

PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

**Fearing God in a Fear-Filled World? Homiletical Explorations**

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**Abstract**

*The presidential address introduces the 2018 conference theme through rhetorical, political, spiritual, and biblical understandings of fear as well as communicative and homiletical strategies for addressing fear in preaching. In addition to Aristotle's Rhetoric, the prevalence of fear amid current U.S. political discourse is examined in light of the rhetorical analyses of Martha Nussbaum, professor of law and ethics at The University of Chicago. To develop an appropriately reverent fear of God while addressing the myriad anxieties around us, we may query our fears to better understand what is at stake in ignoring or addressing socio-political concerns. Beyond the rhetoric of fear, the spiritual writings of Julian of Norwich as well as numerous biblical texts (including the Book of Job and Jesus' Sermon on the Mount) suggest communicative strategies that invite a homiletical poesis of divine love and compassion, including musical and theopoetic expressions of faith.*

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“It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.” So says the Book of Hebrews, chapter 10 verse 31. A fearful thing. Why, of all the ways that we may know, understand, and relate with God, should *fear* be such a prominent part of faith and the world we inhabit? The conference theme for this year focuses our attention on fear because the board of Societas Homiletica not only recognizes that it is a prominent theme in Scripture but fear is also rampant among us – in our nations, schools, churches, students, and even within ourselves.

Our theme, “Fearing God in a Fear-Filled World? Homiletical Explorations” holds at least two important considerations. First, it is both theological and existential in its orientation. *Theologically*, it calls attention to a long-standing biblical emphasis on fearing the Lord our God, a

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<sup>1</sup> This essay represents an edited version of the Presidential Address of *Dawn Ottoni-Wilhelm* delivered at the Societas Homiletica Meeting on 4 August, 2018, at The Divinity School of Duke University, Durham, North Carolina, USA.

theme that has inspired preachers around the world and is central to many Christian understandings of what it means to be in right relationship with and to God. *Existentially*, we may say that fear is experienced personally and corporately; we may certainly feel fear but also sometimes generate and perpetuate it as collective fears are often given political and cultural expression. Throughout the keynote addresses, responses, and papers from the conference that are recorded in this edition of *The International Journal of Homiletics*, both the theological and existential import of fear and its relationship to preaching are addressed.

Second, the theme includes a question mark. Not a colon or a period but a question mark follows the juxtaposition of “Fearing God in a Fear-Filled World?” In discussing this theme, our board members recognized that there is a great deal we wonder and worry about fear: What rouses or inspires fear among us? Under what conditions does it thrive? How do we sense or recognize fear? Are there healthy, even God-given fears? Which fears inhibit – if not strangle – our voices? Is fear sublimated, ignored, or impossible to ignore? Overwhelming or subtle in its approach? Obvious or insidious? What is it about *God’s* being, presence, and activity that necessitates and calls forth a fearful allegiance, relationship, or response? In what ways may the fear of God empower or repel us? In what ways may fear be an expression of reverence and how does it call for relational accountability – not only to God but to all creation?

As homileticians, what fears do our students face? What do we fear in our research, writing, preaching, and teaching? When is it wise *not* to name and address fear and how do we discern whether or not we do so? AND what are the words we use and the strategies we employ that may help us name, describe, unmask, address, understand, encourage, or challenge fear?

In other words, *How do we speak of fearing God in our fear-filled world?*

By way of an introduction to our conference theme, I want to first explore what fear may mean to us ... Then consider what one spiritual elder of the medieval church, Julian of Norwich, has to offer in helping us to better understand the nature of godly fear ... Finally, I will suggest a few questions for further discussion – all of which I believe will be relevant to our homiletical engagement with fear.

First, what do we mean by fear? What are we talking about?

In Book 2 of Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*, the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE philosopher explores several emotions that are important and useful for orators to understand and make use of in their public speaking.<sup>2</sup> Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* provides us with the earliest systematic discussion of human psychology on

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<sup>2</sup> *Aristotle, On Rhetoric. A Theory of Civic Discourse* (George Kennedy trans. and ed.), New York, NY 1991.

record, giving speakers insights into human feelings, motivations, and how best to address one's audience. Among human emotions or sensations, Aristotle devotes great attention to fear which he defines as "a sort of pain or agitation derived from the imagination (Gr. *phantasia*, which also suggests the *appearance* or *visualization*) of a future destructive or painful evil [...]."<sup>3</sup> Not all evil is to be feared, according to Aristotle. For example, we do not fear becoming unjust or slow witted. However, he argues that two features dominate our sense of fear: it involves that which is near at hand (something dangerous is about to happen, impending, imminent) and we feel that we are powerless to ward it off. Although Aristotle is careful not to dwell on our fear of death (because, he contends, we all know that we will die and when death is not near at hand, he believes that we take little note of it), I suspect that death does indeed loom large in our minds as natural disasters strike indiscriminately, cancer and other ills inflict widely, and abuses of many kinds push us to desperation, trauma, and death's door.

