

The Questions

Today, we begin a new series called "Since You Asked..." Over the past couple of months, we've asked you as the Beavercreek Nazarene congregation to send us the questions you have about faith, God and the Church. We got tons of really good questions. Some of them we've grouped together, and some I'll engage on my blog throughout the series. Today, we thought we'd start at the most important place: God. Several of our questions are about God - who God is, what God wants for us, how God acts in the Bible. So let's dig in. Here are your questions:

Why am I supposed to fear God? I hear people say "He's a God fearing Christian" like it's a good thing and that I'm supposed to fear God too. I thought God loved me and only wants me to succeed. Why should I fear my Father? That doesn't sound like a healthy relationship to me.

Would you please explain the passage in Exodus 4:24-26? Was God angry with Moses because he failed to circumcise his sons? ...Something certainly triggered God's wrath!

Why does God have so many names and what is the hype about them? **[Let's go ahead and use the "names of God" graphic/screen for dramatic illustration.]**

Why are we supposed to fear God? Why does God sometimes act so strangely in the Bible? And are God's names important? And does God really give us whatever we ask for?

All of these questions today center around how we understand God. It all boils down to a central question: How safe is your God?

<Greeting question: What are you most afraid of?>

In the ancient and medieval worlds, sailors tried to draw maps of the world **[let's find some old maps that have an obviously badly represented world]**. And especially in the oceans, in the deepest parts of it, where no one had been able to travel and map, they would just write "Here There Be Monsters". The message was clear: this place is unknown. It's dangerous. Be afraid of going here.

But as our control over the world improved, so too did our maps. There were fewer and fewer unknown places. Fewer and fewer spaces for monsters to live. The world slowly became a less frightening place.

Fear is all about the unknown. I can still tell you the moment that I've been the most scared in my whole life. I saw the film *The Ring* the spring of my senior year of college. I was 22 and a couple of months from graduating. Three friends and I went to see the movie in the theater. If you've never seen the movie (spoiler alert!) it's about a video tape that kills people. Which sounds incredibly silly, but through the whole movie you don't ever get to see *how* people actually die. You just know that they watch this tape and die seven days later.

At least until the end of the film, when we get to see what happens: your TV turns on by itself (even if it's unplugged!), the girl crawls up out of a well and *out of the TV SCREEN AND KILLS YOU*. You think VCRs and TVs can't be scary? Think again.

But it wasn't sitting in the movie theater, watching the film that was the scariest moment of my life. It was when I went home that night and tried to go to sleep. I remember vividly laying in my bed, trying to fall asleep, scared out of my mind. And 49% of my brain was chastising me. You are a 22 year old man. You're graduating from college and entering the adult world in two months. Quit acting like a child, close your eyes and go to sleep.

But the other 51% of my brain was screaming at me: IF YOU CLOSE YOUR EYES SHE IS GOING TO WALK OUT OF YOUR CLOSET AND KILL YOU. DO NOT GO TO SLEEP!

That's what horror films do best... they transform ordinary, everyday experiences into something horrifying. Thanks to Friday the 13th, summer camp isn't just fun and games anymore. Thanks to Freddy Kruger, nightmares *might* actually be able to hurt you when you're awake. And as if clowns weren't already scary enough, the Saw franchise had to go and make them even worse for everyone who was too young to have seen *It*. *The Ring* took something totally benign - our televisions - and took away our sense of control over them. Made them insidious alien devices broadcasting fear directly into our homes.

What are you afraid of? Do you have some phobias? Do you *fear* clowns or spiders or heights? What are some of your more legitimate fears? Flying? The economy? Terrorist attacks? Do you fear for your family?

Consider with me for a moment the nature of fear. Think of that thing you're afraid of. Think about horror films. What's at the bottom of that fear is a lack of understanding, a lack of control. Fear is the emotion we feel, the attitude we take, when we're shoved outside our comfort zones and we don't have anything safe to latch onto.

Spiders? They're so alien. They look and move like something from... well... from a horror movie. Heights? What if you fall? So close to the edge, all it would take is a gust of wind. The scariest rollercoasters go around 70 mph on their first drop, but we think nothing of driving that fast in our cars. Why? Because behind the wheel, we're in control. Why was 9/11 so scary? Because it came out of nowhere, with no warning. And it could happen again, at any time. Because we weren't in control. That's why we put completely useless body scanners in the airports. They don't actually stop terrorists. They just make us feel like our government is in control. They make us feel safe and unafraid.

Fear is essentially about a loss of control, a lack of understanding. When we fear, we feel small and powerless. It's not a good feeling. We don't like it.

So it's interesting that the book of Proverbs begins: "**The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction.**" -- Proverbs 1:7 (NRS) We're supposed to *fear* God. What does it look like to *fear* God? Isn't God safe?

That's what we think, right? We like to think that we understand God. That the Bible has God all mapped out. That there aren't any unknowns. We want to believe that we have domesticated God. The problem is, the God we get once we've domesticated him looks more like this... This is a safe god. But this god clearly bears no resemblance to the God of the Scriptures. Because that God is not safe at all.

If you've read or seen the first Chronicles of Narnia story, Mr. Tumnus and Lucy are talking about Aslan the Lion (spoiler alert: in Narnia, Aslan is God). Mr. Tumnus says, "Aslan is not a tame lion," to which Lucy replies, "No, but he is good."

God is not tame. God is not domesticated. God is not safe. But God is good. God is love.

God is not safe, but God is love. God is not understandable. God is not domesticated. God is not under our control, at our beck and call.

This helps us to get at what it means to fear God. The fear the Scriptures command for us isn't dread or terror. That's how most of us usually think of fear, but a more appropriate word we could use is awe, to get us away from the connotation of terror.

But what is awe? That's not necessarily a common experience for us these days. Awe is a transcendent experience, a moment when you are aware of how small you really are and how big the world is. Those moments when you realize that you don't, in fact, run the show, that the world isn't asking your permission to keep spinning. For some people, being up in the mountains brings you to a moment of awe. The Grand Canyon brings you there. The birth of your child.

Some of the most truly awesome moments in my life are when I visit the ocean. I *love* the ocean. It's a tragedy that I've lived my whole life in the Midwest because every time I visit the ocean, I am overcome by how *big* the ocean is, and how *small* I am. I realize that this is an indescribably large *thing*, and that the ocean is really and truly dangerous. I have to be much more careful in the ocean than I ever have to be in a lake or pool. The ocean demands of us a certain level of respect and caution. It doesn't ask our permission for anything. It's easy to die in the ocean, and we are wise to fear it.

This is the awe the Scriptures command us to feel for God. God is beyond us - far more than we could ever understand or control. God is the center of the cosmos - the true core of reality. Not us. When we truly encounter the living God, the God of the Scriptures, we ought to feel small and insignificant in the face of so overwhelming a presence as God. *That* is a true fear of God, the awe we are meant to feel.

And according to Proverbs, we will never live a life that is full, meaningful and complete until we acknowledge that. The Fear of the Lord, that sense of awe, is square one. And the Scriptures are our guide to a life of awe. The Scriptures guide us to that place where we encounter God in all God's awe-inspiring glory.

A great example of this is that weird story in Exodus 4. Let's take a look at this God who is infinitely beyond us. God is going to rescue his people from slavery in Egypt and he's chosen Moses to be his champion. Moses is living in a foreign country with a wife he met there, and their children. God appears to Moses in one of those Ocean moments, an awe-inducing experience at a burning bush and tells Moses he's been chosen to lead God's people (and Moses' people!) out of slavery and into freedom. Moses has been tapped for one of the top 5 all-time most important events in human history. This is a world-altering mission. Our story here happens when Moses and his wife Zipporah are on their way back to Egypt, to carry out God's mission. Here's what happened:

On the way, at a place where they spent the night, the LORD met him and tried to kill him. But Zipporah took a flint and cut off her son's foreskin, and touched Moses' feet with it, and said, 'Truly you are a bridegroom of blood to me!' So he let him alone." -- Exodus 4:24-26 (NRS)

This almost sounds like a scene from a horror movie, doesn't it? Here's Moses, God's chosen champion, and God tries to kill him (which, time out... what does it even mean that God *tries* to kill someone?), apparently because Moses had not circumcised his son. Moses' wife performs an on-the-fly circumcision, throws the foreskin at Moses and then God leaves.

