



[Rev. Steven S. Billings](#)

Sermon for The Feast of the Transfiguration

March 2, 2025

Let the Peoples Tremble

Psalm 99

- 1 The LORD reigns;
Let the peoples tremble!
He dwells *between* the cherubim;
Let the earth be moved!
- 2 The LORD *is* great in Zion,
And He *is* high above all the peoples.
- 3 Let them praise Your great and awesome name—
He *is* holy.
- 4 The King's strength also loves justice;
You have established equity;
You have executed justice and righteousness in Jacob.
- 5 Exalt the LORD our God,
And worship at His footstool—
He *is* holy.
- 6 Moses and Aaron were among His priests,
And Samuel was among those who called upon His name;
They called upon the LORD, and He answered them.
- 7 He spoke to them in the cloudy pillar;
They kept His testimonies and the ordinance He gave them.
- 8 You answered them, O LORD our God;
You were to them God-Who-Forgives,
Though You took vengeance on their deeds.
- 9 Exalt the LORD our God,
And worship at His holy hill;
For the LORD our God *is* holy.

One of the problems with our world today, particularly our own society, is that no one seems to tremble anymore at the presence of the Almighty – even those of us who acknowledge that He is truly present. We don't enter His house with reverence, we treat His gifts as though they mean nothing, we approach His altar as though we had our own right to be there. The fact is, we don't.



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There was a time when people feared the presence of God – feared even setting their eyes on Him, for they knew that no one could see the Lord and live. We in our day, of course, are recipients of His grace; we enter His temple at His own invitation and recognize, as we have been taught, that we live now under grace and not under law. An unfortunate result of this is that many in our day have lost any sense of the sacred, that God, and the things of God, are holy and ought not be taken for granted. We may do well, my dear brothers and sisters, to tremble before the Lord now and then, remembering that the only reason He has not obliterated us from the face of the earth is His pure, unmitigated love for us poor sinners.

Today's Psalm gives us three reasons that we should tremble before the Lord our God. First of all: Because He reigns. The Lord rules all things in heaven and earth according to His almighty power. He is seated on the throne of His majesty amid the cherubim. Now, in reality, these are not those cute chubby little angelic creatures depicted shooting "love" arrows around Valentine's Day. Ezekiel describes cherubim as being fearsome and majestic, inspiring awe and wonder – four faces and four wings, sparkling like burnished bronze, flashing like lightning, like burning coals of fire. I guarantee you, if I saw one of those, I would be trembling – quaking in my shoes! – not to mention the fact that between these cherubim is the Almighty Creator!

Secondly, the Lord, the Almighty, is great, not only in Zion, the place of His holy temple, but He is exalted over *all* the people. St. Paul writes to the Philippians that every knee shall bow and every tongue confess – not just human tongues, not just human knees, but every knee, every tongue, the knees and tongues of every created being, including demons and angels and archangels and arch demons – *every knee, every tongue* will acknowledge God the Father Almighty and our Savior Jesus in the power of His Spirit to be the undisputed King of all creation. A lot of arrogant people these days run their mouths denying His very existence, but no one will be able to omit His praise on the great and terrible day of His appearing. Every atheist, every agnostic – there will be no doubters that day, the day we stand before the throne of His glory. We will all praise Him, but some will not remain. Those who never voiced His praise on earth will not get to share His glory in heaven. Oh, there will be trembling and deep, deep cries of woe and regret.

Thirdly, we tremble because He is holy, He is unique; there's no other being like Him. Peter, James, and John witnessed Jesus' glory in today's Gospel. His holiness shone forth, causing Him to become "dazzling white." The disciples had never seen anything like that. You and I have never seen anything like Jesus, for the purity of His person is like nothing else in the world. Everything in this world – even its greatest good – is like filth compared to God's perfect goodness.



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The psalmist says that He loves justice, that He establishes equity, and that He executes righteousness. None of these things would exist without Him. *Nothing* would exist without Him! Nor is His justice bound by our understanding of what's right and wrong, which understanding is always tainted with our inherent sin. His justice is perfect. His righteousness makes ours look like dirty rags by comparison. He is perfect.

His equity is not a political idea, for He treats absolutely everyone justly and fairly. For, in His eyes, we're all the same. We're all filthy sinners, with no good in us and no real righteousness to call our own. We all deserve His present and eternal punishment – damnation for all eternity. But He loves us equally and sent His Son to suffer the punishment for all of us. Absolutely everyone – regardless of race, nationality, ethnic origin, or any other distinction – absolutely everyone who turns to Jesus Christ in repentance and faith receives the full and free forgiveness of their sins. His equity is perfect!

So we are called to exalt the great and awesome name of the Lord our God. We tremble at His presence, we praise His name, we lift Him up before the world, we worship at His footstool, and by His grace and with His help, we keep His testimonies and His statutes. We love Him because He loves us, and therefore we ask His help in following His commands.

Moses, Aaron, and Samuel are representative in our text of God's servants, who called out to the Lord in time of crisis. The Lord heard them and answered them. He proved Himself to be not only righteous concerning His law, but righteous also concerning His gospel, showing Himself the avenger of *their* wrongdoings! It does not say that God was the avenger of the wrong done to them, though He certainly was. We would expect Him to fight Israel's enemies on their behalf. But here it says that He is the avenger of *their* wrongdoings – the wrongdoings of Moses, Aaron, and Samuel! Like all human beings, they were sinful, needing forgiveness. And God gave it to them!

Beloved, our God is a God of forgiveness. When we turn to Him in repentance and faith, He forgives us. How dare we not forgive others! Jesus said, "If you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, *but if you do not* forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses (Mat. 6:14-15). We heard in last week's Gospel Jesus' command to love our enemies, to do good to those who hate us, to bless those who curse us, and to pray for those who abuse us. "Be merciful," He said, "even as your Father is merciful." "Forgive, and you will be forgiven." Our God is a forgiving God. His people are to be a forgiving people. Christians forgive; it's what we do.

But what do you do when you fail? When Peter first met Jesus, he said, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man." What did Jesus say? "Follow me, and I will make you a fisher of men." On the night of Jesus' betrayal, Peter denied Him three times. What did Jesus say? "Feed my sheep." And in Matthew's account of the Transfiguration, Peter and the others, confronted by the majesty, the holiness, the awesome realization of who Jesus is, fell on their faces before Him, terrified. But what did Jesus say? "Rise, and have no fear."



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What do you do when you fail to exalt the Lord, to praise Him as you ought, to fear, love, and trust in Him above all things? What do you do when you fail to love your neighbor as yourself? Falling down before Him is not a bad start. There's no better way to greet the Lord than on your knees, for in doing so you acknowledge His majesty, His holiness, and that your life truly is in His hands. Like I said, falling down is not a bad start, but it's a terrible finish!

Jesus never left anyone on their knees before Him. "God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world," He said, "but in order that the world might be saved through him." To the woman caught in adultery, He said, "I do not condemn you; go and sin no more." To the Samaritan leper He said, "Go, your faith has saved you." To countless others He said, "Go in peace, your faith has made you well." And to His disciples on the mountain, He said, "Rise, and have no fear."

What do you do when you fail to live up to God's expectations, when you sin by transgressing His holy and perfect law, when you've lived as if God didn't matter and you mattered most? By God's grace, you repent; you turn to Him in faith, and you go in peace, worshiping the one whose forgiveness is just as perfect as He is: your Lord, your Savior, your Messiah, your King. He is holy. Hallelujah! In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen