

“Wait for the Lord”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
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Psalm 27

What causes us fear and anxiety? Wondering if we will get into the college we so desperately want to go to? Sending our children off to school in the days following a school shooting? Driving into work knowing what the headlines said the day before, that your company is in financial distress? Waiting for the doctor to come into the exam room with the test results from your spouse’s biopsy? Seeing a person of a different race or ethnicity on the street, in the aftermath of another violent night in our city? What causes you fear and anxiety?

Dreams are usually fleeting for us, and my dreams are no different. Most of the time I cannot recall what I dreamed last night, much less last week. But what is fascinating to me is that I can recall a dream I had when I was three or four-years-old as if I dreamt it last night. And it was a dream that caused me to be afraid.

I may have shared this before, and if I have, please forgive me. But in this dream, I am with my parents in the car, and we pull into the parking lot of a local grocery store. I can even recall the store – Seessel’s Supermarket in Memphis, Tennessee, where I was born. My parents go into the store to get some food, but for some reason, they leave me in the car. And as I look at them walking into the store, I see two figures on top of the store pouring something on the roof – perhaps it was gasoline or something like that. I start to panic and call out for my parents, and that’s when I woke up from the dream.

I believe one of the reasons that dream has stayed with me for over forty years is the fact that it touches an emotion that is raw and deeply human – the fear of losing those whom we love most deeply. As an only child, my parents were my life at that age, and to consider something happening to them which would take them away was terrifying. That is definitely where fear can become an overriding emotion, if we allow it.

However, I also believe that that dream forged in me the deep value I place on family, especially as I have grown older. I recognize that the time we have with those we love is not promised tomorrow, and so I have grown to appreciate deeply the moments and memories that are formed when I am blessed to be with both my immediate and extended family. It’s funny – something that first evokes fear actually, at the same time, also evokes love.

Our psalm today is a statement of belief in God’s love for us, even when we are afraid. The psalmist reminds us that faith is not always about having our prayers answered according to our will, but faith gives us the capacity to live through what we face in life. And more than anything, we are invited to

be patient in our faith, for as we “wait for the Lord,” we are given strength and courage through the grace of our loving Creator.

The very beginning of Psalm 27 reflects the mirroring of fear and love I shared earlier. We read in the first verse: “The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?” In actuality, the Hebrew words for “light” and “fear” are very similar; it’s like the writer is showing us through a word-play that there isn’t much that separates the two. God provides the light we need to shine through our darkest places. We can either choose to embrace that light, or we can live in fear by not trusting God to lead us on our way.

One thing we discussed in our Lenten Bible Study on Tuesday was the fact that this psalm can be broken into two parts. The first half, verses 1-6, speaks of faith in very positive, evident, obvious ways. The writer – perhaps David, perhaps someone else – is speaking to an audience about God in the third person: “The Lord is my stronghold . . . One thing I asked of the Lord . . . For God will hide me . . .” It is a statement of faith that is strong in the face of adversity and challenge. In fact, the writer speaks of God providing shelter from those who wish to do him harm: “For he will hide me in his shelter in the day of trouble; he will conceal me under the cover of his tent” (27:5). God is the protector in the midst of all that assails us. And the psalmist wishes for others to know of God’s unwavering protection.

There is a shift in tone, though, in the second half of the psalm, beginning with verse seven. That is, the psalmist is no longer speaking about God in the third-person; he is speaking to God directly: “Hear, O Lord, when I cry aloud, be gracious to me and answer me!” (27:7). God is no longer some distant figurehead high in the clouds; God is real and sought after, which is expressed through a series of transparent pleas. In a succession of imperative commands, the psalmist longs for God’s presence once again: “Do not turn your servant away in anger, you have been my help. Do not cast me off, do not forsake me, O God of my salvation!” (27:9). “Do not give me up to the will of my adversaries, for false witnesses have risen against me” (27:12). Someone on Tuesday noted that if it was David writing this psalm, then these pleas would coincide with all of David’s imperfections, as an adulterer, a schemer, and a sinner.

Throughout the entirety of this psalm, the writer speaks of faith as trusting in God, even when faced with obstacles and challenges. In verse 10, there is hope that even “if my father and mother forsake me, the Lord will take me up.” In verse 11, the psalmist wishes to learn God’s way, so that he might be led on a level path despite the pull of his adversaries. And through it all, both in the obvious signs of God’s presence and in the times when God’s presence might be hidden, the psalmist concludes with the ultimate profession of faith: “I believe that I shall see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living” (27:13).

