

## *How Big Is Your God?*

26<sup>th</sup> Weekend in Kingdomtide – November 12/13, 2005

### Sermon Background Study

*Proverbs 9:10-12 (NRSV)*

<sup>10</sup>The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom,  
and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight.

<sup>11</sup>For by me your days will be multiplied,  
and years will be added to your life.

<sup>12</sup>If you are wise, you are wise for yourself;  
if you scoff, you alone will bear it.

[We return to the story of Jesus and Peter on the water. Notice the ending.]

*Matthew 14:28-33*

<sup>28</sup>Peter answered him, “Lord, if it is you,  
command me to come to you on the water.” <sup>29</sup>He  
said, “Come.” So Peter got out of the boat, started  
walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. <sup>30</sup>But  
when he noticed the strong wind, he became  
frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out,  
“Lord, save me!” <sup>31</sup>Jesus immediately reached out his  
hand and caught him, saying to him, “You of little  
faith, why did you doubt?” <sup>32</sup>When they got into the  
boat, the wind ceased. <sup>33</sup>And those in the boat  
worshiped him, saying, “Truly you are the Son of  
God.”

*By the grace of God, we can do big things, but  
only if we have a big vision that is true to our big  
God. If we make this about what we can  
accomplish, we are going to dream small. But if we  
really embrace God's bigness, make Christ big in  
our lives, we'll find that God will do great things  
through us.*

Though today closes our stewardship series, *A Passion for Giving*, for me it marks the end of an eight-week series that began with Peter getting out of the boat on the Sea of Galilee. My willingness to share in, as Paul put it, this “gracious ministry of giving,” my passion for giving, my embrace of tithing as the least we can do for our gracious God – all this begins with these questions: Will I dream big or will I dream small? Will I trust in my own abilities and bank accounts or will I trust God in all things? Do I really trust that God is present with me, every day and in every way? Do I have confidence that God is competent? Do I truly know God’s immeasurable love for me? . . . Will I step out of the boat?

*The fear-of-the-LORD*

What do we really mean by a “big” God? How can we truly embrace God’s “bigness?” We can answer the questions with our minds and talk about God as all-powerful, all-knowing, and so on. But I don’t think that doctrines really get us there. Trusting a big God in all things, getting out of the boat, is more a matter of the heart. Today’s proverb says, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.” Fear is certainly a matter of the heart. Fear can make our hearts race and stop at the same time. But if God is

### *Thru the Bible*

God is not only big but surprising. A few weeks ago, Patti, Robby and I were flying home from Disney World. As I was reading Peterson’s *Christ in Ten Thousand Places*, I felt God tugging at me to undertake a project in 2006 – reading through the entire Bible. I had felt for awhile that I needed to be more disciplined in my spiritual growth and reading through the Bible in twelve months seemed to be just the ticket. (For good or ill, I like concrete, measurable projects!)

Two days later, at a meeting of all the staff, I told them of my idea and, further, told them that I wanted to invite the congregation to join me in this. I had found a new “spiritual growth” study and devotional Bible by the likes of Richard Foster, Eugene Peterson, and Dallas Willard that I would use and invite others to use. I had even already found a suitable reading plan published by Navigators that would begin January 1.

I guess God had been tugging at the hearts of a lot of us, because by that afternoon we had not only committed to inviting the congregation to read through the Bible with us in 2006 – the preachers had all agreed to preach through the Bible for 52 weeks! Each Sunday, the Scripture readings will come from the thru-the-Bible readings from the week before.

You’ll be hearing more about this in the coming weeks. The reading plan will be distributed to everyone at St. Andrew. The plan will not take us straight from Genesis to Revelation, but will, instead, be built on reading book-by-book from the Old and New Testaments: Genesis then Matthew then Exodus then Acts and so on. We are also working with the publisher of the *Renovare Spiritual Formation Bible (NRSV)* to get copies at a much-reduced price for those who would like one. Of course, any Bible will do. As someone once said, the best Bible for you is the one that you’ll read.

