

FEAR

SHERARD EDINGTON

Psalm 111

Last year, my family added a member. Back in August, we acquired a dog. Yes, this is our pandemic puppy; it is our COVID canine.

We like to have pets in the house. When Courtney and I got married, she had a cat, and I had a dog. We added another cat somewhere along the way. But when these animals eventually died of old age, we didn't replace them. We were both working, and it didn't seem fair not to be home for a pet. But COVID changed that. With my wife working from the house and our daughter home from school, it seemed like a good time to dip our toes back into the pet pool.

So, after doing some research, I located a two-year-old Australian Shepherd. Sadly, the woman who sold him to us was less than truthful about this dog's background. He is a lovely dog—very sweet and gently. He seems to be smart. However, as we would discover, the dog has some significant emotional issues. Or, more accurately, he doesn't have issues, he bought the entire subscription. He is a work in progress.

My daughter named the dog Eddy and the two of them hit it off right away. Eddy follows her around the house like a shadow. He sleeps under her bed. They talk long walks at the dog park. Eddy also likes my wife. When she's working at home, he will go and lie at her feet for hours. And then there is me. Eddy hates me. He despises me with the burning heat of a thousand suns. The root of this hatred appears to be fear. The dog is terrified of me. If I make a movement, he flinches. If I walk towards him, he bolts. When I am near the dog, he acts like he is in a hostage video. He glares at me as if I am the person who murdered his family and is now coming after him. All I want is for this dog to like me. It is hard to convey how distressing it is to be sitting quietly on the sofa reading a magazine when the dog walks through the door and notices that I am present and then slowly backs out of the room. They say, "dogs are man's friend," but clearly Eddy did not receive the memo.

Now, what did I do to deserve this? Nothing. From the very start I have extended every kindness to this dog. I feed him and take him for long walks and do all those things that dogs should love.

Generally, dogs like me. Our neighbors have a dog and when he sees me in the yard he runs over and jumps up and down says, "scratch my ears, rub my belly, throw the ball." He is excited to see me. Meanwhile, my dog will be standing off to the side sharpening his sword and muttering, "One day I will exact my revenge."

So, why does Eddy feel this way about me? I don't know. Our best guess is that someone—a man—was abusive to him. And so, Eddy associates that man with me. All the literature that I have consulted says that I should give the dog his space and eventually he will come around. But no one can tell me how long “eventually” will be. And I am tired of living every day in the doghouse.

In the past, I have always enjoyed the relationships I've had with my dogs. I like being the dog's friend, its master, even its god.

The renowned atheist Christopher Hitchens writes: “Owners of dogs will have noticed that, if you provide them with food and water and shelter and affection, they will think you are god. Whereas owners of cats are compelled to realize that, if you provide them with food and water and shelter and affection, they draw the conclusion that they are gods.” I am a dog person.

What I desire is that Eddy would choose to be with me, even adore me. I want him to heed my commands—sit, stay, mow the yard. In turn, I will love the dog, care for it, feed it, give it shelter, and take it to the vet when necessary. (Except for that one operation.) That is the contract.

There is, however, an upside to my experience with Eddy so far. It has provided me with a fresh theological insight. As I reflect on the months with this dog, I have developed a new sympathy for God. God's covenant with God's people is not unlike the relationship I want with Eddy. The gist of God's covenant is that God will create a holy nation. God will watch over and care for them and God will love them. In turn, God asks that they worship only God and obey his commandments. God wants the people to worship him and him alone and it hurts God when they turn away, when they scorn God, when they follow other gods, when they hate God.

In numerous places in scripture, we can read of God's grief at being rejected. For example, in the book of Numbers, God laments, *How long will this people despise me? And how long will they refuse to believe in me, in spite of all the signs that I have done among them?* (Numbers 14:11) And in the book of Jeremiah, God says, *Let my eyes run down with tears night and day, and let them not cease...* (Jeremiah 14:17) God's pain over our sin is real.

Scripture repeatedly tells of how the people turned from God and yet God always ushers them back. In the book of Deuteronomy, for example, as the people are about to enter into the promised land, Moses points out to them that God is not giving them this land because they have been righteous. It is not a reward. No, Moses tells the Israelites, *Remember and do not forget how you provoked the LORD your God to wrath in the wilderness; you have been rebellious against the LORD from the day you came out of the land of Egypt until you came to this place* (Deuteronomy 9:7). But still, God is giving them this land to call their own.

Even today, as God's people, we are prone to sin and rebelling against God. Theologically, we constantly run jump the fence and don't come when called and God is forced to get in the car and go driving around the neighborhood looking for us, and then brings us home. And this is where Psalm 111, our reading for today, is helpful. This psalm is a beautiful reminder of God's enduring love for us. Why should we worship God? Psalm 111 reminds us why.

The psalm begins with the words, *Praise the Lord!* Literally, the phrase is *Hallelujah*. It is from the Hebrew *hallu*, or praise, and Yahweh—hallu-yah. This psalm begins with a call of praise. The psalmist proclaims, *I will give thanks to Yahweh with my whole heart*. And where do we give thanks to God? *In the company of the upright, in the congregation*. We are to give thanks to God among the gathered faithful. When we gather here for worship, we are that company. It is truly a joy to join in worship with all of you as *the company of the upright*.

The purpose of this psalm is celebrate the great works of God toward his people. First of all, the psalmist says that *mindful of his covenant*, God provides food for those who fear him. We will talk more about fear in a moment. But I can identify with this each morning as I set out a bowl of kibble for a dog that continually fears me. Feeding the dog is a reminder to me of the commitment I made when taking in this creature. God commits to caring for his people despite their feelings toward him.

In addition, as the psalm tells us, God has revealed his power to his people. God's actions are always faithful and just. God has redeemed God's people. God has held up God's covenant forever. God's name is holy and awesome.

And then the psalm concludes with a statement about fear. *The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom*. These words are not unique to this psalm. We can find this phrase several times in our scripture. The fear described here is not the "I'm terrified" type of fear. It is not like a fear of spiders, or a fear of heights, or a fear of speaking in public. This is not the fear of a dog that has been beaten. This fear is different. It is awe or respect. It is the appraisal we take when we comprehend something's true power.

Take, for example, my fear of the ocean. I'm not afraid of the ocean; I love the ocean. But, from my hundreds of hours on the water, I am also keenly aware of the ocean's terrible power and inherent dangers. To fear the ocean is to respect the ocean and that is the starting point in surviving the ocean. To fear God is the starting point of living in relationship with God. As the catechism teaches, "Man's chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever." We can do this only when we possess a healthy fear of God. When we fully comprehend God's true power, we should tremble in fear. The wisdom of knowing God and understanding God can only commence when we comprehend and appreciate God.

We are here this day—as we are each Sunday—to worship God, to praise God, to shout our Hallelujahs and stand in awe of the God who is gracious and merciful, who loves us and cares for us and embraces us and does not give up on us even when we less than faithful. We are not here just to shout words, we are here to celebrate God’s redeeming and saving acts in our world. We are to remember with joy and awe what God does for us.

Through the week, I call upon you to identify God’s loving acts in your lives. Stand in awe of God because of God’s goodness. Celebrate the fact that God forgives us.

Let us give thanks. Praise the Lord!