The same Hebrew word for “I believe” is used in Genesis, when Abram is distraught that he will not have an heir by his wife, Sarai, and he complains to the Lord: “You have given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is

to be my heir.” But God responds to Abram and says, “This man shall not be your heir; no one but your very own issue shall be your heir.” And after God tells Abram to look into the night sky at the multitude of stars, and how that will be the number of Abram’s descendants, we are told: “And Abram believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness” (Genesis 15: 1-6).

In the face of hopelessness, God offers hope, and Abram responds with faithfulness. In the face of adversity, God offers grace and protection, and the psalmist responds with faithfulness.

But it is not a blind faith, or a shallow faith; it is a faith rooted in honesty and transparency with our God. It is a trust and faith knowing that it is not our will that might be done, but God’s will that might be done. As Richard Stern puts it:

Be clear, however, this is not a psalm about how God answers our prayers. It is a prayer, even a plea, for patience, for trust, for the ability and the endurance to wait for the Lord, even when there is no sign that prayers may be answered, when the Lord’s arrival is a long, undetermined way off. This radical sort of trust is hard enough to generate but so much harder to sustain in difficult times. In the aftermath of both 9/11 and the devastating Hurricane Katrina, television reports and newspaper articles featured folks who had lost trust, who had lost faith in God because of these events. If there even IS a God, they opined, those catastrophic events proved either that God is not all powerful or that God just does not care. In either case, God is not to be trusted. It is the age-old problem of theodicy. Martin Luther wrote a hymn that attempts to counter this dilemma. The lyrics request, “Grant peace, we pray in mercy, Lord.” They later resume, “For there is none on earth but you, none other to defend us. You only, Lord, can fight for us” ([Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 2](#), Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2009: 59).

The psalmist concludes by saying, “Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the Lord!” (27:14). It’s almost as if the psalmist knows his audience won’t believe it the first time, so he repeats it again: “Wait for the Lord!” But let’s face it – it’s simply human nature to not be patient, to not trust in the face of fear, to not believe that God is there fighting for us.

Oftentimes, we will reckon that the opposite of faith or belief is doubt. However, a lack of faith is not so much doubt and is it being full of fear. When we struggle in our faith, we are struggling to trust that God is present, especially if God’s presence might not be as obvious to us. When we fail to trust that God is with us, we believe we can handle all the world’s problems on our own. And as that cycle becomes more and more repetitive, we forget the words that Luther wrote in his hymn: “For there is none on earth but you, none other to defend us.”

What if, instead, we considered facing life’s challenges not on our own, but with God, the stronghold of our life, by our side. As we stress about which school we will choose, how we will pay for it, and whether or not we’ve

done everything we can to make the “right choice,” what if we trust and believe that with God as our light, we will be safe and secure wherever we go?

As we watch a loved one die slowly due to a disease which has no cure, and our head tries to do everything it can to make it stop, while our heart feels more and more hopeless every day, what if we trust and believe that God is my shelter and my loved one’s shelter, and we both are drawn to seek God’s face of love and care – now and forever?

As we struggle with our job, wondering if this is what we are supposed to be doing, and we grasp at this skills inventory or we apply for that job posting, but never really feel sure about any of it, what if we trust and believe that God is our help at all times, and no matter where we go or what we do, God will be there?

As we live through acts of violence against innocent human beings, acts motivated by hatred, bigotry, and ignorance, and we fear God is absent in the face of death in a synagogue in Pittsburgh, a sanctuary in Charleston, a mosque in New Zealand, what if we trust and believe that there is none on earth but our Lord, and in our waiting we will see – we will see – the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living?

When I have experienced great pain and loss in my life, I know first-hand the tendency to turn inward, to doubt, to fear, to not be able to trust that God is present with me. That dream I had when I was a child became a reality for our family within the last two years, with the death of both Debbie’s father and my father. Prayers had not been answered. There was no reason to sing praises to God. God was very hidden indeed.

And yet in waiting for the Lord, I have been able to see the goodness of God in the land of the living. Through an unexpected phone call from a close friend who would simply listen, God shined forth his light. Through the music of my daughters and my nephews, I am reminded of Debbie’s father’s passion and love of music, and the goodness of the Lord is very much evident in the land of the living. I know it is hard to wait, my friends, I truly know that feeling. But trust me – through the waiting, God is there, and God will be with you in a way that you can never imagine.

“Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the Lord!” May we hear those words anew as we each travel our Lenten journey.

Thanks be to God. Amen.