The ancient Greeks also provide us with psychosocial resources to better understand fear through their theological rendering of gods and goddesses. You may remember that Ares, the Greek god of war, was united with Aphrodite, the goddess of love (the two of them representing what were believed to be the two greatest passions of humankind, war and love), to produce the twin sons Phobos and Deimos. *Phobos* (from whom we derive the word, *phobia*) means *fear*: it includes not only fear but a sense of panic, flight, and routing one's enemies. *Deimos* means terror, dread. The two brothers accompanied their father into battle, driving his chariot and spreading fear and dread in his wake.<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, Ares and Aphrodite also bore a daughter, *Harmonia*, the goddess of harmony, order, and symmetry. From the richness of these personifications of divine power and presence in ancient Greek culture, Aristotle identified the importance of fear as a perception – something that is felt before it is spoken; he contended that fear is not always seen but is real and present. When our words tap into these primal feelings, we powerfully re-present them for public, shared perception. We may consider fear and other primal feelings that Aristotle describes to be rhetorical instruments that we may cultivate, examine, or manipulate.

Is it any wonder that each language includes a range of terms to depict and decry the reality of fear in its myriad expressions? In English, for example, we speak of being anxious, scared, frightened, perturbed, intimidated, feeling panic and being overwhelmed. We add to this a sense of *disgust*, a term that has recently been explored by feminist scholars as a concurrent factor along with fear, envy, and misogyny that contribute to the oppression of women.<sup>5</sup> Also, the word *dread*

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 139.

<sup>4</sup> As the sons of both Ares and Aphrodite, Phobos and Deimos also represented the fear of loss.

<sup>5</sup> *Martha C. Nussbaum*, *The Monarchy of Fear. A Philosopher Looks at Our Political Crisis*, New York, NY 2018, 193–

reflects a particularly poignant and powerful emotion that includes foreboding and the fear of being stricken.

To be sure, fear is often an appropriate and even healthy response to perceived and real dangers. In fact, our species has survived by developing instincts for detecting dangerous situations. Whether they are beasts in the jungle or bullies in the school yard, human beings have learned to fear the tigers in our midst, including those who threaten us with physical, psychological, emotional, and/or verbal harm. Similarly, it is realistic to fear declining health and we teach our children to fear opiates and other harmful, illegal drugs.

But fear may also become toxic and unreasonable. We may be swept up in tides of fearful response to strangers and other persons who are undeserving of our suspicion, and we may be incited to fear situations that do not pose real threats.

Recently, U.S. philosopher and professor of law and ethics at the University of Chicago, Martha Nussbaum, has investigated the role of emotions as they impact law, political discourse, and democratic societies. In particular, she has studied fear which is proving so perilous to American socio-political life. In her book, *The Monarchy of Fear. A Philosopher Looks at Our Political Crisis*, Nussbaum examines the role of fear and its narcissistic, antisocial intensity, asserting that “Above all, fear responds to rhetoric ...”<sup>6</sup> After describing the roots of childhood fears that are universally experienced among us and contrasting these with what Nussbaum calls a “facilitating environment” of trust, stability, and the provision of basic physical and psychological needs that are necessary to moderating human fear, she goes on to examine the rhetoric of fear in U.S. politics, offering the examples of two recent U.S. presidents who both belong to the Republican Party and the rhetoric they use in referring to Muslims and Islam.

Nussbaum notes that President George W. Bush, in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, insistently told Americans that “we are not at war with Islam.”<sup>7</sup> At a meeting with United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan on Nov. 13, 2002, Bush asserted, “Islam, as practiced by the vast majority of people, is a peaceful religion, a religion that respects others. Ours is a country based upon tolerance and we welcome people of all faiths in America.” At a press conference a week later Bush said, “Ours is a war not against a religion, not against the Muslim faith. But ours is a war against individuals who absolutely hate what America stands for.” Again, on Dec. 5, 2002, at the Islamic Center of Washington D.C. he insisted, “Muslim citizens are making many

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. This and other quotes of then-President *George W. Bush* are recorded *ibid.*, 55–57.

contributions in business, science and law, medicine and education. Muslim members of our Armed Forces and of my administration are serving their fellow Americans with distinction ...” However much many of us may have protested the U.S. invasions of Afghanistan in late 2001 and Iraq in 2003 as well as Bush’s unsubstantiated claims of Weapons of Mass Destruction ready to strike the United States, Nussbaum notes that President Bush acted as a responsible leader in the face of popular fear: “he calms escalating confusion and anxiety, leading people toward a more fact-based and pinpointed strategy, and reminding them of cherished American values that must not be sacrificed.”<sup>8</sup>

