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The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church Faith and Order

The First Sunday of Zemene Tsom (*The Season of Lent*)

Liturgical Readings:

Heb. 13:7 – 17; James 4: 6-end; Acts 25: 13 -end

Psalm 2:11;

John 3:10-25

The Anaphora of Our Lord

“Serve the LORD with fear, and rejoice with trembling” (Psalm 2:11)

The holy Psalmist summons us into a mystery that lies at the very heart of the Orthodox faith: a fear that does not crush joy, and a rejoicing that does not abolish reverence. “Serve the LORD with fear, and rejoice with trembling” is not a contradiction, but a divine harmony. From the Ethiopian Orthodox theological inheritance, shaped by the Scriptures, the Fathers, and the living worship of the Church, the fear of God is understood not as terror before an arbitrary power, but as awe-filled love before the Holy One, who is both Judge and Father, consuming fire and merciful Redeemer.

The first appearance of fear in human history is found in Eden. When Adam heard the voice of the LORD God walking in the garden, he confessed, “I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself” (Genesis 3:10). This fear was born not of reverence but of rupture. Sin distorted the human heart, and fear became alienation, concealment, and shame. Proverbs bears witness to this fallen fear, reminding us that “the wicked flee when no man pursueth” (Proverbs 28:1). Such fear is the bitter fruit of disobedience, the inward testimony that communion with God has been wounded.

Yet the Gospel proclaims a decisive healing. Christians do not live under the same fear that seized Adam and Eve, for we have not received “the spirit of bondage again to fear; but... the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father” (Romans 8:15). Saint John declares with apostolic clarity, “There is no fear in love; but perfect love casteth out fear” (1 John 4:18). The terror of judgement without mercy is not the inheritance of those who are in Christ. We have been released, redeemed, and restored to filial intimacy. And yet, paradoxically, the Scriptures do not abolish fear; they transfigure it.

Here lies the crucial distinction: the fear that arises from sin is not the fear that Scripture commends. The fear of the LORD is rooted in love, humility, and reverent obedience. “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge: but fools despise wisdom and instruction” (Proverbs 1:7), and again, “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom” (Proverbs 9:10). This fear does not drive the righteous away from God but draws them nearer, as David exults, “Rejoice in the LORD, O ye righteous: for praise is comely for the upright” (Psalm 33:1). Thus fear and joy are not adversaries but companions on the path of holiness.

Why, then, is the fear of the LORD the beginning of knowledge? Because true knowledge of God demands surrender. A man who fears the LORD will withhold nothing from Him. Abraham stands as the supreme witness. When he stretched forth his hand upon Mount Moriah, the Angel of the LORD declared, “Now I know that thou fearest God, seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son, from me” (Genesis 22:12). Abraham’s fear was not dread, but total trust,

and it became grace, blessing, and covenant for generations. Likewise, Jacob confessed that had “the fear of Isaac” not been with him, he would have been sent away empty (Genesis 31:42). The fear of God preserved him, defended him, and sustained him.

Holy Scripture further testifies that those who fear the LORD are never abandoned. “The angel of the LORD encampeth round about them that fear him, and delivereth them” (Psalm 34:7). The LORD Himself speaks, creates, and governs all things in sovereign majesty (Psalm 33:9, 11, 14), yet He draws near to those who fear His Name. Solomon, heir to David’s wisdom, exhorts the faithful to fear the LORD and hate evil (Proverbs 8:13), while the New Testament affirms the same truth in the life of Cornelius, the Roman centurion, “a devout man, and one that feared God with all his house... whose prayers were heard” (Acts 10:2). The fear of God opens heaven, sanctifies prayer, and invites divine visitation.

Beloved in Christ, this holy fear also liberates us from every other fear. The Apostles, standing before hostile authorities, declared, “We ought to obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29). Felix trembled when confronted with righteousness and judgement to come (Acts 24:25), yet his fear led not to repentance but delay. Scripture warns solemnly of a fearful expectation of judgement for those who persist wilfully in sin (Hebrews 10:26–27), and the Revelation speaks of the fearful and unbelieving who are separated from the life of God (Revelation 21:8). Such fear belongs to those who refuse grace. For us, fear has been transformed, because Christ has made us children. Therefore, we love Him, and in loving Him, we fear to grieve Him.

Saint Paul captures this sacred tension when he exhorts the faithful: “Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling” (Philippians 2:12). This is not anxiety, but vigilance, not despair, but devotion. Saint Peter likewise commands, “Pass the time of your sojourning here in fear” (1 Peter 1:17), remembering that God judges without partiality. In the same spirit, the Epistle to the Hebrews calls us to remember those who rule over us, to obey and submit with humility, for they watch for our souls as those who must give account (Hebrews 13:7–17). Such reverent obedience is itself an expression of the fear of God, guarding the unity and holiness of the Church.

Saint James further instructs us that “God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace unto the humble... Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and he shall lift you up” (James 4:6–10). Holy fear and humility are inseparable. Pride extinguishes fear; humility preserves it. Even Saint Paul, standing before King Agrippa, spoke with fearless reverence, bearing witness to the truth of Christ with clarity and restraint, leaving judgement to God (Acts 25:13–27). His boldness flowed not from arrogance, but from a conscience formed by the fear of the LORD.

Therefore, we pray with the Psalmist that the LORD would save us from our sins (Psalm 18:13), knowing that salvation itself includes the gift of holy fear. Through the prophet Jeremiah, God promises, “I will put my fear in their hearts, that they shall not depart from me” (Jeremiah 32:40). This is covenantal fear: planted by grace, sustained by love, and perfected in obedience. It keeps the believer within the embrace of God, not by coercion, but by transformed desire.

To fear God, then, is to stand continually before His presence with awe, gratitude, and love. It is to rejoice, yet tremble; to draw near, yet bow low. In the Ethiopian Orthodox faith, this fear is lived daily in prayer, fasting, liturgy, and sacrament, where heaven and earth meet and the faithful cry, “Holy, Holy, Holy.” May the LORD grant us such fear—not the fear of hiding, but the fear of abiding; not the fear of judgement alone, but the fear that blossoms into wisdom, obedience, and everlasting joy.