

# North Kildonan United Church

15<sup>th</sup> August 2021 ~Rev. Don Johnson

## “The Beginning of Wisdom”

*Psalm 111*

*John 6: 51-58*

*Grant, O God, that in the written word and through the spoken word, we may behold the living Word, our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. Amen.*

Before I launch into today's sermon, I want to offer my thanks to everyone who kept the services going during my holidays. So thank you indeed to our worship leaders, Rev. Brenda, Gay, Betty and Peter; to Donna our worship assistant and reader; to readers Sylvia and Noreen; to Peggy our candle-lighter; to Michael our musician; Peter and Heinz our sound technicians and to the one who gathers together our efforts beforehand, then records and edits and produces a stellar video for each Sunday, our Office Administrator Wilma. My gratitude for the efforts of all of you is joined with the appreciation of our congregation and our viewing audience for these past five Sundays as we say thank you and well done!

My thanks continue this day for our reader Betty, candle-lighter Peggy, worship assistant Donna, sound technician Peter, musician Michael and our videographer Wilma.

Today's sermon title is *The Beginning of Wisdom*, which is the second half of the verse from today's psalm: "*The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.*"

For our purposes today, let's hear again the last few verses of Psalm 111.

*"He sent redemption to his people; he has commanded his covenant for ever. Holy and awesome is his name. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; all those who practise it have a good understanding. His praise endures for ever."*

Fear, awesome, wisdom. Not sure how people understand these words anymore, especially in a biblical sense. Or indeed what other meanings have been placed upon these words.

Let's look for a moment at awesome. One time when I was in a restaurant with some friends, the serving person came over to take my order. It was basically standard fare, whatever that particular kitchen was good at creating. Might have even been the special for the day. In any event, it was a plain, regular, unexciting lunch choice.

I made my lunch request, to which the person taking my order replied: "Awesome". How, in any stretch of the imagination, was my simple lunch awesome! *Thanks* would have been an appropriate response to my meal order, *this shouldn't take the kitchen too long to prepare* would also have been reassuring to hear, but *awesome*, somehow I just don't think so.

Of course, part of the problem was that the person who uttered that word wasn't thinking of what had just been said. *Awe* and *awesome*, words that suggest, in the explanation of one dictionary: "extremely impressive or daunting; inspiring great

admiration, apprehension, or fear”, had been used to describe my grilled cheese sandwich and cup of Scotch Broth, or whatever it was that I had ordered. The sacred had become profane, a word intended to call out adoration and trepidation was domesticated into slang.

Similarly, with the word *fear*. The Bible has two meanings for the word fear. Most of the time we only think of one meaning. In the words of the Oxford Guide to Ideas and Issues of the Bible, “fear is understood as emotional distress and alarm with intense concern for impending danger or evil.”

We know this kind of fear, sometimes all too well and too intimately. Many of us lived it during these many pandemic months and some are still caught in its grasp. Fear in this understanding shows itself in countless ways, and it is of little use for me to chronicle for you these manifestations of fear. We all know what makes us fearful and how awful, not awesome, how awful it makes us feel.

But that is not the understanding when the Bible uses a text like today in reference to our loving God. “*The fear of the Lord*” is akin to the word awe. We don’t fear God like we would fear an icy road in the middle of the night. It’s a completely different understanding.

Hear the Oxford book again: ‘The other area of meaning relates to allegiance to and regard for deity. Among the many expressions in the Bible for worshipping God are some metaphors pertaining to fear. These focus on worship as an event of profound respect with the implication of awe. The fear of God involves worshipping the Lord with deep respect and devotion. It is a religious expression and as such implies obedience, love and trust.’”

So if we rescue awesome from its current meaninglessness and we link it to an understanding of fear as not something evil but as an expression of profound reverence and praise, then we will have the Hebrew understanding of the fearsome reality of God.

There is always a danger in the attempt at domesticating the Creator of the Universe into a self-made deity we think we can control. Sometimes our prayers and religious music become too chummy with God, they drift from a proper sense of awe into a more awe shucks approach.

A God of our own creating is of no use to us. Many years ago, as I met with a family I did not know to plan a funeral, I was presented with what they thought were appropriate prayers. “God, put the coffee pot on, mom is coming over” was one of the most memorable, and I must add, unspoken lines. They thought such sentiments were touching. I thought otherwise, and in the end it was the language of the church, not something found on the internet, that was heard at that service.

In our gospel this day we have a somewhat similar issue around understanding the language of faith. Imagine the reaction when Jesus first said to those who heard him:

*“I am the living bread that came down from heaven.”*

*Whoever eats of this bread will live for ever;  
and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.'*  
*The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying,  
'How can this man give us his flesh to eat?'*

*So Jesus said to them,*

*'Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink.'*

So we take a pause and seek the deeper meaning. This is no foolish act of cannibalism; as countless critics have accused the church of over the centuries. Jesus is saying I am giving you the most profound symbol of God's love and intimacy, my very body, my flesh, my blood. And when you remember what I did for you, when you reenact this last supper, when you remember and live out the story, the bread and wine will take on profound and deep meaning for you and I will be amongst you, Jesus promises.

Remembering the story is vitally important to any people, any religious tradition. Much of the current restoration of the aboriginal communities and culture is based upon remembering the story, telling the story and bringing the story to life through rituals and communal acts.

But if you are an outsider and you don't know the story, the rituals may seem strange and bizarre. Many years ago I was in a service where friends of mine were having their child baptized. Holy Communion was also celebrated that day. Friends of theirs were not Christians and at the party afterwards they commented on what they thought was a ridiculous ritual of a cube of white bread and a thimbleful of grape juice. One person's sacred ritual does not always hold any kind of meaning for another person.

It's all in understanding what is going on or at least working hard to try to understand and to learn. Understanding the deeper meanings of words and actions we take for granted or disregard as just slang. Understanding what is sacred and precious to other people, even if it doesn't make sense to us. Understanding that the awesome Creator of the Universe, the one to be feared properly and worshipped devotedly, is the one who loves us profoundly, took human form and walked amongst us and gave his life for us. And so, we can say with the Psalmist:

*"The fear of the Lord is indeed the beginning of wisdom."*

Amen.