

Whom Shall I Fear

Psalm 27

The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom then shall I fear?

Have you ever had a time when the Lord put a scripture on your heart? A passage seems to come out of nowhere. It rises up in your soul, unannounced, unanticipated and unsought. You didn't go looking for it, madly flipping through your Bible. You weren't praying for a word from God. You were just going about your daily routine. Then it appears. Again and again. Everywhere you turn. It is inescapable.

That's what happened to me with today's psalm, which opens with these words:

The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom then shall I fear? The Lord is the strength of my life; of whom then shall I be afraid?

Those words are the gospel for us today. They are the Good News. They tell the story of faith rooted in the real life struggles that befall all of us.

When darkness is all around and we can't see a way forward: The Lord is our light.

When the burdens of life become too much to bear and we think we can't take another step: The Lord is our strength.

When the harm and sin we have done against God, ourselves and others seems unforgiveable: The Lord is our salvation.

Today the Psalmist calls on us to sing this good news with all our hearts.

A few years ago, this psalm jumped off the page and into my life. I was visiting an elderly parishioner who was recovering from a stroke and enduring the slow, steady disappearance that comes with dementia and memory loss. She, her husband and myself sang a few spirituals, said a few prayers. Then we came to the Lord's Prayer.

I am always astounded by how deeply this prayer resides in our souls. The mind can be awash in time.

Yesterday, today and a half-century ago sit side-by-side, indistinguishable from each other. And yet, when the prayer begins, there comes a sudden comprehension, a clarity. So it was this day as she and I leaned towards each other, our voices even and measured.

Our Father, who art in heaven. Hallowed be thy name.

About midway through Psalm 27 the Lord says: "Seek my face." And as we sat there, her piercing gaze meeting mine, it was as if I was looking upon the face of the Lord, who was taking in my every word, studying every gesture of this priest who had come to bring Christ and who instead found himself looking into the face of Christ disguised in that of an old woman. I felt myself falling into something deep, mysterious and comforting. Our souls drank in every word, every phrase of the ancient prayer.

Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done. On Earth as it is in Heaven.

I could feel her faith strengthening me. And I rejoiced! Here was the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living. Here was someone whose trust in the Lord remained strong, despite her circumstances. The Psalmist tells us that even if an army camps against us and war rages, our trust is with the Lord. Even if an army made of our own fears surrounds us and our own doubts wage war within us, yet we trust in the Lord.

For in the day of trouble he shall keep me safe in his shelter.

How I wish that were true! The scripture speaks of one whose sole desire is to dwell in the house of the Lord, the place of safety, our sanctuary in the day of trouble. And yet, time and time again we confront the disturbing realization that even God's house may not be a safe place. From the Coptic Christian churches in Egypt; to Emanuel A.M.E. in Charleston; to First Baptist Church in Sutherland Springs; to the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh; and, on Friday, the Masjid Al Noor and Linwood Masjid mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand – from them comes the terrible reminder that the houses where we worship the One who is known by many names – Yahweh, Allah, Almighty Father – those houses can be places of terror, death and sorrow. In those times the gospel might ring hollow.

The Lord is the strength of my life; of whom then shall I be afraid?

Dear Lord, fear is all around. The sounds are those of an army in full assault and your people are being slaughtered like sheep. Yet, even here can we find strength and consolation in the Lord? Can the gospel still ring true? St. Paul gives us an answer in the eighth chapter of his letter to the Romans:

For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, nor anything in all creation will be able to separate us from the love God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

I pray this holds true in some way for everyone. We know there are times of lamentation. So, too, does the Psalmist. Even though he sings and makes music, he knows of desperation, and he cries out: Hear my voice, O, Lord. Do not turn me away. Do not deliver me to the fears and anxieties that would devour me. Have mercy on me and answer me.

Today's Collect tells us that God's glory is always to have mercy. God desires to reach us, to be in relationship with us, to bring light and strength and reconciliation, to mend what we have broken; if we will but surrender to him. Jesus' lament for Jerusalem and its people in today's gospel calls out to us:

Jerusalem, Jerusalem ... How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!

What a tragedy! Our helper comes to our aid and we turn away. His mercy whispers in our hearts: Seek my face. Turn and seek me. Let my spirit be your shelter. Thanks be to God, the Lord does not turn from us. The Lord keeps on coming. Surprising us. Laying scripture on our hearts. Appearing in unexpected places, like a rehab hospital; and in unexpected ways, like the face of an old woman nearing the last of her days.

If you take nothing else from Psalm 27 today, take the opening verse and write it upon your hearts so you can call it forth on the best of days and on the worst of days, when not a care disturbs you and when an army of bad news surrounds you, for here is the Good News, the Holy Gospel given to us by God and our Lord Jesus Christ, who scoffed at Herod's threats and set his face towards Jerusalem with these words on his heart:

The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom then shall I fear? The Lord is the strength of my life; of whom then shall I be afraid?

Amen.

The Rev. M. Dion Thompson, 17 March, 2019