

***God of Love, God of Fear***  
***Deuteronomy 6.1–9***

***The Rev. Hal Chorpensing, Plymouth Cong'l UCC, 26 November 2006***

About a week ago, Sharon and I went to a preaching workshop with Fred Craddock. Fred is the 78-year-old dean of American preaching, and it's always a treat to hear him tell stories and lecture. One of the more serious comments he made was that we in the postmodern age have no metanarrative. Now, some of you didn't even know you used to have a metanarrative, let alone did you know it was missing!

A metanarrative is a grand, all-encompassing story that gives life meaning. Another way to think about metanarrative is as a set of subtexts that operate behind our thinking and acting. So, what are the subtexts by which you live? What are the ideas, thoughts, values, concerns, attitudes that guide your life?

Joseph Campbell, the great scholar of myth suggests that every culture has myths to live by. "One of our problems today," he says, "is that we are not well acquainted with the literature of the spirit. We're interested in the news of the day and the problems of the hour...When you get to be older, and the concerns of the day have all been attended to, and you turn to the inner life – well, if you don't know where it is or what it is, you'll be sorry."<sup>1</sup>

In the past, American cultural mythology has included the rags-to-riches Horatio Alger stories: Pull yourself up from whatever social station and become a "success." (Horatio Alger, by the way, was a Unitarian minister.) And there are a lot of spin-offs. See if these statements sound familiar to you: The future looks bright. We're in an age of perpetual progress. You can be whatever you want to be when you grow up. Family comes first. True security is found in financial stability.

Some of these assumptions are changing, not so much with the WWII generation or even the baby boomers, but significantly with Generation X and millennial folks. (If you were born in the 1960s or after, you've probably caught a whiff of this in the air you breathe.)

Another metanarrative is what Marcus Borg calls "old paradigm Christianity:" The Christian life is about following the rules. If I lead a good life (i.e., follow the rules), I'll go to heaven. I shouldn't swear, drink, play cards, or dance. (One of our members recently told me that according to his father-in-law, anything that is fun is sinful.) Salvation is about me. It's an individual thing. Christian faith is about believing things that are utterly unbelievable.

And unless this is your first Sunday at Plymouth, you'll know that these assumptions are changing, too.



Let's get back to our roots and to this morning's text from Deuteronomy: If you have Jewish friends who are religiously observant, you may notice that on the doorway into their homes, there is a small container nailed to the doorframe. It's called a mezuzah, and it contains these words that are called *The Shema*: "Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and with all your might." (*Shema* means *Hear!*)

You may also have seen Orthodox Jews wearing *tefillin*, or phylacteries, small leather containers which contain the *Shema*, and worn on the forehead and on the left

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph Campbell and Bill Moyers, *Joseph Campbell and the Power of Myth*. (NY: Doubleday, 1988), p. 3.

arm over the biceps, taking a literal approach to the injunction to keep the words of the *Shema* near your heart and on your forehead.

So, clearly, these two sentences are the core of Judaism: that God alone is Lord and to love God with all your ability.

Christians, of course, have heard the *Shema* more often as we read the words of Jesus, answering a Pharisee or lawyer in the gospels according to Matthew, Mark, and Luke. “When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. ‘Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?’ He said to him, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”<sup>2</sup>

So, that is the central metanarrative out of which Jesus operated; the myth he lived by; the fundamental, underlying assumption that he allowed to guide his life.

But there is something that bothers me...not in the *Shema* itself, but in the introductory words. Here, again, is the beginning of this morning’s text, which is an instruction on how to imbue the *Shema* as metanarrative: “Now this is the commandment—the statutes and the ordinances—that the LORD your God charged me to teach you to observe in the land that you are about to cross into and occupy, so that you and your children and your children’s children may **fear** the LORD your God all the days of your life.”

It bothers me when I read Psalm 111: “The *fear* of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.”<sup>3</sup> And it runs all over the book of Proverbs: “The *fear* of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge.”<sup>4</sup> “The *fear* of the Lord is hatred of evil.”<sup>5</sup> “The *fear* of the Lord prolongs life.”<sup>6</sup> “The *fear* of the Lord is a fountain of life.”<sup>7</sup> And the ultimate: “The *fear* of the Lord is life indeed.”<sup>8</sup> *That’s a LOT of fear!* And in the first century, Gentiles who were not yet fully converted to Judaism were referred to as “God-fearers.”

I have a theory: the reason most Christian Bibles continue to translate the Hebrew word *yir’a* as *fear* is because that’s the way it is in the King James Version, and it has become tradition. In the Jewish Publication Society translation of the *Shema*, that word is rendered not as “fear,” but as “revere.” “Revere the Lord your God” is substantially different than “fear the Lord your God.”

How do you react to fear? And how do you respond to awe?

Fear is what we do when we are children who get slapped around or kicked around by an abusive father. It’s hard to grow up having a healthy, loving relationship with someone like that as a role model. And it’s hard to develop a healthy, loving relationship with a God who is source of fear.

