Sunday, September 16, 1984
WHAT IT MEANS TO FEAR GOD
Psalm 111:10; Romans 11:33-36

There's a lot of loose talk about God these days. Politicians, their speech writers and political parties want us to believe that god is only on their side. Some even maintain that God has been banished from public schools. Others want us to believe that without their aid, God would be gone from American society. It seems that a lot of people, instead of fearing God or being in awe of god's holiness and majesty, believe they have to protect God, or that they are in charge of God.

Does God actually need someone to look out for God's welfare? Consider the continual debate about creationism vs. evolution. Afraid that evolution somehow denies the existence of God (how that could be I never have understood), some Christians are waging a campaign to ensure that God remains around. I don't believe God needs their help, nor does God need the help of politicians who promise that references to God will be permitted in classrooms.

To paraphrase J B. Phillips, their God is too small. God is not dependent on our belief for existence. God simply is! God is Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end.

Trying to defend God isn't the only attitude people take toward the Almighty. There are those who talk about "having" God. "You've got to have God in your heart," they say. The phrase comes out sounding like possession or ownership.

In a similar vein, some people in their talk about God seem almost too chummy, too intimate, too informal. One telltale word is the inappropriate use of the word "just" as in a prayer — "God we just want to thank you." Some contemporary Christian music has the same intimate experience theme.

Still other loose talk about God wants us to believe that god is only on our side or in our corner and then people feel secure or at peace and in control of God.

The night before a major Civil War battle, Abraham Lincoln was in a tent reviewing battle plans with one of his generals. The general turned to his commander-in-chief and said, "Mr. President, let us pray that God be on our side tomorrow." To which Mr. Lincoln replied, somewhat sadly, "I think it is more fitting that we pray that we be on the side of God."

It's nonsense to talk about "having God," or not having God as if God were some commodity, or Genie in the lamp, or good-luck charm carried about in one's pocket.

People have from the beginning tried to use God for their own purposes: controlling their children, keeping church members in line, convincing the masses that shooting Germans or Turks or the heathen or other Christians is God's will. Untold human misery, physical and mental suffering, and even destruction and death have been the result.

Yes, there's a lot of loose talk about God these days, not only by politicians, but in other places as well, including the church.

A few weeks ago, on the front page of the Wall Street Journal there appeared a story about lightning striking the York Minster Cathedral in England. The force of the blast splintered the

cathedral's 13th century oak beams and sent the roof of the south transept collapsing in the flames to the flagstones below.

The lightning bolt hit the cathedral just three days after the consecration of the Rev. David Jenkins as Bishop of Durham, a town 60 miles north of York. Mr. Jenkins is a somewhat controversial figure within the Church of England. His opponents argued that God was angered because he was made a bishop and therefore sent the bolt of lightning as a divine warning. In everyday language such incidents are often referred to as "acts of God." In this instance, some were saying that it was truly an act of God.

The question then of what really caused the fire sparked other theories as well. One person writing to a London newspaper said that lightning bolt was probably an accidental byproduct of some Yorkshire farmer's prayer for rain. She went on to say, "For the god of storms is the god of harvests. Naturally he sends rainstorms on request — it's hardly his fault that the Christians insist on building their monuments directly in his flight path."

Bishop Jenkins himself with a smile offered some other theories. He said, "My daughter asked me why people didn't say instead that the devil was so angry at my consecration that he set the church on fire." "There is room for miracles," he sent on to say, "But you have to decide what the miracle proves." Jenkins himself believe that the bolt from the night sky was derived from "simple weather conditions."

Someone else commented that if God was really angered about the new bishop's appointment why didn't the lightning strike the bishop himself rather than causing destruction to a historic cathedral.

Sometimes too, victims of misfortune try to console themselves with the idea that God has reasons for making something happen to them, reasons that they are in no position to judge. Rabbi Kushner tells the story of a woman named Helen. The trouble started when Helen noticed herself getting tired after walking several blocks or standing in line. She chalked it up to getting older and having put on some weight. But one night, coming home after dinner with friends, Helen stumbled over the threshold of the front door, sent a lamp crashing to the floor and fell to the floor herself. Her husband tried to joke about her getting drunk on two sips of wine, but Helen suspected that it was no joking matter. The following morning, she made an appointment to see a doctor.

The diagnosis was multiple sclerosis. The doctor explained that it was a degenerative nerve disease, and that it would gradually get worse, maybe quickly, maybe gradually over many years. At some point Helen would find it harder to walk without support, and eventually she could be confined to a wheelchair.

The worst of Helen's fears had come true. She broke down and cried when she heard that. "Why should this happen to me? I've tried to be a good person. I have a husband and young children who need me. I don't deserve this. Why should God make me suffer like this?" her husband took her hand and tried to console her: "You can't talk like that. God must have reasons for doing this, and it's not for us to question God. You have to believe that if God wants you to get better, you will get better, and if God doesn't, there has to be some purpose to it."

Helen tried to find peace and strength in those words. She wanted to be comforted by the knowledge that there was some purpose to her suffering, beyond her capacity to understand.

She wanted to believe that it made sense at some level. All her life she had been taught — at religious school and in science classes alike — that the world made sense, that everything that happened, happened for a reason. She wanted so desperately to go one believing that; to hold on to her belief that god was in charge of things, because if God wasn't, who was? It was hard to live with multiple sclerosis, but it was even harder to live with the idea that things happened to people for no reason, that God had lost touch with the world and nobody was in the driver's seat.

Helen didn't want to question God or be angry at God. But her husband's words only made her feel more abandoned and more bewildered. What kind of higher purpose could possibly justify what she would have to face? How could this in any way be good? Mush as she tried not to be angry a god, she felt angry, hurt, betrayed. She had been a good person; not perfect, perhaps, but honest, hard-working, helpful, as good as most people and better than many who were walking around healthy. What reasons could god possibly have for doing this to her? And on top of it all she felt guilty for being angry at God. She felt alone in her fear and suffering. If God had sent her this affliction, if God for some reason wanted her to suffer, how could she ask God to cure her of it? If it was God's will that she be sick, would she be going against God's will if she tried to get well?

Writer Harriet Sarnoff Schiff has written about her pain and tragedy in an excellent book, The Bereaved Parent. She remembers that when her young son died during an operation to correct a congenital heart malfunction, her clergyman took her aside and said, "I know that this is a painful time for you. But I know you will get through it all right, because God never sends us more of a burden than we can bear. God only let this happened to you because God knows that you are strong enough to handle it." Harriett Schiff remembers her reaction to those words: "If only I was a weaker person, Robbie would still be alive."

In our loose talk about God, we don't often think through the implications of our statements.

As a remedy for our loose talk about God, the Bible reminds us in both the Old and New Testaments that "the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom," or as St. Paul put it, "O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are God's judgments and how inscrutable are God's ways."

Albert Einstein, the scientist and physicist had a favorite saying in this regard — "Subtle is the Lord, but malicious God is not." There's a mysteriousness to God that is always beyond us and which transcends us, and yet underneath it all we know that God loves and cares for us.

God is like life itself — the older we grow, the more mysterious life becomes. We sometimes say to a young person that when she grows up, she will know more — but that is only a half truth. In general, an increasing experience of life only deepens the sense of mystery. The more we know, the more the mystery grows.

What then does it mean to fear God?

1. First of all, fear in this context does not mean so much to be afraid of, as to be in awe, or to be in reverence of. To fear God is to know that there is a lot we don't know about God and about God's creation. To fear God is to have a sense of humility about God and God's will. To fear God is to be careful in our loose talk about God.

This means then — beware of those who are always certain they know exactly what God's will is for all things. Another way to put it is that those who fear God, who have reverence for God, also have a healthy distrust of dogmatism. Beware of any claim of infallibility. No set of words, no creed, no confession, can ever totally explain the mystery or majesty or holiness of God. This does not mean that we cannot know God — it means that we cannot know all of God. W can ever even totally know another human being. Rowena and I celebrated our 30th wedding anniversary a week and a half ago. After 30 years of intimacy there's a mysteriousness about each one of us to the other.

In this context, remember it is not the purpose of religion to clear up all mysteries and have the answers to all questions. Why do we even assume that all questions have answers? On the contrary, at the center of our Christian faith is the deepest mystery of all — the cross, where the love of God was nailed to a cross by hate. And somehow through the death and resurrection of the love of God in the flesh we are saved.

So, to fear God means to stand in awe and reverence because of the holiness, the mysteriousness, the majesty, the power of God.

2. Secondly and at the same time, to fear God means also to be in the mood of reverence because of God's all-forgiving, all-embracing, never-ending love. Even though God is holy, mysterious, transcendent, all-powerful, God is also personal. God's spirit dwells among us and within us. We are creature of God. This means that God is related to our everyday life and to everything we do. It means the creation is saturated with god. Since God gives us life, then we are also to have a reverence for life and for creation itself.

We can never be separated from God, because we are an expression of God. Though God is not a person — yet God is personal and we experience God in our corporate lives as well as in our personal lives. Yet there is mystery here as well. Who among us can comprehend the kind of love that dies on a cross and does not fight back? Who among us can comprehend the kind of love that forgives one's enemies? We can only stand in reverence and awe in the presence of that kind of love.

3. This means thirdly, that to fear God means to be thankful to God for the goodness of life and creation. Listen again to the words of St. Paul from our scripture reading: "O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are God's judgments and how inscrutable God's ways! For from God and through God and to God are all things. To God be glory forever. Amen.