By contrast, President Donald Trump, both during and after his campaign, repeatedly alluded to Islam as if it were as a whole a source of danger. Nussbaum notes that “The rhetoric preceding the controversial travel ban singled out Muslims as potential enemies, often using the words *Muslim ban*.”<sup>9</sup> The speech Trump gave in Warsaw in July of 2017, which was widely praised, speaks ominously of “another oppressive ideology” that “seeks to export terrorism and extremism all around the globe.” He names this threat “radical Islamic terrorism,” subscribing to the old familiar notion of a clash of civilizations. Nussbaum calculates that in that speech Trump refers ten times to “the West” and five times to “our civilization” and she asserts that from this and other speeches it is evident that “the West” is not a geographical entity nor even a political or economic term (since Trump does not include Japan, South Korea, and India in his references), but, according to Nussbaum, “it is an appeal to shared religion and shared racial identity: to Christianity (with some Jews included) and to whiteness (since Latin America does not appear to be included).”<sup>10</sup> In other words, President Trump not only contributes to an atmosphere of fear in the U.S., he draws on the deeply emotional and amorphous fears of people, “generated in a climate of ignorance and fed by imprecise and alarmist rhetoric, [which] is the enemy of any sane dialogue about our future.”<sup>11</sup>

Nussbaum describes fear as intensely narcissistic: it pulls us into ourselves as we react to protect ourselves from an imminent or perceived threat which we try to control, dominate, or bully. Furthermore, it is deadly to democratic reciprocity. Fear that runs over us in this way threatens the fabric of democracy because democracy asks us to think not only about ourselves but the shared, public good of all: “democracy requires us to limit our narcissism and embrace reciprocity.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 56. Nussbaum also summarizes her analysis by saying, “President Bush typically used the rhetoric of universal human dignity and progress, rather than the rhetoric of a clash of ‘civilizations.’” (57)

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 57. This and other quotes of President *Donald J. Trump* are recorded *ibid.*, 57–60.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 62.

But fear is having its way in the United States right now. Some of it mirrors an anxious fear of immigrants, refugees, and people of color who have in many cases become the scapegoats of other fears – such as the loss of Euro-American socio-political and cultural dominance and economic security in the United States. Fear is felt in our anxious awareness of the climate crisis and the fear-filled pleas of environmentalists working on behalf of endangered species and national parks; in the reports of innumerable women posting in the #metoo movement; fear is provoked by gun violence and, in particular, the escalation of violence targeted against people of color and LGBTQ persons; and many of us fear not only for the safety of immigrants who enter our land but also the long-term traumatic impact of the Trump administration’s wrongful policy of separating parents and their children, who are held in detention centers. Fear runs rampant in the rising tides of nationalism and populism. According to cultural philosopher Rob Riemen from The Netherlands, populist politics is always deceptive because it offers up our current fears, reinforcing the crises we feel without examining or critically evaluating them.<sup>13</sup> Our conference theme, “Fearing God in a Fear-Filled World?” calls us to examine not only the particular individual encounters with fear but also the myriad ways that nationalism and fear-filled populist movements have gained a hearing and momentum across the globe. When fear runs rampant, Nussbaum warns, “some very bad things can easily happen. Citizens may become indifferent to truth and prefer the comfort of an insulating peer group who repeat one another’s falsehoods. They may become afraid of speaking out, preferring the comfort of a leader who gives them a womb-like feeling of safety. And they may become aggressive against others, blaming them for the pain of fear ...”<sup>14</sup>

But our understanding of fear not only comes from ancient and recent philosophical, rhetorical, and political resources; not only from what we witness through the manifestations and rhetoric of fear around us today. We may also turn to spiritual and biblical resources to better understand our fears and how to address and engage them.

Let us consider a voice from deep within our Christian traditions: Julian of Norwich,<sup>15</sup> a 14<sup>th</sup> century anchoress who lived through a terrible, violent, plague-ridden time in England. You may be familiar with one of her better known affirmations: “All shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.” It is a phrase I have often repeated to myself and others during times of frustration, struggle, hardship, even desperation and grievous loss. Less known to most people is that Julian heard these words from Jesus at a time of her own grave physical suffering at the age of 30. It was

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<sup>13</sup> *Rob Riemen, To Fight against This Age. On Fascism and Humanism*, New York, NY 2015, 79.

<sup>14</sup> *Nussbaum* (note 5), 62.

<sup>15</sup> Because her family/surname is unknown to us, Julian is referred to by her first name alone throughout this essay.

during this period that she received 16 divine visions or “showings.” She heard Jesus say to her that

*“Sin is inevitable, but all shall be well,  
and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well.”*<sup>16</sup>

Julian had a sharp response to this divine message of love: It does not look well to me! How is it possible that all will be well and love is the meaning of all when the cruelest suffering and sin are attacking us without respite? She did not receive easy answers to her questions. For 20 years Julian meditated on the visions that God gave her during her own affliction then began to write her great spiritual reflections titled, *Revelations of Divine Love*. She offers an account of spiritual wisdom that centers on the greatest of God’s passion: the love of God for all, in all, and through all. Her writings provide a remarkably holistic, wise, and spiritually relevant treatise, and the last of her reflections on the last of her divine encounters describes the potency and pervasiveness of fear.