But when we get to the *Shema* itself, it doesn’t say “**fear** the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and might,” rather it says “**love** the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and might.”

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<sup>2</sup> Mt. 22.34–40

<sup>3</sup> Ps. 111.10

<sup>4</sup> Prov. 1.7

<sup>5</sup> Prov. 8.13

<sup>6</sup> Prov. 10.27

<sup>7</sup> Prov. 14.27

<sup>8</sup> Prov. 19.23

Gerald Jampolsky, a psychiatrist at Stanford, has written extensively on love and fear as opposites, a direction that he attributes to Marianne Williamson and *A Course in Miracles*. I think that it is valid to see love and fear as two of our key motivations for the actions we take, and to see them as opposites.

I'd like to read you something written by Anthony DeMello, a brilliant Jesuit from India who died about fifteen years ago, who asserts that *fear* is the root of *violence*.

“Some say that there are only two things in the world: God and fear; love and fear are the only two things. There is only one evil in the world, fear. There's only one good in the world, love. It's sometimes called by other names. It's sometimes called happiness or freedom or peace or joy or God or whatever. But the label doesn't really matter. And there's not a single evil in the world that you cannot trace to fear. Not one.

“Ignorance and fear, ignorance caused by fear, that's where all the evil comes from, that's where your violence comes from. The person who is truly nonviolent, who is incapable of violence, is the person who is fearless. It's only when you're afraid that you become angry. Think of the last time you were angry. Go ahead. Think of the last time you were angry and search for the fear behind it. What were you afraid of losing? What were you afraid would be taken from you? that's where the anger comes from. Think of an angry person, maybe someone you're afraid of. Can you see how frightened he or she is? He's really frightened, he really is. She's really frightened or she wouldn't be angry. Ultimately, there are only two things, love and fear.”<sup>9</sup>

Too often, ministers, priests, rabbis, and imams who lead their people from a sense of *fearing* God wind up not encouraging their parishioners to love God, self, and other. And given the power of religious metanarrative and the cross-cultural contact that is a part of our life on this planet, the results are disastrous.



Joseph Campbell said that “The individual has to find an aspect of myth that relates to his own life. Myth basically serves four functions. The first is the mystical function...realizing what a wonder the universe is, and what a wonder you are, and experiencing awe before this mystery. Myth opens the world to the dimensions of mystery, to the realization of the mystery that underlies all forms. If you lose that, you don't have a mythology. If mystery is manifest through all things, the universe becomes, as it were, a holy picture. You are always addressing the transcendent mystery through the conditions of your actual world.”<sup>10</sup>

I actually think we postmoderns do have a metanarrative. I think that there is plenty of fear in our postmodern metanarrative. And one of the reasons that we have so much fear is that we have a diminished capacity for awe, for reverence, for mystery.

In the absence of awe, reverence, mystery, and a sense of the sacred, we have filled the empty spaces with consumerism, greed, cynicism, over-busyness, and self-absorption...each of which is fueled by fear: fear that we do not have enough things, enough money, enough time, and that we ourselves are not beautiful enough, influential enough, or simply good enough.

In our culture, we have the ability to create cocoons around ourselves. For some of us they are cocoons of material wealth and technology. For others, they are cocoons of addiction to alcohol or food or gambling. It is warm and safe inside the cocoon, but it is also dark – without much of a view – and to stay inside too long means death. The

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<sup>9</sup> Anthony de Mello, *Awareness*, pp. 62-62.

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*, p. 31.

question is when – and whether – we will emerge from the chrysalis to become the true selves that God intends us to be.

To do that we need to open ourselves to the awe, the reverence, and the mystery of God in our midst. How do we go about this? We expose ourselves to God with open hearts and open minds. We allow ourselves to experience the awe of nature (not hard to do in Colorado if you get outside). The next time you see a Canada goose think about the incredible navigation system inside that beautiful flying machine. It's far better than those GPS systems that you see mounted inside a car windshield...and far more beautiful.

We allow ourselves to experience the mystery of life. When we do an infant baptism, look at a newborn child and the wonder of his or her exploration. The process of birth, growth, and development is nothing short of a miracle. Yet, we think of it as "normal," until we slow ourselves down to see life as a gift from God.

We allow ourselves to experience the awe of simple kindness. Just look around Plymouth if you need examples, whether it's someone preparing a meal or offering a ride or taking a blood-pressure reading or starting a micro-business in Afghanistan or helping people from becoming homeless or any of a thousand other ways. And know that God is the source of loving kindness.

We need to close our eyes, take a deep breath, slow down, quiet down, and open ourselves up to the holy in our midst. It takes effort, but we will lead far richer lives when we see the sacred all around us.

Remember the words of the paleontologist, Jesuit, and mystical theologian, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin: "The heart of God is found at the heart of the world, and the living, natural world is shot through with the presence of the divine."

Let us go out into the world with new eyes...eyes opened to the glory of God all around us. And let us wear these words in our hearts and in our minds: "The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might."

Amen.