

Psalm 111 is a *polished literary* piece which was probably used in corporate worship in Israel. *That the psalm was not an extemporaneous outburst of faith is revealed by its form, for it is an alphabetic acrostic in which each of the twenty-two short lines begins with a letter of the alphabet, each in the appropriate order. After the opening affirmation which states the purpose of the psalm, there is an extended body in which both God and the works of God are praised. Because the conclusion of the psalm is couched in the language of the wisdom tradition* (Proverbs 1:7,9:10: 15:33 Eccl. 12:13 Job 28:28) it can be assumed that the poet came from the wisdom circles in ancient Israel. People of faith in those wisdom circles shared the common perspective that *a person may discover who God is by examining what God has done*. In other words, events in history and creation are windows through which humans get a glimpse of Who God is. In Biblical wisdom circles the emphasis would be on Israel's history. Wisdom circles of today would probably share a common belief that *---our observation of what God has done leads to an imperfect understanding of who God is*. (italics from Texts for Preaching, p. 128-129). In psalm 111 the worshipping community praises God's gracious, merciful, holy, awesome, and righteous nature. They praise God's works which are great (v.2), full of honor and majesty (v. 3), and wonderful (v. 4) as revealed through the window of provision of food, the giving to Israel of the possessions of their neighbors (v.6) and the acceptance of Israel into a covenant relationship (v.5,9). The important connection between God's works and God's nature is this: because the

worshipping community has learned to trust the activity of God, they/we may also trust God's teaching (v.7). The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom (about who God is and what God is doing). Psalm 111:10a

*The Epiphany season is a time when the church reflects on the authority of God, God's command, God's purpose, and God's promise* (from *Texts for Preaching*). When we reflect together on the topic of the authorizing power of God in and among us, there is a controversial question that eventually surfaces in the discussion. The question is this: Who has the authority to teach about God's power and name the works of God in human history? In today's Old Testament reading you will hear God clarifying this question for the people of Israel by authorizing Moses and subsequent teachers of the Moses tradition authoritative leaders of Israel's covenant faith with Yahweh.

#### Deuteronomy 18:15-20

The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own brothers. You must listen to him; For this is what you asked of the Lord your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly when you said, "Let us not hear the voice of the Lord our God nor see this great fire anymore, or we will die." the Lord said to

me: "What they say is good. I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers; I will put my words in his mouth, and he will tell them everything I command him. If anyone does not listen to my words that the prophet speaks in my name, I myself will call him to account. But a prophet who presumes to speak in my name anything I have not commanded him to say, or a prophet who speaks in the name of other gods, must be put to death."

The gospel reading from Mark is a miracle story that gives the church's testimony that Jesus is the Jewish teacher who is authorized by God (through the powers operative in Jesus) to teach us about the nature and works of the Almighty.

Mark 1:21-28

They went to Capernaum, and when the Sabbath came, Jesus went into the synagogue and began to teach. The people were amazed at his teaching, because he taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law. Just then a man in their synagogue who was possessed by an evil spirit cried out, "What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have

you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God!” “Be quiet!” said Jesus sternly. “Come out of him!” The evil spirit shook the man violently and came out of him with a shriek. The people were all so amazed that they asked each other, “What is this? A new teaching—and with authority! He even gives orders to evil spirits and they obey him.” News about him spread quickly over the whole region of Galilee.

### **“The Beginning of Wisdom”**

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of Wisdom. . .

(psalm 111:vs.10a)

“Why are you so happy?” was the question that my neighbor shouted out as he passed me by when I was walking down Howard Street towards home last Wednesday. I waved in response and smiled when I realized the two reason for my happiness. The first was that I was uplifted by the beauty of the outdoors, fresh air, and the sunny warmth of the January thaw. The second was that I was already laughing about a joke that I had come across in my preparations for preaching on the closing line of psalm 111--- The fear of the Lord is the beginning of Wisdom. The joke went like this: *An atheist was spending a quiet day fishing when suddenly his boat was attacked by the Loch Ness monster. In one graceful flip, the*

*legendary beast tossed the atheist high into the air. Then it opened its mouth to swallow both the man and the boat. As the man sailed head over heels, he cried out, "Oh, my God! Help me!" Immediately the ferocious attack scene froze, leaving the atheist hanging in mid-air. Then a booming voice came out of the clouds. "I thought you didn't believe in me!" "Come on, God, give me a break," the man pleaded. "Two minutes ago I didn't believe in the Loch Ness monster, either!"* (Collection of Church Jokes, p. 191)

