

“The Conquest of Fear”
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Psalm 27

We live in a culture of fear, and not entirely without reason. Many threats exist to our safety and well-being. The slaughter just a few days ago of 50 people, peacefully worshipping at their mosques in New Zealand, heightens our awareness of how irrational fear leads to ignorance, and ignorance leads to bigotry, and bigotry to hatred that can motivate a person to outrageous, despicable acts. We’re hardwired to detect and respond to such threats, and that’s adaptive and necessary. Without a measure of reasonable fear, not irrational but reasonable fear, we’d make all sorts of terrible choices that harm us and others. But it’s much more than physical violence that provokes fear.

We also worry about our financial security, anxious that our investments might be ruined by forces beyond our control that might jeopardize retirement or paying for a child’s college education. Others have no portfolio to worry about and fret over just keeping their job or how to survive on wages that for many have stagnated, in real terms, for decades. 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 take some precautions, we often feel powerless against global economic forces that sometimes seem to be controlled by an elite few unconcerned about the common good and the average person.

Then there are the apparently endless demands of daily life that can overwhelm and worry us. We wonder if we’ll ever catch up. People endure fraught relationships with family and friends impoverished of trust, compassion, and understanding. Of course, some people do

enjoy healthy relationships, but for those who don't, escaping toxic relationships can lead to isolation and loneliness, a very frightful prospect.

These examples, and there are many more, show how much we 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. This isn't the healthy, natural, adaptive, reasonable fear, but the irrational kind that's unnecessary, wasteful, dangerous, and harmful. Politicians and pundits recklessly accuse each other of dark hidden agendas designed to destroy democracy. 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, irrational fear? It's simple. Fear manipulates and controls people. It exploits our vulnerabilities, warps our perspective, and goads us into actions that may be wrong and against our own interests. Fear inhibits freedom. It squelches imagination and creativity, consumes energy, and weakens people.

To break free from this culture of fear, we need Psalm 27 to echo in our hearts and minds. "The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom then shall I fear?" That's a great question, so the Psalmist asked another one. "The Lord is the strength of my life; of whom then shall I be afraid?" God will defeat those who attempt to devour us, those who want "to eat up my flesh," as the Psalmist put it. We're not talking about Hannibal Lector, but people who exploit our fears to consume us emotionally, intellectually, spiritually, or financially. In his song of praise, the Psalmist thanks God for protecting him against those who, like parasites or vampires, enjoy draining the life out of others for their own benefit or maybe just for fun.

Ever 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." Now 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 generations of people kept singing it. And they sang 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 generations seeking peace and freedom from fear in the assurance of God's justice and mercy and compassion.

Of course, sometimes this gives little comfort, because faith feels futile. God can seem distant, absent. The Psalmist experienced this, too. He begged, "Hide not your face from me, nor turn away your servant in displeasure. You have been my helper; cast me not away; do not forsake me, O God of my salvation." It's also true that God will not rescue us from every danger and pain. Suffering is simply a natural part of what it means to be human, to be limited and sinful creatures.

Yet we can still "dwell in the house of the Lord," "to seek him in his temple." This can happen here in this sacred space where we gather to connect with God in a special way, but God will not 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. If we can grab hold of that truth, and allow it to grab hold of our hearts and minds, then we needn't be victims of unreasoning fear, but freed by faith to really live.

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. Being patient is hard enough on its own, but it’s even harder when you feel frightened, because fear tends to prompt one of three responses that are hard-wired into our brains: fight, flight, or freeze. When you’re fighting or fleeing, you lack the peace to be patient. Paralyzed by fear, nobody can be patient, because patience requires a decision, and when you’re frozen, you can’t make decisions.

This natural cycle seems inescapable, but we can practice and learn how to function faithfully in the midst of fear. It starts with redirecting our attention. Too often we focus on the fearful, to the exclusion of almost everything else. That’s a choice, and we can make different choices. Several years ago, I went on a news diet. For years, I’d gorged on television news and took a dozen daily, weekly, and monthly periodicals. Now it’s important to stay well informed. That’s part of being a responsible citizen and a responsible disciple. But one reliable weekly news magazine or an hour listening to reputable news on the radio, or a half-hour reading reputable news sources online, like the BBC, Reuters, and the AP – that was plenty, and what a difference it made! I felt less worried and fearful, and when I ditch my news diet, my anxiety soars.

We all have the choice to focus less on fear and more on God’s goodness and power, and we need to be grateful for that grace to choose. Gratitude empowers us to experience faith, and faith fights fear by making us aware that God is present, merciful, and mighty. Faith gives us hope that we aren’t trapped, at least not indefinitely.

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 automatically into animal mode where our only alternatives are to fight, flee, or freeze. As Paul wrote the Philippians, “Jesus will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself.”

Paul’s referring specifically to resurrection, but more broadly, the experience he describes is called transcendence, the result of a transformation in our hearts and minds that enables faith not fear to reign supreme. Psalm 27, more than anything else, is a song of praise about how God transforms us through His faithful love into people who can transcend fear, both real and imagined, both reasonable and irrational. God lifts us up so that we can 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. We offer a witness of hope to others, and cause a subtle shift in our lives and our world, a shift away from fear and toward freedom, from despair to hope, from enmity to peace, and from apathy to love, not only for ourselves, but for all of God’s children, even those we fear. Amen.