

**WHEN FEAR IS GOOD**  
**Psalm 111**  
**January 29, 2012**

An acrostic is a poem or other form of writing in which the first letter of each line or paragraph spells out a word or a message. It's often used as a mnemonic device, a memory aid. The best known in Christian circles is ICHTHYS. Iesous, Christos, Theou Yios, Soter. The letters stand for (in Greek) Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior. It's the Greek word for fish – hence the frequent use of the fish as a symbol for Christ in the early days of Christianity to the present time.

Acrostics are often invented by students to help them remember in preparation for a test. A classic mnemonic device for remembering the planets is:

My	Mars
Very	Venus
Excellent	Earth
Mother	Mercury
Just	Jupiter
Served	Saturn
Us	Uranus
Nachos	Neptune

Where's Pluto? In the dog house? Actually Pluto was re-classified as "dwarf planet," one of several large bodies within the newly charted Kuiper Belt (Pluto acrostic=Puny, Little, Upstart, Tossed out).

Lest we wander too far into outer space, the reason I mention acrostic is because the 111<sup>th</sup> Psalm is one, an alphabetic acrostic. Each line begins with the next letter of the Hebrew alphabet. This literary framework signals that the Psalm is comprehensive, or an A to Z celebration of God's works.

The Psalm begins with an invitation to praise which needs no urging for the Psalmist. "I will give thanks with my whole heart . . ." would indicate exuberance, not half-hearted or just going through the motions. This praise originates from deep within. When we think of something "from the heart" we mean something felt deeply, emotional and sincere. However, for the Psalmist the "heart" is more than the feelings. It is the seat of reason, understanding and imagination as well as conscience and emotion. It speaks of completeness; something very personal. So it's not superficial; it's deep and wide.

In an age that is long on the phony, artificial, insincere and shallow, this has to strike a responsive chord with those who long for something real; without polished veneer but genuine . . . and this poem points us to that. There are times when being removed from the rat race, the congestion, the over-stimulation can open us to something greater, something better, something real that surrounds our lives and makes us glad.

Thomas Parker writes, "I now live on a country road, surrounded by very tall trees and verdant undergrowth that flowers in season, beside a flowing stream that provides background music. I lived for years in a large city, surrounded by tall buildings and densely populated streets near an expressway that provided a continual, background sound as well. As one emerges from the trees or comes around a corner, a beautiful sunset can suddenly capture you and transport you into eternity. Who is this artist who grabs me with such beauty and the awesome grandeur of His handiwork? Lost in wonder you have no need of some cleric to exhort you to be aware; we are opened up to praise the Divine Source of all things. For a moment we are awakened to a wider reality. 'My God, look at

that!'"<sup>1</sup> It strikes me that it's like our eyes only see a small portion of the electromagnetic waves there are. Then suddenly, and usually briefly, our eyes are opened to a broader spectrum. There's more than meets the distracted eye . . . and always has been and will be.

What we do in those instances is break into exclamation of amazement and awe . . . we want to share it. "I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart . . . in the congregation . . . Great are the works of the Lord!" It's too easy to be so "nose-to-the-grindstone" that we fail to see the full range of reality . . . and our lives, our worlds, grow smaller.

I recall an incident where a grandfather took his 4 year old grandson to a small hill where he promised the little boy he would see a magnificent miracle. It was late in the day and the sun was about to set. "Watch this," said the grandfather, as the colors appeared in this daily artscape, Grandad began to say, "Going, going, going . . ." and as the sun dropped behind the horizon, he said, "Gone." The little boy was enchanted by the sheer beauty and turned to his grandfather and said with earnest and excited pleasing, "Do it again, Grandad!"

Perhaps it is with the trained eye of long experience, or the fresh impressionable eye of a child, we see better . . . we see the beauty that forces from us a grateful "Wow!" The Psalm begins with words translated from the Hebrew Hallelu-yah. It begs to be expressed . . . to the Creator to be sure, but the Psalmist urges let it be expressed in the company of others – in the congregation, for it awakens something in us, God is present, active and the most remarkable

artist who pours forth masterpieces every day and more often.

Sometimes reluctant as Americans, we revere our privacy. We're irritated when someone intrudes. We guard information we share about others, careful with what we let others, even family know. We have our reasons that all have to do with being vulnerable . . . from identity theft to not wanting to be criticized. At the same time, we possess a deep desire for another to truly know and understand us. Which wins out? Perhaps it would be of some help to remind you God knows us . . . better than we know ourselves. Maybe it could give us confidence enough to open ourselves to another. Sometimes God comes to us with skin on . . . that is in another human being. Tom Parker writes again, "To live as if there were no God, is to live in a place too small for our own souls to grow and flourish . . . and there is great delight in studying them in the company of the faithful."<sup>2</sup>

That is exactly what we are doing at this very moment, unless your mind has slipped focus and you've wandered into another agenda far less important in scope: what will I make for lunch, or shall we go out. It's 11:00 and the preacher hasn't begun his sermon. Would you look at that dress she's wearing? How am I going to pay the minimum on that credit card and ever pay it off? Shall I sell my house now or wait for the market to improve? That nagging pain in my back; could it be cancer? The Psalmist's call here and now. Be here and now. Fully present, awakening to the glories of God and all God's works.

The end of the Psalm has a well known verse. What is the beginning of wisdom?

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<sup>1</sup> Feasting on the Word, Yr. B, Vol 1, p. 291

<sup>2</sup> ibid, p 298

Answer: “The fear of the Lord is the beginning.” We’re not talking about fear in the sense of terror, anxiety or the anticipation of a grievous harm. Fear as used here and many other places in the Scriptures is reverence, awe in the face of the Lord’s amazing deeds. For those who’ve been around a worshiping community for awhile, it may be a reawakening is called for. If we’ve become ho-hum, inured, to the beauties of creation and the grace in the family of God, stir us God from our stupor. Help us see through new eyes. What was that line from T. S. Eliot, “The end of all our searching may be to return to the place we started and know it for the first time.”

When we “fear” the Lord, the response is praise. That was the beginning of the Psalm and the end. His praise endures forever. Amen.



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