End of story.

That's scary, right? How would you feel if you were Moses? No problem fearing God now, right? This is a God who is strange, who is wildly unpredictable (in fact, you'll be hard-pressed to find a study Bible or commentary that will tackle this story today! Most pass over this story because it is so strange). But it's precisely this story's strangeness that teaches us what it means to fear God, to have a proper awe in God's presence. This Scripture is awe-inspiring. It's bringing us to one of those awe moments.

And that's *why* we don't like these kinds of stories - that's why we ignore them. We don't enjoy being unsettled, feeling that loss of control. We want the Scriptures to box God. To map out God for us. We want the Bible to tell us what we need to do to get God to do what we want. To make God understandable. All too often, we turn to the Bible to let us control God.

This God doesn't challenge us. Doesn't dare suggest we don't know where we're going or that what we're doing isn't a good idea. This God just smiles at us, assuring us that we're wonderful, big important people who have everything under control. [[back to the dashboard Jesus](#)]

Until we get to a story like this one. Coming upon a story like this can disorient us. It's like we suddenly realize that everything's not as nice and neat as we'd like it to be. The ground is a lot less stable. God is not as predictable and nice as we thought. Much like I feel at the ocean, we get a sense of awe when we're standing before God's hugeness and God's strangeness. God is *not* human. God doesn't think like us. God doesn't act like us.

We're tempted to ignore these kinds of stories because they make us so uncomfortable. But what if we choose to engage them?

How do we talk to this God? How do we interact with this kind of God? What do we do so God doesn't break into our houses in the middle of the night and try to kill us?

The Scriptures truly are still our guide. But it's the difference between driving on roads and sailing on the oceans. We can't build roads on the ocean. It's far too wild and unpredictable. All we can do is set out on it in a boat. We don't use maps with clear, well-defined, predictable routes. We use charts and compasses that help orient us and move in the right direction, but a boat is always at the mercy of the ocean. God has given us, in our tradition and in our Scriptures, a guide, a compass and charts, for interacting with him. The Scriptures teach us how to approach God safely.

Just like we talked about in our Proverbs series, the Scriptures teach us how we were created to live. What does a life look like that survives and thrives? The biblical word for that is wise. And what does a life look like that chases after death and destruction? The Scriptures calls that kind of life foolish.

It's like when you see that kid swimming out way too far in the ocean and his parents are on the beach not paying attention to him. You look at that whole situation and go, Wow, that's foolish. Someone's going to get hurt. This isn't going to end well.

That's what the Scriptures do for us by outlining wise and foolish ways of living. They teach us how to live in God's world, with God at the center, in such a way that we flourish. And according to Proverbs, that all starts with fearing God, with that proper sense of awe, reverence, respect for the hugeness of God.

The Scriptures give us dozens of names for God [**bring that graphic back up**] - God as healer, God as warrior, God as victory. God as mother, God as father. God as child. God as traveler. God as Lamb. God as Lion. God as King. God as Servant. God as creator. God as judge.

These are all names that God gives us to address God. These are ways that God has chosen to be identified. But these names are not all that God is. These are limited, they contradict each other. Peter Rollins asks us to think of the names of God the way we would a sunken ship in the ocean. [**graphic!**] While it's true that the ocean contains the ship and the ship contains the ocean, the

ocean contains the whole ship, while the ship only contains the smallest part of the ocean. So with these names God has given us. These names are true statements about God. They contain truth about who God is. But they are a small part of the whole of God. The whole truth of who God is far exceeds any one of these names. That's why it's so important to engage with the whole of the Scriptures, not just the parts we like. We need God the lover *and* God the warrior. God the lion *and* God the lamb. We need the whole of the Scriptures.

That was Moses' problem. God called Moses just as God calls us, into a life, an adventure that requires 100% total commitment. Anything less than that is foolish. It's death-bringing.

But Moses didn't fear God. God had given clear instruction about how to identify yourself and your sons as part of God's chosen people. That Moses did not circumcise his son makes a strong statement about Moses' worldview: he clearly does not consider himself part of God's people. He is not allowing God to define his reality. He feels more in common with his wife's people than his own people.