Julian writes that “when we begin to hate sin and amend ourselves by the command of Holy Church, still there persists a fear that hinders us ...”<sup>17</sup> She goes on to describe four kinds of fear:

- (1) The first is *simple fright*. It is what pierces us suddenly because of our human weakness, startling us because of our human frailty. Simple fright does us good, Julian believes, because it helps to purge us just as bodily pain or illness releases something ill within us. When something startles us, we cannot help but to focus our attention on it for a time, wondering if we do or do not have reason to be concerned. Simple fright can make us look and draw our attention to something wrong.
- (2) The second is *fear of pain*. When we fear some act of pain against our bodily person, “we are stirred and wakened from the sleep of sin” and when we are awake, alert, and watchful we begin to receive the “gentle comfort of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>18</sup> Through the fear of pain and bodily death, Julian suggests we may have contrition and turn to God as we seek comfort and mercy from God. This may be “the sort of fear that Jesus has in mind with his call to fear God, who can destroy soul and body in hell” since there is something far more important to fear than one who can kill the body alone (Mt 10:26–31).<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> *Father John-Julian*, O.J.N. (trans. and ed.), *A Lesson of Love. The Revelations of Julian of Norwich*, The Order of Julian of Norwich, U.S. 1988, 61.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 189.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 190.

<sup>19</sup> See *Keith Beasley-Topliffe*, “The Beginning of Wisdom” in: *Weavings*, Vol. XIV, No. 2, March/April 1999, 34.

- (3) The third is *doubtful fear*. It arises through awareness of our own limitations and sinfulness and often draws us to despair. Julian teaches that such fear is transformed by God's grace as the "bitterness of doubt is turned into the sweetness of kind love by grace ..." <sup>20</sup> It may also be described as a kind of "formation anxiety" since doubtful fear can lead us to humility and direct us to true "self-knowledge" and examination, away from arrogant posturing. <sup>21</sup> Doubtful fear, when it is not resisted but held, examined, and offered to God, promotes openness to receive grace, God's forgiveness and love. As preachers and teachers, we would be wise to remember that when doubts are acknowledged and honored, they provide us with opportunities to wonder, reflect, wrestle, examine, and scrutinize what we think and feel. We must be willing to embrace doubtful fear before it may bear the fruits of spiritual wisdom and loving ourselves and others amid our doubtful wonder.
- (4) Finally, the fourth fear that Julian describes is *reverent fear*. This is the only fear that truly pleases God, according to Julian. It is the most gentle or "soft" of fears because "the more of it one has, the less it is felt because of the sweetness of love." <sup>22</sup> If only she had expounded further on reverent fear because it seems in Julian's accounting to be the nearest to health and wholeness in one's relationship with God. But she does elaborate at length on the relationship of fear and love as her treatise draws to a close.

In her reflections on these four kinds of fear, Julian does not speak of them as sequential in their development, as if one must begin with the first before proceeding to the second. But there is no doubt that the fourth, reverent fear, is most fully pleasing to God. We may or may not agree with her, of course. Or we may think that our time and culture call us to abide with one of the first three. For example, in the U.S. we may need to spend more time with "doubtful fear" (i.e., more carefully examining what we are suspicious of in order to better understand what we fear before hastening on to judgment against others or reacting to others out of our insecurities).

But none of these four kinds of fear comes easily, according to Julian, and all inflict us with pain or are born through some experience of pain that is deeply felt within us.

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<sup>20</sup> *Beasley-Topliffe*, *Encounter with God's Love. Selected Writings of Julian of Norwich* (Upper Room Spiritual Classics – Series 2) Nashville, TN 1998, 60.

<sup>21</sup> See *Beasley-Topliffe* (note 19), 34, quoting the work of *Adrian van Kaam*, *Human Formation*, New York, NY 1989, 205.

<sup>22</sup> *John-Julian* (note 16), 190.

How very significant it is, then, that immediately following her brief description of reverent fear, Julian says:

“Love and fear are brothers;  
And they are rooted in us by the Goodness of our Creator  
and they shall never be taken from us without end.”<sup>23</sup>

Love and fear are brothers in Julian’s medieval conceptualization: not *love and war*, but *love and fear*.

Julian’s insight into love and fear and the intimate and reverent relationship they share recalls the teachings of Deuteronomy, chapter 10 verse 12: “So now, O Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you? Only to *fear* the Lord your God, to *walk* in all his ways, to *love* him, to *serve* the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the commandments of the Lord your God and his decrees . . .”<sup>24</sup> According to these verses, not only fear and love but walking in God’s ways and serving God are all necessary and vital companions to one another.

Remarkably, they are *commanded* of God’s people. That is; love and fear are commanded of us as surely as following God’s teaching/Torah and serving and walking with integrity according to God’s will are commanded of us.