On our side of the relationship, the experience of getting to know God better by being scared to death in the face of overwhelming power, is not something that sits well with us. It is also, so the Bible tells us, a problem for God. God knows that finite communion with the Infinite is more than the creature can bear. In several Old Testament scriptures God warns of the deadly danger of looking upon the face of God. God solved this presenting problem of over exposure by granting people small glimpses of God. These epiphanies serve as windows into the Divine. Rev. Frederick Buechner wrote: "*God is alive and present in the world*" . . . "*God gives us only 'momentary glimpses into a mystery of such depth, power and beauty that if we were to see it head on, in any way other than glimpses, I suspect we would be annihilated.'*" (Talking the Walk by Marva Dawn, Acts of God, p. 107) And so, the psalmist remembers to tell us that each of these epiphanies start with an unavoidable element of fear.

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom . . .

The beginning of wisdom (knowledge of Who God Is and What God is Doing) begins with a tiny, miniscule brush with the Highest Power in all of creation. This fear becomes the first tie of covenant relationship between Creator and creature. It humbles us before the Lord, it brings us to our knees in submission, and helps us to be transformed by the wisdom of God. Fear of the Lord is what tames us in our approach and dance of intimacy with the Holy One of Israel---so that we can know one another better. In the book, *The Little Prince* by Antoine de Saint Exupery the prince raised the issue of taming when the fox said that he could not play with the prince. *"I cannot play with you,"* the fox said to the prince. *"Ah! Please excuse me, said the little prince. . . "What does that mean---tame'?"* . . . *"It is an act too often neglected,"* said the fox. *"It means to establish ties."* *"To you, I am nothing more than a fox like a hundred thousand other foxes. But if you tame me, then we shall need each other. To me, you will be unique in all the world. And now here is my secret, a very simple secret: It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye."*

Today's psalm highlights teaching as one of those windows that tames our fears, establishes trust, and grants us some essential knowledge of God that is invisible to the eye.

The works of his hands are faithful and just; all his precepts are trustworthy. Here, the psalmist praises God

for safely revealing the secret nature of God through the medium of words, laws of obedience, history of God's mighty acts, and the person of Moses. One of Aesop's fables helps us understand what that transforming teaching and submission to the authority of God's word feels like within. *Once upon a time, there was a piece of iron that was very strong. One after another, the axe, the saw, the hammer and the flame tried to break it. "I'll master it," said the axe. Its blows fell heavily on the iron, but every blow made its edge more blunt, until it ceased to strike. "Leave it to me," said the saw, and it worked backwards and forwards on the iron's surface until its jagged teeth were all worn and broken. Then it fell aside. "Ah!" said the hammer. "I knew you wouldn't succeed. I'll show you the way." But at the first blow, off flew its head and the iron remained as before. "Shall I try?" asked the small, soft flame. "Forget it," all replied. "What can you do?" But the flame curled around the iron, embraced it and never left it until the iron melted under the flame's irresistible influence.* (100 Wisdom Tales by Margaret Silf, p. 148)

In I asked for Wonder, rabbi Abraham Herschel made this observation about the transforming glimpses that people catch of God. (from *Nothing Can Ever Separate Us*, in *When I Opened My Window*, Chandler Gilbert, p. 15) *God is not always silent, and man is not always blind. In every man's life there are moments when there is a lifting of the veil at the horizon of the known, opening a sight of the eternal. Each of us has at least once . . . Experienced the momentous reality of God . . . The remembrance of that experience and loyalty to the response*

*of that moment are the forces that sustain our faith . . . ).*  
As the rabbi sees it, every person has had some fearfully awe-filled encounter with momentous reality that fires up their faith and leads to the stronger trust and deeper knowledge of the Divine. On national TV this week, viewers got to hear Joyce Urch give her personal testimony about fear's flaming embrace of faith within her. It happened when she, a hereditary sightless woman of 28 years, suffered a heart attack with kidney failure and woke up after surgery with her vision restored. She called it a miracle. I am certain that the memory of that event will serve to transform her in the wisdom of God in the same way that we are less dramatically transformed whenever we study the precepts of the Bible; whenever we cling to the words of a hymn or gospel song that resonate with some power for life in our lives; whenever the teachings of authorized leaders of the Christian faith stick in our minds; whenever the teachings of Jesus stand out as the powerful Word that tops them all. All serve as beginnings toward the deepening of some greater understanding of God.

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, all who follow God's precepts have good understanding. "Why are you so happy?" my neighbor inquired. After extended meditation and prayer on this verse, I have the blessed assurance that it was because I was filled with the knowledge that this awful/awe--filled power of the universe is always --- "for us" and that, all shall be well.