

This church season of Lent, with its somber practices, minor key music and emphasis on the cross of Jesus, might seem like a strange place to look for renewal. Renewal implies a beginning. The cross of Christ signals an ending. Renewal implies hope, new possibilities, new ways of living. How do you find renewal at the scene of an execution?

For an answer, we’re going to look to a dying thief, who was hanging on a cross next to Jesus. If he could find hope in that horrible situation, there is hope for you and me. And there is hope for you no matter what you may have done or not done in your life. There is renewal here; but in keeping with the strangeness of the moment, we will see it is renewal that begins with an appropriate amount of fear. And it’s not just any fear; it’s the fear of God.

You may not like the idea of fearing God too much, and that’s all right. You don’t have to like it. But if you take the Bible seriously, you have to accept that a healthy fear of God is necessary. Why? Because God’s power is absolute—and he demands perfect justice. If you think it through, that combination ought to make you feel uneasy, and this is what fearing God is about.

There is a natural reaction we have to powerful things. In August of 2018, I stood on the southeast slope of Mount St. Helens, and let me tell you, knowing that the mountain had once exploded created an interesting set of feelings in me. It wasn’t paralyzing fear. It was more of a sense of how puny I was in relation to the immense potential power still there under the rocks. Or to say it a different way, the (admittedly dormant) volcano had power over me. If it blew it’s top, and I was in the blast zone, there’s nothing I could do to stop it.

When you think of God, do you picture him as having that kind of limitless power? Because it’s even greater. God set the mountains in place with a word; and with a word, you and I could be dust.

You and I have a natural reaction to powerful things—and we have a natural reaction to justice, as well. This one is really easy to understand. If I’m going 85 in a 55 mile an hour zone and I see red and blue lights in my rearview mirror, justice is being served. There’s a good chance that its going to change the way I drive, for a little while at least.

Well, consider this: in God, you have ultimate power and perfect justice combined in one being. And that being wants to have a relationship with you. He knows everything about you, and I mean everything, right down to the secret things that if anyone learned about you, you would die of embarrassment on the spot. He knows. If that doesn’t kick up some feelings of dread and fear in you, you may be dead already.

We know that the one thief on the cross near Jesus understood this, because he said so. His partner in crime seemed to think that it was a good idea to insult and blaspheme Jesus, and the thief reaches a point where he can’t take it anymore. So he strains against the crossbar to get enough breath to speak, and says, “Do you not fear God? You are getting the same punishment Jesus is. We are punished justly, getting what we deserve for what we did. But this man has done

nothing wrong.” This criminal, who spoke up in Jesus’ defense, understood justice and injustice. Whatever wrong he had actually done, the fear of God enabled him to *see things clearly*.

And then came the breakthrough. Proverbs 9:10 says, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom,” and it is! It is the beginning of seeing things clearly, but it is not the end. Fear is not enough. The thief on the cross needed more than fear.

And he saw it, he sensed it, he found it, in Jesus. He discovered some glimmer of hope in this innocent sufferer. The thief decided that it would be enough to be kindly remembered by someone as great as Jesus. So he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." Remember me! Not my sins. Not my crimes. Remember me!

Are those also your words tonight? If so, then the promise comes to you, as it came to him, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise." The load of sin is lifted. The guilt is gone. Why? Because the fearsome power of God’s judgment exploded upon Jesus on the cross. No one else was caught in that blast. So, no matter what you have done, you can say, "I am not worthy of anything good from God, but Jesus died for me. He gave me the promise of paradise." No matter who you are or what you've done, God says to you: "I know you. My Son died for you. You are mine." The thief on the cross is not the exception. The thief is the rule. It begins with the fear of God, which gives way to something else—a vulnerability; an opening up to Jesus; finding in this innocent sufferer something far greater than ourselves. If he will just associate with us, it will be enough. And it ends up being way more than enough. The thief on the cross is not the exception. The thief is the rule. There is no paradise without Jesus giving it as a gift of grace; and give it He does. Jesus refuses to let you just be a memory. He says, “Today you will be with me in paradise.”

God has used His fearsome power to open Paradise to you. And this Paradise is not something to claim only at the end of your life. It’s open to you now. The God who can hang a galaxy in the universe by speaking a few words has called you his beloved daughter; His dearly loved Son. He is as well pleased with you as He is His own Son, our Lord Jesus. To work that into your heart is to live in Paradise every day.