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Sermon: October 23, 2011  
Beverly E.C.C., Chicago, IL

**“CURSE AND GIFT” ~ Isaiah 8:11-14**

Fear is a curse. I don't have to tell you that, but I will anyway: fear is a curse that undermines security.

☹ To be more precise, fear in reaction to a false threat *or* fear that is out of proportion to a real danger *or* that provokes a sinful response is a curse.

Fear is a terrible enemy, not only of personal peace, but also of social harmony.

Fear turns strong people into passive victims.

Fear is a source of hatred. It is frequently the trigger for bullying, lynchings, gang violence, and terrorist acts, and is a basic cause of organized social, political and economic oppression.

Fear is a curse.

Fear is also a gift. Maybe you have never thought of it that way, but fear is a gift that can boost our security.

☺ Fear in response to a threat that is real *and* that is in proportion to the actual danger *and* which provokes a right response is a blessing.

☑ When you see your two-year old toddling toward a busy street it is good to race over, snatch them away, and shriek at them with sufficient volume and intensity so that they will never do it again.

☑ When your neighbor unleashes 18 tigers, 17 lions, 3 leopards, 3 pumas, 3 grizzly bears, 6 black bears, 2 wolves, 2 monkeys and a baboon (as happened near Zanesville, Ohio last Wednesday) it is good to go inside, lock the doors and windows, and dial 9-1-1.

☑ When you become aware that {Ro 6:23} **“the wages of sin is death”** and the Holy Spirit convicts you that are on the way to reaping eternal destruction, it is good to turn your back on sin and turn to Christ Jesus in trust and repentance.

Fear is a curse. Fear is also a gift.

☐ Please turn with me to Isaiah 8:11-13. The prophet reports:

**The LORD spoke to me with his strong hand upon me, warning me not to follow the way of this people. He said:**

**“Do not call conspiracy everything that these people call conspiracy;**

**do not fear what they fear, and do not dread it.**

**The LORD Almighty is the one you are to regard as holy,**

**he is the one you are to fear, he is the one you are to dread, and he will be a sanctuary;**

**but for both houses of Israel he will be a stone that causes [them] to stumble and a rock that makes them fall.**

**And for the people of Jerusalem he will be a trap and a snare.”**

**“Do not fear what” “these people” “fear, and do not dread it,”** commands the LORD YHWH.

☞ **“These people”** are citizens of Judah, offspring s of Judah and Benjamin. These 2 southern tribes remained loyal to King Rehoboam when the 10 northern tribes broke away to form the Kingdom of Israel in about 930 B.C.

*What is it that they “fear” and “dread”?*

To answer that, we must know two basic details: *When is God speaking? And what is happening in the Ancient Near East?*

By correlating Isaiah 8 with 2<sup>nd</sup> Kings 16 {16:5-9}, 2<sup>nd</sup> Chronicles 28 {28:5-21}, and Isaiah 7:1 we can confidently date this passage to 734 B.C.

Eleven years ago Assyria restructured its military and set out to conquer the known world. Since then their armies have gobbled up one big power and petty kingdom after another. Those who surrender quickly are treated decently enough; but the Assyrians use mass mutilations, executions, and deportations to punish those who resist.

Tiglath-Pileser III (the emperor and commander-in-chief) has, so far, ignored Judah. He has also granted limited self-rule to a handful of other small states, including Israel and Aram. If they acknowledge Assyrian supremacy and pay tribute (i.e., “protection money”) the emperor will permit them to remain in existence.

However, these small vassal states realize that after Tiglath-Pileser fully digests his new provinces in Persia he will probably turn his ravenous gaze in their direction. Instead of waiting for him to pounce, Israel and Aram form an anti-Assyrian alliance.

To their alarm, King Ahaz of Judah declines to unite with them. He (correctly) perceives that armed resistance is tantamount to national suicide.

Consequently, the kings of Israel and Aram connive to *compel* King Ahaz to join them. They rally the troops and march toward Jerusalem. But word of their plans arrives there before they do, and (Is 7:2) **“the hearts of Ahaz and his people [are] shaken, as the trees of the forest are shaken by the wind.”**

This union of Aram and Israel is what **“these people call conspiracy.”** A military defeat that will push Judah into battle against Assyria is **“what they fear, and dread.”** They are in a tough spot!