This is not some massive new program (even if it sounds like it) but a simple invitation to join us in devoting 20 minutes or so a day to Scripture so that we might be renewed and transformed, becoming evermore Christlike. The Spiritual Disciplines, such as regular Bible reading, are how we go about our spiritual training. I hope you’ll consider joining us.

loving and good, as he is, then why should we be terrified? Are we to be quivering disciples? Where is the comfort in that? Of course . . . Peter is terrified of the sea and the waves, but not of Jesus. He gets out of the boat because he trusts Jesus.

The phrase “fear-of-the-Lord” is much misunderstood. It is a phrase that occurs nearly 140 times in the Old Testament alone. As in this proverb, the fear-of-the-Lord is to be sought by God’s people. Eugene Peterson writes, “[The fear-of-the-Lord refers] to the way we live the spiritual life – not just what we do and say but the way we act, the way we speak. . . . It is the stock biblical phrase for the way of life that is lived responsively and appropriately before who God is, who he is as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.”<sup>1</sup>

Despite its biblical prominence, we don’t often speak of the fear-of-the-Lord because we tend to unpack it into four words, “fear + of + the + Lord,” concluding that we are to be scared of God. But that is way off track. As Peterson notes, these four words in English are a traditional way of translating a single two-word Hebrew “bound phrase,” two words that have a single meaning like “mass transit.” The problem is that no single English word does justice to the Hebrew phrase. Awe and reverence are close but they lack the punch intended by “the fear-of-the-Lord.” Peterson again: “The moment we find ourselves unexpectedly in the presence of the sacred, our first response is to stop in silence. We do nothing. We say nothing. We fear to trespass inadvertently; we are afraid of saying something inappropriate. Plunged into mystery we become still, we fall silent, all our senses alert. This is the fear-of-the-Lord.”

### Worship

We can get pretty mixed up about worship. First, we tend to think of it as an hour on Sunday rather than the only sensible response to the greatness and mystery of God. Second, we think that when we gather for worship it is about us. What are we getting out of it? Did we like the music? Was the preacher “on” that day? Too much liturgy? Too little?

But worship is about God! We are not the “audience” in worship. God is! We are not there to be entertained. It is not first about our being fed or getting a few good tips on marriage or parenting. It is about God first and last. We *will* get fed, but that is a consequence, not the purpose. We *will* be renewed and transformed by our worship of our Lord. We do *need* to worship because it is so easy for us to forget God’s bigness and God’s beauty. But, for all that, our worship is about God.

In a sermon, N. T. Wright said, “Worship is nothing more nor less than love on its knees before the beloved; just as mission is love on its feet to serve the beloved.” I guarantee that if you have ever been on your knees before your beloved, you know that your focus was on the one you loved, not on yourself.

Not only do we rob God when we view worship attendance as optional, dependent upon the Cowboys schedule or soccer games, we rob ourselves. There is simply no better place to be, no better moment to experience, than to be “on our knees” before our beloved and know that we are, in turn, loved beyond all comprehension.

When Jesus walks on the water to his disciples and climbs into the boat, they are stunned. They are plunged into a mystery they cannot truly comprehend. Their response is worship, adoration, awe – the fear-of-the-Lord. As Matthew writes, “And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, ‘Truly you are the Son of God.’” We’ve all experienced moments like this. Perhaps it was the first time you saw the Grand Canyon or Niagara Falls and you were stunned by the inexpressible beauty and grandeur. Or perhaps it was at the birth of a child when the wonder of it all overcame you. Or perhaps it was when God strangely warmed your heart at a worship service.

### *The vision of St. Andrew and our big God*

The common thread in all this is God’s bigness. The only response from the disciples that makes any sense is for them to worship their Lord. They were in touch with God’s bigness in a way that they could not miss.

