

“The Conquest of Fear”
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II Lent – 20 & 21 February 2016
Psalm 27

We live in a culture of fear, and not entirely without reason. Many threats exist to our safety and well-being. Violent crime and terrorism, portrayed luridly in the media, provide a few of the most prominent examples, and many people take what seem to be sensible precautions. We keep our car, home, school, and office doors locked. We install alarm systems and some purchase guns, even carrying them constantly.

We also worry about our financial security and the state of the global economy. Many people watch the market numbers daily with anxiety, afraid that their hard work and investments might disappear overnight, jeopardizing their retirement or a child’s college education. Many worry about just keeping their job or how to survive on wages that, in real terms, have declined over the last 30 years. A household living from paycheck to paycheck can collapse over a single serious illness or major car repair, unlike violence, where we can at least feel like we can do something, we often feel powerless against hard-to-understand economic forces that seem to be controlled by an elite few who might be unconcerned about the common good and average person.

The apparently endless demands of daily life overwhelm people, too, who wonder how and when they could ever catch up. People endure fraught relationships with family and friends, relationships impoverished of trust, compassion, and understanding, relationships sometimes complicated by chronically bad choices that lead to addiction, abuse, and neglect. Of course, some avoid this and enjoy healthy relationships, but some escape because of isolation and loneliness, the prospect of which probably frightens us the most.

I could continue almost indefinitely, but these examples give a clear enough idea of how people struggle with fear. Unfortunately, the culture of fear does not end here. This is just the real stuff. An entire industry devotes itself to making people afraid. Every political candidate accuses each of the others of possessing a secret desire to destroy our democracy and enslave the American people. Advertisements warn that without their product your life will be empty, meaningless, and unpopular. Some religious traditions rely on fear of hellfire and damnation to recruit and retain members.

Why all this manufactured fear? It's simple. Fear manipulates and controls people. It exploits their vulnerabilities, warps their perspective, and goads them into actions that may be wrong and against their own interests. Fear inhibits freedom. It squelches imagination and creativity, consumes energy, and weakens people. Fear captures attention and, therefore, it sells.

No so long ago, our ancestors lived in an environment where their very survival was constantly threatened. Focusing on the frightful was necessary if you wanted to live, and though our environment differs greatly from theirs, the habit remains. So something dangerous, even if it's a fabrication, captures our attention, and people who want to sell something – whether it's a political ideology or a material possession or a certain brand of religion – need our attention and often resort to fear to capture it.

In this culture of fear, to break free, we need Psalm 27, not just on our bulletins or on our lips or in our ears or in our minds, but in our hearts. “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?” For this single verse, we owe the author of great debt of gratitude, and he goes on to elaborate at length.

God will defeat those who attempt to devour us, those who want “to eat up my flesh.” We’re not talking about Hannibal Lecter here. Cannibalism is not the Psalmist’s concern. No, he refers to people who want to consume us emotionally or intellectually or spiritually or financially. In his song of praise, the Psalmist thanks God for protecting him against vampires, the type of people who like to drain the life out of others for their own benefit or maybe just for the fun. And the fangs of these metaphorical vampires, more often than not, are fear.

Feel like everybody’s against you? Don’t be scared. The Psalmist counsels, “Though an army should encamp against me, yet my heart shall not be afraid.” Likewise, with lethal force, when terrified, “put [your] trust in [God].” Now I know that’s easier said than done. We can scarcely compare our faith with that of a Psalmist whose work has lasted for millennia, but his work lasted because generation after generation of people preserved it. They copied it and sang it and memorized it because they found it to be true and useful and applicable in their daily lives, and we can be like them. In fact, we are them, just the latest in a sequence of people seeking peace and freedom from fear in the assurance of God’s justice and mercy and compassion, as promised in Psalm 27.

Yes, it’s true that God sometimes seems distant when the problems that frighten us seem too close for comfort. Yes, it is also true that God will not rescue us from every danger and pain. Yet we can “dwell in the house of the Lord” without needing “to seek him in his temple.” You see, the Psalmist saw God as dwelling in a single space, the Temple in Jerusalem, and he hoped to live in the midst of that presence always. Now this is a sacred space, a place where we gather to connect with God in a special way, but God will no longer be restricted. God will be present wherever he chooses, and God chooses to be present with anyone willing to accept Him. And in

that holy presence, love conquers fear, ecstasy triumphs over agony, and we receive hope renewed.

For God is faithful. “Though my father and my mother forsake me, the Lord will sustain me,” wrote the Psalmist. God is the one and only person in all of creation who, no matter what the circumstances, despite anything you might do or fail to do, will not abandon you, ever. Get that through your head, and let it settle down into your heart, and then keep it there. Otherwise, you will be a victim of fear for the rest of your life.

“What if I had not believed,” exclaimed the Psalmist, “that I should see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living!” Well, first off, he would have never written this Psalm, and I imagine that his enemies would have gradually ripped him to shreds. But he did believe. How, we don’t know, but the intensity of his gratitude sprinkled throughout the Psalm suggests a source for his faith. When we seek out God’s goodness and give thanks for it, no matter how miserable or frightened we might be, faith emerges and receives strength.

However, it takes time. “O tarry and await the Lord’s pleasure . . . wait patiently for the Lord.” That’s how the Psalmist finishes up, encouraging us to be patient. One of the hardest things to do when you feel frightened is to be patient, because fear tends to prompt one of three fast and natural responses that are basically hard-wired into your brain: fight, flight, or freeze. When you’re fighting or fleeing, you lack the peace to be patient, and when you’re paralyzed by fear, you’re not being patient, because patience requires intention, and when you’re frozen, all of your intentions have shut down.

This natural cycle seems inescapable, a legacy of our animal nature that stretches back eons, but we can practice and learn how to function faithfully in the midst of fear. It starts with redirecting our attention. We don’t have to focus on the fearful. That’s a choice. Several years

ago, I went on a news diet. At the time, I took twelve periodicals – daily, weekly, and monthly – and gorged on television news. Now it's important to stay well informed, but I found that I could do that on one weekly news magazine and listening to the radio about an hour a day, and what a difference it made! I worried less and felt much less fearful.

Be aware that you have the choice to focus not on fear but instead on God's goodness, and be grateful for it. That gratitude will empower you to experience faith, and faith fights fear, because faith makes us more aware that God is present, merciful, and mighty. Faith gives us hope that we aren't trapped.

With faith, we can better experience the mystery of God's unconditional love, which encourages us to dwell with God, and in God's presence, we receive peace, and peace strengthens our souls and shapes our perspective so that when we confront something or someone frightening, we can resist the impulse to go into animal mode where our only alternatives are to fight, flee, or freeze.

And that whole experience is called transcendence, the result of a process just described called transformation. Psalm 27, more than anything else, is a song of praise about how God transforms us through faithful love into people who can transcend fear, both real and imagined. God can lift us up and enable us to rise above the culture of fear that wants to dominate us, and every time we accept this gift of freedom from fear, we reveal the lie of our dominant culture, offer a witness of hope to others, and cause a subtle shift to occur in the culture, a shift away from fear and toward freedom, hope, peace, and love, not only for ourselves, but for all of God's children. Amen.