Yet God commands Isaiah not to be afraid. **“Do not fear what they fear, and do not dread it.”** Rather, **“the LORD Almighty”** is the One **“to fear.”**

*What is the fear of the LORD?*

📖 The NIV Study Bible defines it as **“A loving reverence for God that includes submission to his lordship and to the commands of his word.”**

In the O.T. this {International Standard Bible Encyclopedia} **“feeling of reverent regard”** is rightly **“tempered with awe and fear of the punishment of disobedience.”**

But things change with the advent of Jesus. In New Testament faith {I.S.B.E.} **“fear of God in the lower sense”** of dread **“is removed.”** Since God has drawn near to us in Christ, we are invited to {Heb 4:16} **“approach [his] throne of grace with confidence.”**

A word of caution: we must not throw the baby of reverence out with the bathwater of terror! The great Truth that sinners like us can come to Holy God

without horror does not in any way diminish the great Truth that he is, has always been, will always be Holy God.

Fear of the LORD always includes deep respect and awe toward the Godhead and the eternal issues involved. Hence we are told, **“Do not be arrogant, but be afraid”** (Romans 11:20); **“Since the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us be careful that none of you be found to have fallen short of it. For... because those who heard did not combine it with faith... has said, ‘They shall never enter my rest’”** (Hebrews 4:1-3); and, **“Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed... continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling”** (Philippians 2:12).

*Why should we fear God?*

1<sup>st</sup>, God is God and we are not.

2<sup>nd</sup>, we tend to give our loyalty, obedience, and service to those people or things whom we fear.

3<sup>rd</sup>, for good or for bad the object of our fear shapes our character, thoughts and actions.

These last two are true whether we are talking about fear as loving reverence or as horror. Consider these two illustrations:

① Who fears the abuser more than his victim? No one! But who is more likely to become an abuser than a victim of abuse? No one! (Praise God, there are exceptions!)

② Who is most likely to treat others with kindness and respect and dignity? One with a parent, a teacher, or some other mentor who embodies those qualities.

Fear of the LORD is **“loving reverence for God.”** It is always right to fear God.

The LORD Almighty commands Isaiah to do so, and instructs him to go to King Ahaz with the same basic message (Isaiah 7:3-9): **“Be careful, keep calm ... don’t be afraid. Do not lose heart.... If you do not stand firm in your faith, you won’t stand at all.”** God also promises that Judah will not fall to this coalition.

The threat is real. Will the king react in proportion? Will his response be right or sinful? Will his fear turn out to be a curse or a gift for him and his people?

The armies of Aram and Israel {Is 7:2} “[march] **up to fight against Jerusalem.**” True to his Word, God prevents them from overpowering Jerusalem.

But Ahaz forgets that God is God. Instead of crying out to the Living God for sanctuary, he cries out to Tiglath-Pileser: {2 Ki 16:7-8} **“I am your servant and vassal. Come ... and save me out of the hand of the king of Aram and of the king of Israel.”** He also steals the gold and silver that have been dedicated to God’s service in the temple and sends it with his panicked S.O.S.

Tiglath-Pileser replies by capturing Damascus, deporting its people, and killing its king. Then he summons Ahaz and dictates his terms: Judah will make regular tribute payments, Ahaz and his successors will operate as his clients, and Judah will serve Assyrian interests.

Ahaz willingly complies. After all, we give our loyalty, obedience, and service to those we fear.

Not only so, Ahaz exceeds Assyrian demands and builds an Assyrian-style altar in the temple. The object of our fear shapes our character, thoughts and actions.

Contrast him with the repentant thief in Luke 23:39-41: **“One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at [Jesus]: ‘Aren’t you the Christ? Save yourself and us!’ But the other... rebuked him. ‘Don’t you fear God, since you are under the same sentence?’”** He does fear God. To him, Jesus promises: **“today you will be with me in paradise.”**

Danger and anxiety are epidemic in this world. Where can we find objective safety and subjective confidence?

Contrary to popular opinion coercive power, money and possessions, and false religion are not the answer to our insecurity.

The answer, or at least the *beginning* of the answer, is the fear of God. In this world of insecurity, that kind of fear is a gift.

**“The LORD Almighty is the one [we] are to regard as holy, he is the one [we] are to fear... and he will be a sanctuary”** for us!