But how can one *command love*?! And how can one *command fear*?! To our 21<sup>st</sup> century ears, it sounds incredible that God commands us to love and fear. As someone who did not grow up in the church, I remember well as a young adult hearing the command to love God with heart, soul, mind, and strength. How outrageous, I thought, that one could think of commanding love! But as the years passed, I realized and learned that the command to love God and neighbors is linked with and in the context of God’s issuing commands to follow divine teaching and laws. Love has to do with following these laws and *fear* with living in right relationships with God and others. When we violate or ignore these commands, we risk alienating ourselves from God and one another.

No wonder love is such an integral part of fear and fear of love and that God commands them both.

Of course, we may also remember a passage from the First Epistle of John, chapter 4 verse 18 that says “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.” Aware of our many imperfections (including our repeated failure to love ourselves and others well), this verse may

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> This and other biblical quotes are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible.

incite guilt: If I fear, is it because I do not have enough love? Or because my love is less than perfect? But in light of Julian's multi-faceted appreciation of fear, in light of the many kinds of fear we experience personally and corporately, we may say that the kind of fear John wants to be purged from our lives is certainly not *reverent fear* but the more insidiously damaging kinds of fear that plague us; fears that instill self-doubt, inhibit our creativity and courage, destroy our hope, turn strangers into enemies, sever us from one another and make scapegoats of those whom we fear. Love, I think Julian would agree, casts out those kinds of fear.

But many preachers have not learned the difference, and many have commanded a fearful response to God that damages our reverence for God and our love of others.

Remembering the Puritans during the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, their so-called "fire and brimstone" sermons certainly held sway in many pulpits across North America as preachers hoped to instill a fear of God into their parishioners. Jonathan Edwards' sermon, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" was first preached in 1741 at his home church in Massachusetts, was subsequently published and circulated for decades thereafter and it continues to reverberate today; its vivid imagery intending to shock and awaken listeners to repent and call on Christ for salvation from the torments of hell. Its commanding tone and content urge people to fear God as one who is ready to condemn but also to forgive our sins and arrogance.

But as a communicative strategy, commanding people not to be afraid usually does not attract listeners but repels them! We may want to stop fear in its tumultuous tracks, but it does not respond well to such commands. No doubt that is another reason why godly fear is often paired with love: the myriad expressions and experiences of fear and love invite us to consider something beyond commanding people to fear God. Are there not other ways to preach and teach about fear and the fear of God? Other than commanding fear or instilling images of a wrathful God, are there ways to honor fear and move us toward a more blessed sense of awe and relational accountability, infused with divine love and compassion? Are there not ways to cultivate an appropriately reverent fear of God and also to understand, describe and address fears of different kinds as they inflict damaging and woeful effects upon us? These are among the questions that preachers need to raise as we encounter fear around and among us.

In fact, when fear causes our people and congregations, our schools, communities and nations to clench our fists in silence or yell in anger at others, one of the greatest communicative strategies we have to offer is to query our fears: to develop questions that address the real roots of our fears and what is at stake in the fears that turn us away from God and against our neighbors.

As the last president of Societas Homiletica, John Cilliers of South Africa, said to me this week: “It is better to raise questions that have no answer than to give answers that shut down or leave no room for questions.”

As a rhetorical strategy, raising questions in our sermons may not only make room for careful, thoughtful examination of our private and public fears; they may also invite opportunities to look at what we need to fear: such as violence in our streets, schools, and homes, opioid addictions, and climate crises. Preaching may put fear to good use as we engage questions of social, political, and religious import: we may not only examine fear but be on the look-out for fear and challenge it. Walter Rauschenbush, the late 19<sup>th</sup> – early 20<sup>th</sup> century U.S. preacher and leader of the Social Gospel Movement (that wedded evangelical fervor for the gospel with the great social concerns of his time) said that a clergy person should “be the master of politics by creating the issues which [political] parties will have to espouse.”<sup>25</sup> How may preachers do this? By choosing the questions we need to discuss for our particular time, in our particular contexts. For example:

- Why has it become such a risky and controversial thing to say that “Black Lives Matter?”
- Which biblical texts about violence against women are not in our lectionaries and when will we listen to and address them?

The New Testament records many instances when Jesus encountered fear. He sometimes questioned people’s fear but often simply recognized and addressed it. In fact, fear plays a central role throughout the stories of Jesus’ miraculous acts of power and the Gospels and Letters attest that fear is experienced by many people for many different reasons: the disciples respond in fear when Jesus calms the storm (Mk 4:40); people are afraid when Jesus exorcizes the man inhabited by demons (5:15); the woman healed of her 12 year hemorrhage is afraid when she falls at Jesus’ feet (5:33); and when receiving news that his daughter has died, Jesus urges Jairus not to fear (5:36). Jesus frequently reassured people, telling them not to be afraid because we are of more value than sparrows (Lk 12:7b); not to be afraid because it is our Father’s good pleasure to give us the kingdom (12:32). The angels, God’s message-bearers, also urge people to “Fear not!” (e.g., Mt 1:20; Lk 1:13; 1:30; 2:10; Acts 27:24).

