

February 1, 2015 / Season after Epiphany / David L. Edwards

**Fear of God, Covenant, and Blood:  
Revisiting Some Important, yet Troublesome, Words**

Genesis 4:8-10      *And the Lord said, “What have you done? Listen; your brother’s blood is crying out to me from the ground!”*

Psalm 111      *God has commanded the covenant forever.  
Holy and awesome is God’s name.  
The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom;  
all who practice it have a good understanding.*

Mark 14:22-25      *He said to them, “This is my blood of the covenant,  
which is poured out for many.”*

This morning I want to talk about three words that are central to our faith tradition—covenant, the fear of God, and blood. The latter two cause us more trouble, but all are important for our understanding and practice of our faith. Mostly I have found that the popular and widely-accepted meanings of these words lack the truest, deeper meanings of them. Ours is a rich spiritual tradition that offers a vital, fulfilling, and timely way of understanding and living our lives in this world. These words and the realities to which they point us are, to my mind, at the heart of it.

I begin with the “fear of God”. We find it in our psalm for today: “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; all who practice it have a good understanding.” There was in Israel the belief, and experience, that God is so powerful and sacred that to be directly in the presence or to “look into the face” of God would bring death. This is part of the meaning of fear of God, and perhaps we have lost something important when we do not acknowledge the sacred dimension of life as beyond our understanding and control, something that should create in us a necessary humility. Yet, we find something of the fuller meaning of “fear of God” in the previous verse of the psalm: “Holy and awesome is God’s name.” Fearing God most fully means **to live in reverent awe**—of life around us, of our own lives, of the power and presence we call God.

This reverent awe gives us the wisdom needed to live harmoniously in and with the world as God’s creation. It is what we feel when we stand at the shore of the ocean, or look up into the night sky strewn with innumerable stars, planets, and galaxies, or from the summit of Sharp Top gaze at the seemingly endless ranks of the Blue Ridge Mountains. Psalm 8 expresses it perfectly: “When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have

established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?” This crucial dimension of our lives is affirmed and cultivated in children through Camp Kum-Ba-Yah's summer and year-around outdoor programs. Also in our Children Worship & Wonder program. I have experienced this reverent awe so many times in hospitals, for instance, when people—children and adults alike—find within and yet beyond themselves strength, courage, healing, and peace in the midst of pain and even death. You see it in people as they awaken to the sacredness of their own lives, as they begin to know at the center of their being that they are a precious gift to the world. We experience it when a small group responds to a call to bring about some ministry, then begins to give themselves to it and to each other in love. They feel their smallness, yet discover a power beyond themselves that works through them.

We desperately need to recover this reverent awe toward life because it restores in us awareness of the goodness, beauty, and holiness of everything. It teaches us that our first spiritual work is not to change the world but to honor, cherish, and delight in the world as God's creation. If we as human beings were living with reverent awe, we could not be doing what we are doing to each other or to the creation. When we live with the fear of God as reverent awe, we strive in every dimension of our lives to respect, honor, and cherish each person, the whole of the creation, and ourselves.

I have found this understanding of “fear of God” to be at the core of other spiritual traditions. Most prominently in Native American and other native or aboriginal cultures. Eastern traditions—Buddhist, Taoist, Hindu. In Celtic Christianity, a Christian spirituality very centered in our experience of God in the creation. It has been diminished, overlooked, or suppressed in our Anglo/European/American tradition that adopted a conquest mentality, objectifying other people and the natural world. My hope is that we are now finding what has been in our own scriptures all along--the fear of God understood as reverent awe for life, because God created it, because God is present everywhere in it and through it.

I also want to talk about “blood,” which becomes primarily important for us as we read the stories of Jesus' last supper with his disciples. There we find Jesus saying to his disciples that the cup that he blesses and asks them to share is his blood of the covenant. This has given rise to the very popular notion that Jesus' “blood” means God's sacrificing him on the cross in order to save us from our sins and, some would add, so that we can go to heaven. Called the “atonement,” this explanation of Jesus' death on the cross says that it was required as a sacrifice for our sins, just as sin-offerings were made to God in the temple. This notion finds some but not complete support in Paul's and other writings in our scriptures. However, it is not the only biblical understanding of the meaning of Jesus' life and death. And it is one that many, including myself, find abhorrent and a needless stumbling block for people who otherwise would find the Christian

spiritual path compelling.

