

Fear and Faith

from the pulpit of
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church
Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania
by
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Psalm 27:1-9

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

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

2 When evildoers assail me to devour my flesh— my adversaries and foes— they shall stumble and fall.

3 Though an army encamp against me, my heart shall not fear; though war rise up against me, yet I will be confident.

4 One thing I asked of the Lord, that will I seek after: to live in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord, and to inquire in his temple.

5 For he will hide me in his shelter in the day of trouble; he will conceal me under the cover of his tent; he will set me high on a rock.

6 Now my head is lifted up above my enemies all around me, and I will offer in his tent sacrifices with shouts of joy; I will sing and make melody to the Lord.

7 Hear, O Lord, when I cry aloud, be gracious to me and answer me!

8 “Come,” my heart says, “seek his face!” Your face, Lord, do I seek.

9 Do not hide your face from me. Do not turn your servant away in anger, you who have been my help.

Do not cast me off, do not forsake me, O God of my salvation!

Isaiah 9:1-4

But there will be no gloom for those who were in anguish. In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he will make glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations. ²The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness— on them light has shined. ³You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as people exult when dividing plunder. ⁴For the yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian.

“Do not be afraid” “fear not” – such words are common in our holy text. By some generous counts, the phrase appears 365 times, a reminder each day to overcome fear with faith. It’s a pithy encouragement, something you might see on an inspirational sign with a beautiful landscape as its background setting. “Do not be afraid” “fear not”. Sure it’s one thing to stifle your fear when the landscape behind you is beautiful, it’s another to “fear not” when fear has made its way right to the front of your face. In such settings, this daily command can seem a bit confusing. How are we to not fear, when life becomes fearful, when fears are all around us? Our scripture readings today offer some insights into this predicament. They demonstrate that the way to approach fear is to bring it to the light, to place our fears before God, in all their difficult detail. Doing so upholds our faith, not because we dispel the fear, not because we get rid of it, but because our faith rises above fear’s suffocating presence. “Do not be afraid” “fear not” – for your faith can walk with you and your fear.

This morning, on this third Sunday after Epiphany, in a season known for light, we find ourselves worshipping in a season of tension. The tension exists because we are living in those weeks between Advent and Easter.¹ The anxious expectant waiting we did back in December culminated in the joyful birth of our savior, and now we find ourselves in the short time before Ash Wednesday and the reflective Lenten season, which we know will lead to Jesus’ death and resurrection. It’s a tension between the two most celebrated Christian holidays, a tension between new life and eventual death.

It’s fitting that today’s Psalm reading is placed in the lectionary during these in-between weeks because the psalm itself is ripe with a similar style of anxious tension. Looking back in their life, the psalmist can testify that God has been revealed to them. God is their light, and salvation. They know they can trust God, can depend on God, because

¹ This point was identified in: Maryann McKibben Dana, "Psalm 27:1,4-9: Pastoral Perspective," in *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 1, Advent through Transfiguration*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, vol. 1, Feasting on the Word Commentary (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 272.

God has been trustworthy and dependable in the past. Yet, the future is dark. They are fearful about the weeks ahead. The psalmist has hope and assurance in God because of who they know God to be, but fear also accompanies them. Fear and faith, they both are present in the life of the psalmist, and in God's word for us today. They provide the reluctant reminder that even in times of solid faith and confident hope, the problems of life do not disappear.

Fear is often present on the journey of faith. Well, for that matter, it's present in the life of all of us. Even though the psalmist begins with confident words based on past experience, "the lord is my light and my salvation...the lord is the stronghold of my life..." it's the question that follows that opens the gates for the rest of the psalm: of whom shall I be afraid? Of whom shall I be afraid? It is not rhetorical, far from it. Of whom shall I be afraid? Well, actually, there is quite a lot.

The text proceeds to name some of those fears: they have evildoers out to devour them, adversaries and foes and armies camped against them, war rising up towards them. Their life is difficult, they are nervous and anxious and fearful. Amidst their fear though, they are seeking God. They desire to live in God's house, to behold the beauty of the Lord, to seek God's face. They are fearful, and they want God.

The story from Isaiah, which Becky read, also contains the people of God confronting fears. The people are living amidst a social system built on tyranny and brutality. Their nation's northern territory was exposed to Assyrian armies, who worked their brutal will against the defenseless Israelite territory. They were a vulnerable people who suffered humiliation at the hands of their enemies.² While the people of God experience great fear at the threat of the Assyrians, they still find a way to profess confident hope in God's promise to protect and deliver them. They name their fear, they bring it to the light, and then they believe that the light will carry them beyond their current oppression. If

² Walter Brueggemann, Charles B. Cousar, Beverly R. Gaventa, James D. Newsome, *Texts for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV, Year A* (Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, KY, 1995): 111.

the words Becky read sounded familiar, it's because we just read them at Christmas. They are a reminder today, that even when life seems dark, the light is on its way because we just saw it happen! Whether we're waiting for the birth of our savior, seeking relief from the pains that cripple us, or struggling through a season of tension, by naming what is happening in our life we bring it to the light where God's face shines upon it.