Surely Jesus and the angels are not simply dissuading us from what Julian of Norwich called “reverent fear.” Instead, they were instead trying to move us away from “simple fright” or “holy

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<sup>25</sup> Paul Rauschenbush (ed.), *Christianity and the Social Crisis in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. The Classic That Woke Up the Church*, New York, NY 2007, 295.

dread” toward a deeper, more nuanced and empowering encounter with divine presence among us; a holy fear in which fear and love are indeed siblings.

There can hardly be a more moving and meaningful account of Jesus’ response to human fear and suffering than his beatitudes. Like the blessings and woes of Lk 6:17–26, the beatitudes of Mt 5:3–12 are a touchstone of faith for many of us. They also address our deepest fears as each blessing addresses a different source of anxiety and concern: poverty (economic and spiritual), mourning (whether grieving the death of loved ones, a lost home, job, or another tragic event), meekness (being overlooked, unrecognized, or stepped upon by others), hunger and thirst (for food as well as justice), lack of mercy, a conflicted heart, war mongering and violence, persecution. Jesus blesses all of these. He offers the blessing of God who transforms even our greatest fears and sorrows into that which is touched by grace and hope.

Consider for a moment what Jesus is saying:

Blessed, happy, divinely touched are you as you experience poverty of body or spirit: when all of your external and internal resources have been drained and you fear that there is nothing left for you to be or do. That is when you may be open to receiving God whose kingdom and rule is near.

Do you mourn the loss of the person most dear to you? The work that sustained you? The home you loved? The marriage you cherished? Do not fear these losses in your life. Know that you are embraced by God whose arms will embrace and comfort you.

You who are meek, whom no one ever notices, whose gifts are least prized and often taken advantage of by others: do not be afraid. You are blessed. Whether or not others yet recognize it, you are the true owners of everything that is precious and priceless. You will inherit all.

Blessed are you who know that things are not right or fair and who fear for the well-being of creation and the future threatened by oppression and injustice. Your hunger for these things will be satisfied and all that you are and do on behalf of God’s love and justice in this world will not only bear fruit but you will enjoy the feast of your labor alongside that of many others.

Are you afraid that there is no mercy for you and others? That loving kindness is overruled by malice and retribution is considered just punishment with no other means of relational accountability in this world? You will be blessed with God’s care for you and for all others, in God’s way and time.

Is your heart, your will, undivided and well- focused? Or are you troubled by your lack of clarity, scattered schedule, and divided loyalties? Keep seeking integrity of intention and wholeness

of heart that is devoted to God alone. When you examine your own heart, God will bless you with insight, wisdom, and love.

You who struggle to make peace amid hardship and violence, even as others avoid conflict at all cost: continue to pursue peace, develop cooperative relationships instead of competitive ones, collaborate thoughtfully with others rather than tearing down others in order to lift yourself up. God will bless you as a beloved child and you will find your home in God's family.

When you risk sticking your neck out, taking courage to say and do what is right according to God's teaching, even when others are sharpening their knives, eager to cut you down if not kill you altogether: no matter how fearful the situation, remember that you are in the company of God and of prophets with whom you share the fullness of God's love.<sup>26</sup>

In the beatitudes, Jesus speaks pastorally and prophetically to some of our greatest fears – not by ignoring them, brushing them aside, or analyzing them but by blessing them, holding them in God's gracious care, speaking in ways that encourage and uplift as surely as they challenge and redirect our priorities. Whether or not Jesus ever preached an uninterrupted sermon in the form of Mt 5–7 or Lk 6, the sayings, analogies, metaphors, brief parables, and teachings that comprise what we call “The Sermon on the Mount” or “The Sermon on the Plain” offer us a wellspring of preaching resources and rhetorical strategies that may inspire us to study, teach, and preach anew about what it means to fear God in our fear-filled world.

And dare we remember Jesus' most fearful moment? At the garden of Gethsemane, the Synoptic Gospels give us the sure impression that Jesus knew danger was imminent and that he had given his power to God, into whose hands he committed himself. We learn in Mark 14:34 that Jesus was distressed and agitated as he entered the night vigil with Peter, James, and John. Nearly two millennia later, Brother Jacques Berthier of the Taizé community created a meditative, memorable, and worshipful song centered on the words of Jesus asking his closest companions to stay and pray during his time of greatest fear and travail:

Stay with me,  
Remain here with me.  
Watch and pray,  
Watch and pray.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> My paraphrase is inspired by that of *Eugene H. Peterson*, *The Message*. The New Testament in Contemporary English, Colorado Springs, CO 1993, 15f.

<sup>27</sup> *Jacques Berthier*, *Stay with Me*, in: *Songs & Prayers from Taizé* Chicago, IL 1991, no. 8.

Music is yet another way to preach. It is perhaps the most effective way of preaching with our hearts and heads together, joining our theology with our humanity. Through hymns and religious songs, we confess our sins, express our needs, address, bear, and engage our fears. In his book *Dem Dry Bones*, Luke Powery examines African American spirituals as these also preach of the ways songs of suffering and faith help to move us through the worst of times.<sup>28</sup> In them, we, like Jesus, not only seek comfort and divine presence, but we proclaim our need for companions and companionship; for God who sees us, knows our fears, and loves us through all our lives.

The poetry of music is another way that we may draw people into new and transformative encounters with our fears, including godly or reverent fear. It may seem extraordinary to consider poetry as means of disclosing or pointing us toward salvation, but the English translation of Martin Luther's great hymn, "Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott" ("A Mighty Fortress Is Our God"), evokes the power of God through music's poetry:

*And though this world, with devils filled,  
should threaten to undo us,  
We will not fear, for God hath willed  
his truth to triumph through us.  
The prince of darkness grim,  
we tremble not for him.  
His rage we will endure,  
for lo, his doom is sure.  
One little word shall fell him.<sup>29</sup>*

If fear responds to rhetoric, as philosopher Nussbaum contends, then surely also to *poesis* – the creating of new language and a new imaginary. In his *Poesis*, Aristotle describes the poetic act as the invention of a fable-plot: a creative act. Poetry invents a mythos, argues Paul Ricoeur, which is distinct from rhetoric that so often builds upon logical argumentation.<sup>30</sup> Rhetoric and poesis are not opposed to one another, to be sure; but whereas rhetoric draws from conventional ideas and centers on deliberative, judicial, and epideictic settings, poetry is a creative act, Ricoeur insists. It "points to the breach of newness that the creative imagination opens."<sup>31</sup> The "conversion of the

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<sup>28</sup> Luke A. Powery, *Dem Dry Bones*, Minneapolis, MN 2002, 21–38, 57–69, 109–112.

<sup>29</sup> Martin Luther, *Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott*, in: *Geistliche Leeder* (tr. Frederick H. Hedge), 1852. See *Hymnal. A Worship Book*, Elgin, IL 1992, #165.

<sup>30</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Rhetoric – Poetics – Hermeneutics*, in: Michel Meyer (ed.), *From Metaphysics to Rhetoric*, Boston, MA 1989, 137–149.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 142.

imaginary is the central aim of poetics” Ricoeur contends, and “it is less a matter of *settling a controversy* than of *generating a new conviction*.”<sup>32</sup>

According to past president of Societas Homiletica, Thomas Troeger, our old and tired words may become idols and are ever in need of reaching through clarity to uncover or reveal new forms of expression. In his essay, “A Poetics of the Pulpit for Post-Modern Times” Troeger writes: “A post-modern homiletics does not so quickly grab at the right verbal formulation. Instead, it begins at the level of human suffering and the trust and empathy awakened when our pain is recognized by another.”<sup>33</sup> Or as founding member of Soc. Hom., Richard Lischer outlines in his book, *The End of Words: The Language of Reconciliation in a Culture of Violence*, the violence of the 20<sup>th</sup> century has made a mockery of words. “The preacher’s vocation,” Lischer writes, “entails a dying to the norms of those who control language in our culture. It offers a resurrection of freedom to speak of God in a God-free society and to join our words to the suffering and joy of God’s people.”<sup>34</sup>

The late great poet Jane Kenyon put it this way: “The poet’s job is to tell the whole truth and nothing but the truth, in such a beautiful way that people cannot live without it.”<sup>35</sup>

Beautiful, yes. But the truth of poetry, like the truth of preaching and the truth of suffering, injustice, and fear, can be a terrible thing, however robed in beauty we may find it.

Just ask Job. Amid horrific suffering and loss, having his worst fears realized upon the death of his sons and daughters, the annihilation of his home, livestock and livelihood, inflicted with sores from head to toe, Job sat with friends in silence for 7 days. When at last he opened his mouth it was to curse the day he was born – and he spoke in the form of a poem with images of light and dark, night and day, appealing to the sea and stars. Wailing amid darkness he called out, “Truly the thing that I fear comes upon me, and what I dread befalls me. I am not at ease, nor am I quiet; I have no rest; but trouble comes” (3:25).

His friends cannot resist the urge to offer their interpretation of things, even questioning whether Job truly fears God. Each takes a turn speaking in poetic verse, with Job responding to each in kind. But also, and remarkably, Job at times directs his speech to God: in fact, he is the only one to do so, setting a precedence for all who hope that their words flung into the void will find a landing place in the heart of God.

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 143 (emphasis mine).

<sup>33</sup> Thomas H. Troeger, A Poetics of the Pulpit for Post-Modern Times, in: Richard Eslinger (ed.), *Intersections: Post-Critical Studies in Preaching*, Grand Rapids, MI 1994, 63.

<sup>34</sup> Richard Lischer, *The End of Words. The Language of Reconciliation in a Culture of Violence*, Grand Rapids, MI 2005, 91.

<sup>35</sup> Quoted in *The Christian Century*, April 26, 2017, 3.

But between Job and his friends, is a poetry slam of the worst kind: back and forth they contend with one another, his friends addressing and accusing Job of suffering the result of his own wickedness or faithlessness. No artful unveiling of sympathetic queries to God are raised on his behalf; no tenderness of affection is felt. Their words are ponderous and vindictive, fulfilling their own need to blame the victim of Satan's cruel test.

Remarkably, in chapter 28 Job breaks out in a hymn. His poetic song searches for God's ever-elusive wisdom. Frustrated that neither he nor his friends can offer a satisfactory explanation for the travesty of his losses, Job calls out: "But where shall wisdom be found? And where is the place of understanding?" (28:12). Culminating in his most astonishing affirmation, Job declares:

God understands the way to it [wisdom],  
and he knows its place.  
For he looks to the ends of the earth,  
and sees everything under the heavens [...]  
And he said to humankind,  
'Truly, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom;  
and to depart from evil is understanding.'  
Job 28:23,28

There is no language to contain his grief; no mortal way to understand what has happened. All has been taken from Job EXCEPT his words.

And God also has words, if not answers to Job's questions. In fact, Job's comfort is in hearing God's questions after issuing so many of his own:

'Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?' (38:4)  
'Have you commanded the morning since your days began,  
and caused the dawn to know its place ..?' (38:12)  
'Shall a faultfinder contend with the Almighty?' (40:2)  
'Will you condemn me that you may be justified?' (40:8b)

There are no answers given by Job or God and no explanations are made for his predicament. But God is with him. Job's ears have heard and his eyes have seen God. His friends are rebuked, his

fortune restored, more children are born to him. But it is in hearing God's questions, being in God's presence, that Job finds his place. The controversy over suffering is not resolved but a new conviction arises: the beginning of wisdom and understanding resides with the God whom we fear.

Poetry gives voice to wisdom and our fearsome relationship with God. It both cries out and holds silence, lives in images as well as gray places. It is perhaps especially well-suited for both invoking and evoking a reverent fear of God because it holds the paradoxes of awe and annihilation, of anger and anguish, of judgment and humility, of universality and particularity. A theopoetics of fear is needed in our preaching because we need language that suffuses suffering and transcends it; calls out to God and remains true to our fears and failings, needs and desires. In the words of poet Gregory Orr:

Let's remake the world with words.  
Not frivolously, nor  
To hide from what we fear.  
But with a purpose.

Let's  
As Wordsworth said, remove  
"The dust of custom" so things  
Shine again, each object arrayed  
In its robe of original light.

And then we'll see the world  
As if for the first time,  
As once we gazed at the beloved  
Who was gazing at us.<sup>36</sup>

I think this is what African American homiletician Valerie Bridgeman described in her response to Henry Mitchell's 2005 book, *Celebration and Experience in Preaching*, when she insisted that the preacher needs to speak as if life matters. That is, we need to "preach to matter"; the flesh-and-blood, earthbound creatures who live and struggle, wonder and worry, celebrate and sing their way

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<sup>36</sup> *Gregory Orr*, *Concerning the Book That Is the Body of the Beloved*, Port Townsend, WA 2005, Part Three, 99. Used with permission.

to faith.<sup>37</sup> And to do this, Bridgeman contends, we need *poetic sermonic forms* that will meet people in their everyday lives. It is what homiletician Frank Thomas calls “keeping it real” – something that the hip-hop music of Jay-Z and other musicians insist upon in their existentially authentic performances.<sup>38</sup> There is both logical and emotional truth in “real rap,” Thomas asserts: descriptive imagery and word play, honestly addressing the profane side of life [...] knowing that our profane lives are sacred to God [...]. These are all part of keeping it real amid life’s challenges and fears.<sup>39</sup>

Fearing God in a Fear-Filled World? As homileticians, we are called to explore what this may mean for us, our people, nations, and the socio-political, cultural, and religious contexts of our time. We raise questions and search for words beyond words, wisdom through suffering, fear and love. And in this conference we ask ourselves and one another:

- What are the fears or what kinds of fear do we recognize in our teaching contexts or nations?
- Given the many kinds of fear that Julian of Norwich identifies and the many fears that claim our attention, what ways may we address these fears? If, for example, it is not helpful for us to “command” fear, what other rhetorical strategies may we use to help one another identify, address, engage, and/or challenge fear?
- Are we afraid of fear or do we know the life-giving potential of reverent fear of God? What does reverent fear of God look and sound like in our lives, churches, and communities?
- What poetic moves, metaphors, sights, and sounds call us into and through a fearful love (or loving fear) of God and one another?

So it is that we listen and learn, wonder and wait, hunger and hope – fearing God in this fear-filled world.

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<sup>37</sup> Valerie Bridgeman, “Response,” in: O. Wesley Allen, Jr. (ed.), *The Renewed Homiletic*, Minneapolis, MN 2010.

<sup>38</sup> Frank A. Thomas, *Introduction to African American Preaching*, Nashville, TN 2016, chapter 4.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 117–120.