Christ's apprehension in the Garden of Gethsemane gave way to submission to God's will. Or maybe the Day of the Lord is still yet to come, and will be Christ's Second Advent, when he comes in clouds descending to call all the faithful, living

and dead, to join him in bringing about the New Heaven, the New Earth, and the New Jerusalem. Why would someone fear that glorious day of retribution and reunion?

Well, as we read, Amos says, “Woe to you who desire the Day of the Lord.” It’s as if he said, *You want the Day of the Lord? You should not desire it, you should fear it!* The great Day of the Lord should be feared because it is indeed a day of judgment. The Israelites faltered because they assumed that the Day of the Lord would vindicate them before their foes. When in reality, if the Day of the Lord did fall upon them, they, too, would be cast into utter ruin. There are Christian denominations and sects that pray to the Lord that this age may be the end of times. They long for, they desire Christ’s coming. They assume too much. We should fear the Day of the Lord because we are not worthy to be counted amongst the righteous. How many of us can raise our hands and say, “Yes, I’m ready. All my affairs are in order, all my relationships are correctly aligned, I’ve obeyed all of God’s commands.”? How many of us can say that? I know I can’t. Like Amos’ audience, we expect God to intervene on our behalf and execute his judgments against our enemies, but we are, instead, racing toward our own condemnation.

Now we can answer, Why should we fear the Lord? We ought to have a healthy fear of God because God’s judgments will pan out. I don’t know about you, but God hasn’t made me privy to his judgments. I certainly hope and pray with conviction that I am in God’s good pleasure. But the reality is, I don’t know. I’ll never truly know until I stand before that awful throne. Calvin, however, is quick to remind me that Amos does not intend to drive us “indiscriminately into despair.” The Prophet’s design was to shake off what Calvin saw as *the* cancer that eats away at the Church, namely hypocrisy. When the Church puts off this perverse conduct, she returns into God’s favor and receives his pardon. But if hypocrisy is left unchecked, then the day of the Lord is not a day of light for the Christian, but a day to be feared—a day of darkness.<sup>2</sup>

Without a sense of foreboding, we can never truly appreciate God’s sovereignty. God certainly loves us and desires goodness for us. But God is not lovey-dovey, kumbaya camp friend. God isn’t some cool hipster dude you might run into at a coffee shop. God is *the* Almighty, *the* Creator, *the* Great I AM. Surely God is our Abba, Father, Daddy. But God is also much more. God is the Author of Life and in a single word can take life away. I’ve said this before, but sometimes the Christian has to hold two things in tension until the fullness of truth is revealed. In the one hand we have to see God as someone with whom we can have a relationship. And in the other hand we have to remember God is wholly other, whose depth is unfathomable. So while we should never be afraid of God, we also need to fear God and the punishment we rightly deserve. That being said, I echo Calvin in seeing this not as something to cause despair but as something to move us to repentance.

Without a sense of fear of God’s awesome and awful power, we all too easily slip into iniquity. Fear, especially a healthy fear of God, opens our eyes to our need of correction and reconciliation. Without that fear, our life and worship can all too quickly fall into stagnation. That is what Amos is getting at, for we see in verse twenty-one the Prophet, speaking for God, says the Lord takes no delight in Israel’s assemblies and despises their feasts. God accepts not

their offerings, looks not upon their sacrifices, and listens not to their clanging voices. Why is it that Amos pronounced Israel's worship despicable to God? It wasn't "because none of it conformed to God's law but rather because it was dead. Mere formalism had replaced hearts eager to serve the Creator. [This is] evidenced in the Prophet's substitution of justice and righteousness for approved acts of worship. [Their] worship was not transforming men and women into people who promoted God's standards in every sphere. It merely papered over their ill-treatment of the weakest members of society."<sup>3</sup> Without a healthy and proper fear of the Lord, we open ourselves to selfishness and pride, and eventually self-glorification and other unhealthy attitudes. When we allow an unhealthy fear to influence our relationships with our neighbors, our life becomes displeasing to God. When we allow unhealthy fear to cloud our reasoning and blind us to injustice, when we refuse to move from hesitation to openness, we turn our worship to ash before the Lord. When we assure ourselves of our own security and salvation, we need to realize that that is just an assumption. The final say still rests with God.

But thanks be to God we have Jesus. In him we have an advocate. I find it helpful sometimes to imagine God as a judge and I am standing trial before him. Now, I don't know about you, but if I ever found myself standing before a judge in Campbell County I'd be really afraid. I can't imagine the fear I would have standing before God's judgment seat. And to hear my sins recounted before God's court would not make standing there any easier. Where my hope lies is not in myself or my abilities, but in Christ and the Holy Spirit. The Holy Ghost is my counsel, my lawyer. I rely in him to guide my steps toward righteousness, justice, and peace. And Christ takes my place in the defendant's chair. And when God looks to Christ, he no longer sees my weakness, my iniquities, and my failures, but instead sees Jesus' perfect work on the Cross. I don't know about you, but I have no room to boast before God. I fear what God might do to me if I were without Christ. It is Christ who helps us model fear. We turn to him to see what fearing God looks like. We see Christ's submission to God's authority. We see Christ's conviction for God's power. We see Christ's testimony of God's love. Christ was not afraid of the "other." He was not afraid to be seen with outcasts and sinners. Christ never had a notion of unhealthy fear. Therefore, let us fear God through the imitation of Christ our Savior.

Please join me in prayer. Almighty God, seeing we are so distracted by our sins, nothing is more difficult than to put off our own corruption and renounce the wickedness we are accustomed to. Grant that we be truly awakened by your proddings and truly return to you, fully changed in disposition and renouncing all wickedness. May we sincerely and wholeheartedly submit ourselves to you and look forward to the coming of your Son. May we cheerfully and joyfully wait for him, by ever striving after such renewal of life that we are cleansed of all corruptions and, at length, renewed after your own image. May we become partakers of Christ's glory, which has been obtained for us by the blood of the same, your only-begotten Son. Amen.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Dictionary of the Bible*, "Day of Atonement." Grand Rapids: Wm. Eerdmans, 2000. Page 324

<sup>2</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary on Joel, Amos, and Obadiah*. Amos 5:19.

<sup>3</sup> Ligonier Ministries. [www.ligonier.org/learn/devotionals/dead-worship/](http://www.ligonier.org/learn/devotionals/dead-worship/)

<sup>4</sup> This prayer is adapted from John Calvin's Prayer Lecture #59 from his *Commentary on Joel, Amos, and Obadiah*.