If we are afraid to step out of the boat, it is because we’ve made our God too small. Our anxieties swamp us. We concentrate on what is safe and reasonable rather than what is possible and unreasonable. When our God is too small our dreams are too small, for they are built upon what we think we can expect of ourselves rather than upon what we can expect of God. We sink rather than walk.

St. Andrew has always been about trusting God and taking risks. From the aggressive building programs to our Katrina relief commitments, we have always tried to think big, to push past the safe and reasonable. Not foolishly, but with the wisdom that comes from knowing, trusting, and seeking God. Our tithes and offerings, our “unreasonable” giving, are essential to St. Andrew’s continued commitment to inviting, worshiping, learning, loving and serving.

<sup>1</sup>from Peterson’s recent book, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places: A Conversation in Spiritual Theology*. Peterson reminds us that “spiritual” and “theology” need each other. He writes, “‘Spiritual’ keeps ‘theology’ from degenerating into merely thinking and writing about God at a distance. ‘Theology’ keeps ‘spiritual’ from becoming merely thinking and writing about the feelings and thoughts one has about God.” Peterson is also the author of the Bible paraphrase, *The Message*.

## Daily Bible Readings

*(more on the fear-of-the-LORD – it is not about being scared of God!)*

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p><b>Day 1 Job 28</b> Where does wisdom come from? See verse 28.</p>	<p><b>Day 2 Psalm 19:1-10</b> God's glory in creation and Law. The fear-of-the-LORD endures forever.</p>
<p><b>Day 3 Isaiah 11 1:9</b> This message from God speaks of a king to come from the line of Jesse, David's father. The early church quickly saw here a promise of the coming Messiah. See verse 2 – the fear-of-the-LORD will rest on this coming king.</p>	<p><b>Day 4 Acts 9:26-31</b> The community in Jerusalem lives in the fear-of-the-LORD.</p>
<p><b>Day 5 2 Corinthians 5:11 – 6:13</b> Paul's ministry of reconciliation</p>	<p><b>Weekly Prayer Concerns</b></p>

## Sermon Notes

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### **November Book Recommendation**

#### *Understanding Islam: An Introduction to the Muslim World*

by Thomas W. Lippman (Second Revised Edition)

I get many questions about Islam, as a religion, as a culture, even as a political movement. I've found Lippman's book to be an excellent introduction to all three. Lippman tackles the basic beliefs and practices of Islam, Muhammed, the Koran, law and government in Islam, and the various strands of Islam. This book will provide reasonable answers to most of your questions and will give you a good foundation.

**Available at *Inspiration*, the St. Andrew Bookstore**

### ***A Christian Looks at Islam***

#### **Next Sunday, Nov 20, at 9:30 in Wesley Hall**

Growing up, most of us received little exposure to Islam. But that has all changed. Now, our questions are endless. Next Sunday, Scott Engle will take a look at some of the key tenets and practices of the Muslim faith, including the Koran and the five pillars of faith. We'll also take a few brief observations about Islamic theocracies in a modern world.

## Questions for Discussion and Reflection

In his book, *If You Want To Walk On Water, You've Got To Get Out Of The Boat*, John Ortberg asks the question, "How big is your God?" He suggests some questions for us to consider:

- "How would you characterize your worship at this time?"
- "When in your life did you most find your understanding of God getting bigger? What prompted this?"
- "Is God getting bigger to you right now, or smaller, or staying the same?"
- "What step could you take to 'magnify God' in your life?"
- "If God truly is a big God, and you could ask him to do any one thing in your life, what would it be?"

How does our understanding of God's "size" affect our vision for St. Andrew and our work toward that vision? Our building program has enabled us to plan for big things and to respond to opportunities that God places before us, such as the just-announced contemporary service in Wesley Hall at 11am. This was not on anyone's radar, in no one's plans - except for God's. Yet because the St. Andrew congregation has always thought big, we are able to implement this new service in a matter of a few weeks. In what other ways will thinking big help us to be an ever brighter light to the world? In what ways would thinking small hold us back?