Sunday, April 9, 1989
THE BEGINNING OF WISDOM
Psalm 111:10; Romans 11:33-36

What is the greatest of all the accomplishments of 20th-century science? Nuclear energy? The telephone? The computer? Space travel? None of these. According to Dr. Lewis Thomas and other scientists, the greatest accomplishment of 20th-century science has been the discovery of human ignorance.

In a remarkable book entitled Coming of Age in the Milky Way, the author Dr. Timothy Ferris writes, “The more we know about the universe, the more we come to see how little we know. When the cosmos was thought to be but a tidy garden, with the sky its ceiling and the earth its floor, and its history coextensive with that of the human family tree, it was still possible to imagine that we might one day comprehend it in both plan and detail. That illusion can no longer be sustained.”

The ancient Greeks believed the world was only a few thousand years old. Now we have come to understand that the universe goes back more than ten billion years. Not only its age, but the immensity of creation is almost too much to imagine. Dr. Ferris says: “If we possessed an atlas of our galaxy that devoted but a single page to each star system in the Milky Way (so that the sun and all its planets were crammed on one page), that atlas would run to more than ten million volumes of ten thousand pages each. It would take a library the size of Harvard’s to house the atlas, and merely to flip through it, at the rate of a page per second, would require over ten thousand years.”

“Add the details of planetary cartography, potential extraterrestrial biology, the subtleties of the scientific principles involved, and the historical dimensions of change, and it becomes clear that we are never going to learn more than a tiny fraction of the story of our galaxy alone — and there are a hundred billion more galaxies.”

It’s no wonder we can say that the greatest of all the accomplishments of 20th-century science has been the discovery of human ignorance.

Our ignorance, of course, has always been with us. What is new is our awareness of it. Not very many years ago, there were eminent scientists and others who were saying that soon we human beings would know everything. The French chemist Berthelot said in 1887, “From now on there is no mystery about the Universe.” A few years later in 1895, Lord Kelvin said, “Heavier-than-air-flying machines are impossible.” At the same time, Professor Lippmann told one of his pupils that physics is a subject that is exhausted... and he had better turn his attention to something else. The pupil’s name was Heilbronner, who became a famous modern physicist.

So the beginning of all wisdom is to recognize how little we know. And this is as true in our religious faith as it is in science or any other field of knowledge.

The Psalmist said the same thing in another way: “The fear of God is the beginning of wisdom.” That’s our text. But what does it mean to fear God?

First of all, note that “Fear of God” is not cowering, frightened intimidation. Those who are said to fear God are not wimps and are not preoccupied with an excessive need to please God.

This proverb does not advocate a relationship to God based on terror. What it has in view is awe and reverence, a sense of the holy, an awareness that God's ways are not ours, and that the word "God" refers to a mystery we acknowledge but cannot master, which surrounds us and confounds us as much as it supports us and sustains us.

It's what the Apostle Paul had in mind when he wrote to the church at Rome, "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. If that person remains sensitive and does not have a closed mind, an increasing experience of life as she grows older will only deepen the sense of mystery. The more we know, the more mystery grows.

I saw a "For Sale" ad the other day which read: "For Sale, Complete Set of Encyclopedia Britannica. We have a teenager who knows everything."

To fear God is to begin to comprehend the "awesomeness" of God. It is to have a sense of humility about God and God's will. In fact, a good paraphrase of this proverb is: "To recognize the awesomeness of God is the beginning of wisdom."

I emphasize this because there is so much loose talk about God these days. There are people who claim to know God's will in every situation. To hear them talk, they have domesticated God into a cosmic pal.

In an excellent book entitled The Bereaved Parent, Harriet Sarnoff Schiff 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 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 happen to you because God knows that you are strong enough to handle it." What a bunch of nonsense! Harriet Schiff remembers her reaction to those words, "If only I was a weaker person, a person of less faith and strength, Robbie would be alive."