This is where the story of Cain and Abel comes in. Cain is jealous that his brother's sacrifice to God was accepted and his was not. We don't know why that happened, and it is not really important. We do know the common human experience of feeling hurt and angry at what we think is the unfairness of God or life, and blaming it on someone or something. Cain lets his anger get hold of him. He lures his brother out to the field and kills him. When God asks him where his brother is, Cain gives what is actually a sarcastic, smart-alec response: "Am I my brother's keeper?" It has been assumed that the correct answer is, Yes, you are your brother's keeper. You should know where he is. In reality, Cain knows that he is NOT his brother's keeper. "Keeper" is the translation of a Hebrew word that is used only with regard to God. Only God is our keeper, and Cain knows that. So he is trying to dodge the whole thing and put it back on God. How should I know? You are my brother's keeper.\*

Of the many references in scripture to God as our keeper, we need only mention one—Psalm 121: "God will **keep** you from all evil; God will **keep** your life. God will **keep** your going out and your coming in from this time on and forevermore." The point is that we first, and only, belong to God. Only God is the One who holds our lives, who keeps us. By killing his brother, Cain played God. He "kept" his brother's life in an ultimate sense. Yes, we are called to help one another, to care for one another, to love one another. But we are not called to **keep** one another. Whenever we presume to know what is best for another person, whenever we judge or try to control others, to make them into what we think they should be—spouse, friend, stranger, or our children—we are "keeping" them. Whenever we engage in killing, in war or otherwise, no matter how we try to justify it, or when we deprive others of basic human needs, we are "keeping" our brothers and sisters. We are playing God.

This is reinforced because of **blood**. How does God know that Abel has died? Abel's blood cried out to God from the ground. Our blood comes from God. Our blood is our life. Our blood cries out to God when we suffer. That was the Jewish understanding. So when Jesus says that the cup is his blood of the covenant, he is saying that it is a sign of his life which he lived for God, in service to God, out of his complete love for God. He did offer his life as a sacrifice. He lived completely for the One from whom his life came. And as we share the bread and cup of the Eucharist or Lord's Supper, we touch that life in him and in ourselves—the life that is lived with awareness of where our life comes from, a life lived in and out of our love for God. It is not something unique that happened to Jesus only. It is the life he calls forth and empowers in us, a way of living with the fear of God, with reverent awe for life, that gives itself in love of God, and neighbor, and ourselves. It is the life of deep awareness that our blood, our life comes from and belongs to God. You can already see how these words I have been talking about are related to one

another at a deep level.

Finally, **covenant**. This word is very important for us as the Church of the Covenant Community. From the beginning, we have felt called to live individually and together an intentional relationship with God, a covenant relationship. God offers a covenant to Abraham. And to Moses. And to the people of Israel as they wander in the wilderness. Joshua has a renewal of the covenant before the people enter the land God had promised them. The prophets of Israel in the period of the exile in Babylon speak of a new covenant that will be “written on their hearts” (Jeremiah 31:31-34). A fundamental understanding of our spiritual tradition is that we are always offered the invitation, the call to live in a covenant, an intentional relationship with God that brings fullness of life. The biblical story is of the offering of a covenant again and again. The psalm says that “God has commanded the covenant forever”. The people agree and commit themselves. Then they drift into ways of living that bring disaster. Then a new covenant is offered. And so on. When Jesus says that his blood, the cup that his disciples are asked to drink, is a covenant, or new covenant, he is saying that his life, his teachings, and yes, his rejection and death are all part of a new opportunity people have to respond to God's gracious love. It is “new” not in the sense of replacing the “old”. It is not a replacement of Judaism by something that came to be called Christianity. It is a new, fresh opportunity to respond to God, to live the life of God's love.

Covenant happens when we want to live as we were created to live, with reverent awe for the sacredness of life and the world, knowing that our blood, our life, comes from and returns to God, and we want to make our lives an offering, a sacrifice to God. It is a life that calls for commitment and practice. It does not just happen. That is why our community has always had a few simple, time-honored and tested spiritual disciplines or practices that give a fruitful, growth-producing form to our lives. When we work with them as faithfully as we can, they awaken in us our true life. The reality, power, presence, source of life which we call God is always inviting, calling us to enter into a partnership that brings fullness of life to us and through our living to others and the world.

I hope that what I have said helps our understanding and stirs our desire to live even more fully these precious lives that God has given us.

May the words of my mouth, and the thoughts and meditations of our hearts  
be pleasing to You, O God, our rock, our refuge, and our life. Amen.

\*based on an article in Interpretation (1970) by Paul A. Riemann, Drew University, entitled “Am I My Brother's Keeper?”