

PRECARIOUSLY PLACED

And this is the boldness we have in him, that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have obtained the requests made of him. -1 Jn 5:14-15

Many of the great surviving churches and monasteries of the Armenian highlands are precariously placed on top of mountains, on the edge of massive gorges, cut into the sides of cliffs. For example, Sevanavank the church in which Yn. Anna and I were married, is hard enough to get up to that several of our older guests came to the site but couldn't make it up to the sanctuary. The monastery of Geghard is half way up a mountain and miraculously carved into the side of a mountain. Datev church and monastery, however, might just be the most precariously placed Armenian Church. On the edge of a deep gorge of the Vorotan River, it is so remote and hard to get to, that the Swiss helped build the world's longest two way, aerial tramway, taking you for a three mile round trip in the air to get to it.

Now anyone who has basic knowledge of Armenian history can tell you why these magnificent sanctuaries were built in ways so difficult to access. When every Spring, every year, there was the real possibility that foreign invaders would storm through your towns, destroy your place of worship and loot all of its vestments and vessels, you had to make your churches hard to access. You had to cover up your place of worship and protect your faith heritage with high walls over even higher gorges, so that those who meant you harm would fear approaching your sanctuaries.

However, what was done out of necessity in the past, may have caused unintended consequences which linger in our church to this day. The negative side of making our churches unreachable, guarded and fear inspiring is that God himself might seem as unapproachable as these imposing and remote churches.

And to an extent, this awesome depiction of God has its place, and is support by the old 'promise' of our biblical faith. Access to God, for Old Testament Jews, was often a cause for fear. When God thundered on Mt. Sinai, the people feared approaching Him. Accidentally touching the Ark of the Covenant, which represented the holy presence of God, would result in death. Our modern sensibilities might find such an imposing image of God too punitive. And if this is all we ever knew of God, I would agree. But as an essential first step in faith, the imposing God of the old promise is basic to mature faith. Indeed, the book of Proverbs tell us that fear of God is the beginning of all wisdom (Pr 9:10), and by extension the first step in knowing God is admitting He is not in your pocket. That like Datev, Geghard and Saghmosavank, God is majestic, imposing and out of your reach. But alas, fear is the beginning and not the end of our dealings with God. As we mature in faith and give ourselves more fully to God, we find that-like tram riders over Datev's deep gorge, Our Lord lifts us up and protects us; transcending all fear and all distance.

Coming to know and trust the mercy of God who is near to us, this is the second and decisive stage in our faith development. This is the new promise, the New Testament, in which we are encouraged to approach God without fear. "Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need (He 4:16)," we read in the Epistle to the Hebrews. And in today's Epistle reading from John; "This is the boldness we have in him, that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us (1 Jn 5:14-15)."

With the coming of Jesus, we are emboldened. In Jesus we are given a bridge to pass over the chasm of sin which separates us from the majesty of God. With Jesus' death and resurrection, we must no longer fear death and plunder of all that is sacred by our enemy. Following Jesus, we know the way, for Jesus himself is the way to boldly approach the majestic creator of all things visible and invisible, without fear, without stumbling. Therefore, whether we are approaching God's holy places and holy presence on Sunday, or approaching him daily in our prayers, let us not keep our distance out of fear or supposed reverence. The fear which is natural for children in faith, is to be left behind as we grow to know, love and trust our God. Though the chasm is wide and the walls are high which separate us from God, in Christ we are absolutely confident in the way to our heavenly father, now and always; amen.