I get very upset with people who want to answer every tragedy or mystery by quickly saying, "It is the will of God." Beware of those who are always certain they know exactly what God's will is for all things. If you truly stand in awe of God, then you will have a healthy distrust of dogmatism. Beware of any claim of infallibility. No set of words, no creed, no confession, no metaphor can ever totally explain the mystery or majesty or holiness of God. To recognize the awesomeness of God is the beginning of wisdom. To be aware of your own limited knowledge of God is the beginning of wisdom.

This does not mean that we cannot know God — it means that we cannot know all of God. We can never even totally know another human being. Rowena and I will celebrate our 34th wedding anniversary a few months from now. After 34 years of intimacy, there remains a mysteriousness about each one of us to the other.

Remember, it is not the purpose of religious faith 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 of Jesus, where the love of God was nailed to a cross by hate. And somehow through the suffering, death, and resurrection of the love of God as experienced in Jesus, we are saved.

So to fear God means to stand in awe and humility before the holiness, the mysteriousness, the majesty, the unearned forgiving love of God which is always there surrounding us and supporting us. To fear God is also to stand in awe of God's creation and God's blessings.

Secondly, to fear God, to stand in awe of God, to recognize that we can never know all there is to know about God, does not mean that we should not continue to try to learn as much about God and God's ways as possible. Because we cannot do everything does not mean that we should not do anything. Do not be afraid to have your old ideas about God questioned. Do not be afraid of new knowledge of God.

Unfortunately, there are some religious people who are suspicious of knowledge because it might undermine their faith. There are those who do not "fear" God so much, but are afraid of free critical inquiry, afraid of new knowledge. The church's track record in this matter can make one ashamed. Most of us are aware of how the church years ago tried to silence Galileo. And there have been many others since then.

Even today, among some segments of the Christian church, there is fear of free critical inquiry into the Bible and its sources and traditions. I remember a seminary student who had been an uneducated lay preacher before entering seminary who admitted one day in a moment of candor, "I could preach a whole lot more fervently before I knew so much about the Bible." Again and again, Christians devout and sincere have concluded that only that knowledge is safe which is controlled by the fear of God translated into doctrine.

Knowledge and faith are two different things. They are not two forms of the same thing, and they are not in opposition to one another. Knowledge does not replace faith, nor does faith replace knowledge.

So to fear God, to stand in awe of God, should not be interpreted to mean that we should not learn more about God, or be afraid to have our ideas about God challenged. Let me be personal for a moment. My ideas about God have changed tremendously over the years and are still changing — but that has not threatened my relationship with God; that has not threatened my basic trust in God. In fact, it has increased my faith and trust in God.

What I discovered long ago is that I can be free to seek knowledge about God and to question my old assumptions about God if I also remember that the God to whom our language and our symbols point is also free and is not the prisoner of any doctrine or any social program. And my basic trust is that God is not threatened or intimidated by my doubts nor made anxious by them. God is not threatened in any way by my free critical inquiry into the Bible and its origins. Nor is God threatened or intimidated by our scientific theories or knowledge. Rather, I believe God is honored by our search for more knowledge.

Thirdly, to fear God, to be in awe of God, means also to be in a mood of gratitude because of God's all-forgiving, all-embracing, never-ending personal love. Even though God is holy, mysterious, transcendent, God is also personal. The Bible reminds us that even the hairs of our head are numbered. This holy mysterious God is among us and within us. We are

creatures of God. In the birth, life, suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus, God has touched the creation and each one of us in a new way. The creation is saturated with God.

Since God is the source of all life and all creation, we are also to have 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.

So what does it mean to fear God and how is that the beginning of wisdom? I have mentioned three elements: (1) To fear God is to begin to comprehend the awesomeness of God. It is to be aware of God's holiness and God's mystery. It is to recognize our own ignorance about God and to know that we will never know all there is to know about God. It is to be humble.

(2) Secondly, to be aware of the awesomeness of God does not mean that we give up trying to know more about God. We are not afraid of new knowledge because we know that knowledge is not the enemy of faith, but a friend of faith.

(3) To be aware of the awesomeness of God means to be in a mood of gratitude because of God's personal love for each one of us and God's love and care for all of creation.

To have wisdom means to take God with utmost seriousness as the premise and perspective from which life is to be discerned and lived. A life lived in such awareness will be one lived in praise to God.

"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.