When I was a little kid growing up in Hong Kong, almost every month, my family would go and visit one of my uncles’ home. I always dragged about going there because I felt intimidated by my uncles presence. I was always afraid of him, especially when he raised his deep baritone voice. His facial hair along with the smoking pipe in his hand also made him more intimidating, at least from a little child’s perspective. My sister and I were so scared of him that we even gave him a nickname the **Fearsome Uncle 5**.

But as we became older and got to know my uncle a little more personally, I came to realize that he wasn’t as frightening as we thought he was. We began to see the kinder, gentler side of him. Over time, our “fear” of him had eased up a bit and turned into admiration and respect. However, even to this day, my sister and I would still jokingly call him the Fearsome Uncle!

During this season following Epiphany and before Lent, the church is invited to reflect upon the nature of who God is in the course of our spiritual journey. It invites us to embark on a “re-search” of God in our everyday lives. Perhaps our relationship has drifted and become short-sighted or complacent over the years. We may see God as some distant higher being while the rest of the world is revolving at a much faster pace than we could imagine. We contemplate the questions, *“Where is God when all of these evil things are happening around us? Does God even care? Does God even know?”* In our Old Testament Psalm reading this morning, the Psalmist reminded us that God’s presence is ever so real in our midst and that God deserved our utmost fear, respect, and admiration. We shall “fear” God not because God is intimidating but as a sign of our utmost reverence and respect towards God. This psalm (Psalm 111) is an alphabetic acrostic (in Hebrew), meaning each line begins with the successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet (from Aleph to Tav) in describing and honoring the works of God. One may interpret such literary style as that our God is an all-encompassing God who not only sees the big picture but is also concerned about the most finite details of our lives.

The Psalm concluded by making a proclamation that centers our meditation for this morning. The **Fear of the LORD is the beginning (the source/the foundation) of Wisdom.** What does that mean? Just what kind of Fear was the Psalmist referring to? What kind of Wisdom? Is there really wisdom that we can extract from our fear of God? Was the Psalmist calling us to keep God at a distance? Stay way! Don’t go near Him! Only call upon God when we need Him! If we get too close to God, we might get burned.

First, lets talk about Fear. What is Fear? Every one of us here in this room has some kind of fears. No one is exempt. Some of us might disguise our fears better than others. Derived from the Greek word phobos meaning fear, there are literally hundreds of “phobias” out there in our everyday vocabularies.

Some of us may have fears whenever we go see our doctors. Some might have a fear of the needles, fear of the dark or being surrounded in an enclosed space, riding a roller-coaster, flying on an airplane, or when being approached by certain animals. But there are other types of fear as well, such as fear of the unknowns, the uncertainties, or our future. How ‘bout the fear of change? The fear of being of dying, death, or the loss of a job....the list goes on and on.

Some of these fears may be driven by our own superstitions. Fear makes us feel vulnerable and insecure. Sometimes we may be called to confront our fears head on in order to overcome it, but on the other hand, suppressing our fear may not always be healthy either.

But the Fear that the Bible talks about is a different kind of Fear. This kind of fear is derived out of ones reverence and respect when one is in the presence of God, such as when the high priests had to go through series of cleansing rituals before entering the holiest part of the temple. Even still, only an elite group can enter the holiest part of the temple and only on certain high holy days. Ordinary people, as a sign of reverence for who God is, would not even be allowed to mention the name of God - YHWH. Even the great prophet Moses had to remove his sandals when he came upon the burning bush because of his fear and reverence of God for standing on the Holy Ground.

Secondly, lets talk about Wisdom. What is wisdom? Throughout the history of humanity, we have been on a spiritual quest to acquire more and more wisdom. Having knowledge does not mean that we are any wiser. We live in a society with an over-abundance of information and data. There are a lot more information out available to us than we need to know. We can find out about almost anything literally at our fingertips. But that only makes us more knowledgeable and not any wiser. Those are head-knowledge, not heart-knowledge.

From the Garden of Eden to the Tower of Babel, human beings craved to acquire more wisdom, even as wise as God. We wanted to see ourselves as God’s equal…that is until we violated God’s trust in us and failed to own up to our end of the covenant with God.

**True wisdom comes from God.** Even the great King Solomon, who had all the wealth, power and prestige, also seek God for more wisdom.[[1]](#footnote-1) By doing so, he confessed that God is the source and the beginning of all wisdom.[[2]](#footnote-2)

*For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength. God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong.[[3]](#footnote-3)*

Just like my childhood memory of my “fearsome uncle”, God may seem harsh and fearful at times, but as we spend more time with God and get to know God better in an intimate relationship, we come to respect God for who God is. However, we must also be wise enough to draw the line and keep our respectful distance from God, for God is God and we are not. We trust that God is still ultimately in charge of everything there is under the sun.

When we seek God’s wisdom, God gives us the freedom to live our lives to the fullest as God intended and purposed, but that does not mean that we can do whatever we want. Despite our freedom, we’re still living within the sovereignty of God.

How many of you have heard of the **Serenity Prayer**? Written by a contemporary theologian Reinhold Niebuhr in the early 1940's in the midst of the 2nd World War. This prayer has been widely used today among many self-help organizations, including the military as a prayer of HOPE for those who are wrestling with various challenges in life. The prayer acknowledges that we are severely limited of what we can or cannot do. We need to depend on a higher source of strength and wisdom in our lives. One common version of this prayer goes like this...

 **God, Grant me the Serenity to accept the things I cannot change; the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.**

**Because of what Christ has already done for us on the cross, not only do we have no Fear in confronting with many of our challenges, but we have this Freedom to Love and to Embrace those around us through the power of the Holy Spirit.**

As our New Testament passage from *I John* reminds us that ***There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. We love because God first loved us. [[4]](#footnote-4)***

In a moment, we will once again come before this table of thanksgiving in celebration and remembrance of God’s presence among us. We cast aside all of our fears, all of our worries, all of our burdens and baggage and we lay them all before the Lord. As Jesus said*,* ***"Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. 29 Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. 30 For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."[[5]](#footnote-5)***

We come with our utmost gratitude of reverence and thanksgiving because the bread that we partake and the cup that we drink from, are the signs and seals of God’s covenant of grace and mercy towards us. These elements are broken and shed for our salvation and for ALL of God’s children.

We come, not because we are righteous in God’s sight but we are in need of rekindling our relationship with God and be reunited with the source of our wisdom. We are charge to bear this love of Christ into the world and share it with others, as witnesses and proclaimers of God’s love – extension of God’s hands and feet.

Friends, **having Fear of God is a sign that we have the presence of mind to know who we are and who God is. We know where we belong in God’s embrace! That relationship must be honored and never be bridged.**

**Therefore, we shall fear and love God with all our hearts, with all our souls, and with all our minds.** *For God has not given us a spirit of fear and timidity, but of power, love, and self-discipline.*[[6]](#footnote-6) When we love one another, our love casts out ALL fears that we may have in our lives. This is our greatest joy and our highest hope every time we come before this table. So come, let us seek God’s wisdom through our reverence and fear.

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, Amen.

1. *I King 4:29-34* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Proverbs 1:7* [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. I Corinthians 1:25, 27 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *I John 4:18-19* [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Matthew 11:28-30* [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *2 Timothy 1:7 (New Living Translation)* [↑](#footnote-ref-6)