Rather than dwelling on those things that frighten us, we must call the darkness of our world out into God's light. Faith and fear are not mutually exclusive, unless we choose to keep them that way.

For years, that's exactly what I did. I kept a particular fear away from my faith, confident that such a fear would inevitably exclude me from a faith community. This fear was the fear of death:

From as young as I can remember I've wondered why we're here, where we go after, I've been fixated on death. This fear became more pronounced as I got older, as the reality of pain, suffering, finality, became more focused. These fears came to a head in the summer of 2015 with a man named Gene.

Gene was a retired NJ radio host whose voice billowed and expectations soared. He co-hosted a radio show that I helped produce for the nonprofit I worked for. He was a perfectionist's perfectionist and over our years together we became quite close. But one sunny day in December Gene told me he had a mass on his kidney. The cancer progressed rapidly and he was able only to record a few more radio shows. He underwent chemo, radiation, all of it, but to no avail. A few months went by and I had yet to visit Gene. I couldn't. I couldn't bear to see this man who I knew so closely, who I loved, get sick, be close to death. I wanted to visit but I just couldn't. I was too afraid.

One day I was told that Gene was not doing well and that if I wanted to see him I better go soon. With a frantic heart rate, sweaty palms, and terror-filled thoughts I ran to my car, drove the forty minutes, and entered Gene's nursing facility room out of breath. There Gene lay, his sister and two friends beside him. Gene was not awake but I took a seat next to him. For a time I just sat there, unsure what to say. Gene's sister spoke up, "you meant a lot to him," she said. "I think he's been waiting for you." Tears filled my eyes as I began to apologize to Gene. "I'm sorry for not visiting," I said, "I couldn't. I just couldn't. I was too afraid. I'm so sorry." And so it went for about thirty minutes. Amidst my tears and words I held Gene's hand. When I had finished my rambling confession, Gene sort of sighed. About ten minutes later he died, his hand still held in mine. I was frozen. It was something holy, something profound, something unlike my fears. Terror still raced through my blood but it was a holy terror, as if I had encountered the divine and lived to tell about it.

Something about Gene's death, about death as a whole, wasn't actually that fearful once I encountered it. It was more natural, more honest, more connected. It was as if in that moment I encountered the truth that the fear I had developed in my mind was disconnected from the truth of God's love and care. My fear of death had been brought to the light in the most immediate way, and once it was there, once I genuinely encountered it, I realized my faith could sustain me even at that moment.

The life of faith, the belief in God, does not render us invisible, anonymous faces in the crowd. We will still encounter the pains of life, the struggles that every person can face. Indeed, following God includes assuming some personal risk as we are called to confront our fears and the fears that consume our culture. As people of faith, we are called to actively live out what we believe, fears and all.

We begin by naming them before God in the light. We announce with specific clarity our fears, and there is much that makes us fearful

today: what happens when I die? Will my spouse survive the treatment? Will my cancer return? Will our country go to war? Will my child or grandchild make it through school? Will anyone remember me? Have I made a difference? Do I matter? Name your fears, specifically, bring them to the light believing that God will hide you in his shelter and will never forsake you. We can be assured that God hears us, is gracious to us, and will answer us.

Over the course of this weekend, Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church has been honored to welcome the Rev. Dr. Serene Jones to our campus. Dr. Jones is the President of Union Theological Seminary in the City of New York and is a renowned theologian, particularly on matters of trauma and grace. In her book, *Call it Grace*, she brings many of the traumas and fears from her life to the light. She talks about individual and corporate struggles, and how she has encountered justice, mercy, and love. At the end of the book, reflecting back on these many fears she talks about the faith that sustained her. Dr. Jones says that this is faith built on assuredness, not certainty. The difference she says is that assuredness is, “a state of mind marked by trust and confidence in what you know, even when it cannot be proven.” Certainty on the other hand is “rigid, close minded, distant.”³ A faith built on assuredness is a faith that remains confident even amidst the darkest of night and strongest of fears. It’s a faith that allows us to bring our fears to the light, both for our own healing, but also for the benefit and support of our larger community.

Naming our fears, bringing them to the light, takes away a lot of their darkness. Naming them in the context of a faith community, takes away even more. Just like the psalmist and Isaiah, neither our fears nor our faith are set in isolation. They are connected to this church, to the people sitting next to you, to your friends and family and loved ones. The assuredness of faith is strengthened as we worship and serve together, as we open up to one another, as we trust God even when life

³ Serene Jones, *Call it Grace: Finding Meaning in a Fractured World* (Viking: New York, 2019), 295.

seems darkest. Your presence and your witness help others to bring their fears to the light and to remember how God has been there for us in the past.

Without a doubt the fears of life will come, the seasons of tension will persist. “Do not be afraid” “fear not” – is a wonderful statement but it can only be sustained when we bring those fears into the light before God and one another. In so doing, we can be assured that the God who protects us and never forsakes us, will be right there with us. When we come face to face with fear, when the questions will not cease, our faith will be right there as God’s face shines upon us. Thanks be to God. Amen.