If Moses had gone to Egypt as he was - half-committed to God's call, we know how it would've turned out. It wouldn't have been pretty. And God was not willing to send Moses to lead one of the most important movements in the history of humankind while Moses is so uncommitted. The stakes are too high for fence-sitters.

So we have this little interlude. We see in this story that God comes to Moses to put the fear in him, and Moses finds the proper fear of God (through his wife, interestingly enough). By the end of this short story, Moses realizes the stakes and has aligned himself with God's mission, God's life-giving way. Moses is all-in.

The Moses we meet after this story isn't afraid of anyone or anything. Moses has fully embraced his faith tradition, taken his place among God's people. God said that to be one of his people means to be circumcised. So Moses relents, bows to God's will. Finally, Moses fears only God. Moses lives a life with God fully in the center, and that gave him the courage to pursue the radical, world-changing life God had for him. The Moses who confronts Pharaoh and leads his people from slavery into God's freedom is all in. He doesn't quit when it gets tough. He doesn't fall away when things get scary.

I'm willing to bet there are parts of that story that still make you uncomfortable. The idea that God would so infringe upon someone's personal rights rubs our cultural sensibilities the wrong way. We want a God we can take to dinner parties. A God who comes into our lives and doesn't mess anything up. Because we've got everything just how we want it. But that is not the God of the Scriptures.

Our God is not safe. But God is love. And the Scriptures teach us how to live wisely, how to engage God in safe, life-giving ways. The names the Bible gives us for God are the compass and charts that let us approach God in humility, with the appropriate awe, and find the beauty and life

that await us in the mystery of who God is. But no matter how much of God we seek out and understand, there will always be these huge gaps in our maps, the places where ancient cartographers would've written *Here There Be Monsters*.

To step into the ocean, to set sail on a ship, is to take real risk. Because the ocean is vast, beyond us, bigger than we could ever hope to be. So too, with God. As Moses learned, there is real danger in relating with God. God is far beyond us, bigger than we could ever hope to be, and so we must approach God with awe, with fear. The ocean is not safe. Neither is God.

But there's an important difference between the ocean and God. The ocean is a thing, an inanimate force. The ocean can be cruel; it's no wonder ancient sailors were sure there were Monsters out there. But God is a being who is perfect love. The Scriptures teach us that Jesus is the fullest, most perfect revelation of who God is. In the Person of Jesus, we see the beauty and mystery of God revealed in its fullest form. And Jesus teaches us that this strange, mysterious awe-inspiring God is *for* us. This God loves us. More than we could possibly understand.

Even in those terrifying, fearful moments. I can't help but believe that is the reason God only *tried* to kill Moses. Because God knew what Moses had in him. God was *for* Moses and God was *for* the people Moses was going to rescue. And God was willing to do whatever it took to rescue Moses even from himself. That's the same sort of love we see demonstrated on the Cross, when Jesus died to save us from ourselves, from our own decision to swim out way too far without a lifevest.

That's the problem with dashboard Jesus. We've domesticated him. This neutered Jesus can't save anyone - how could he? We've stripped him of all his majesty and power. Our problem all along has been that we can't handle the power that comes from being at the wheel - we crash the car every time. God wants to set us free from our illusions of control.

Who is God to you? Is God a safe, domesticated life-additive? Or is God a big, wild, unpredictable, awe-inspiring force at the center of your existence?

The appropriate response to the awesome nature of God is worship. It's that gasp, that tightness in your chest when you step into the ocean, when you stand at the edge of the Grand Canyon, when you've sweat and climbed to reach the mountain peak and then turn to see the world laid out all around you.

There aren't words for that kind of experience. All the songs we sing, the Scriptures we read, the prayers we pray, those are our guides to that place where everything else falls away and we stand before God.

How do you want to respond today? It's different for everyone. We have space here at the end of our time together. We have songs and prayers and Scriptures that will lead you toward God. But it

is your choice to take those final steps. To dive into the ocean, unafraid because there're no monsters, only love.

In a world of fear and uncertainty, we can know one thing for sure: God is not safe, but God is love.

<Prayer>

