

Psalm 27: 1-5, 11-14 "What Do We Have to Fear?" Rev. Janet Chapman 3/17/19

A story is told of two young brothers who were playing in the living room when one of them said to the other, "I'm going to eat you!" The mom, who happened to be walking by, corrected her son saying, "Oh no, we don't eat people. There are some people who eat other people but hopefully not in our area. We call the cannibals. You know, boys, maybe someone should tell them about Jesus, what do you think?" The youngest wrinkled up his nose and said, "Yeah, but they better tell them over the phone." Ya' think? We live in fearful times – the news and social media remind us constantly that our world is a dangerous and unpredictable place. Besides the Jeffrey Dahmers among us, there are all manner of atrocities taking place daily. A terrorist kills 49 Muslims and wounds almost 40 more in a country which had never experienced such terrorism before, where police don't even carry guns, and during which the terrorist live-streamed the killings through a helmet placed on his head, all in the name of white supremacy. One wanders how it could get any sicker than that? James Mattil, managing editor of Flashpoints: Guide to World Conflict, says "Whenever we ask why people hate, or why they are willing to kill or die for a cause, the answer is invariably fear." The natural emotion of fear is capitalized upon, as pundits on both sides of the political fence raise anxiety levels about security, health and economic woes. Finally, marketers incite fear and insecurity to encourage us to spend and buy possessions we really don't need which can't possibly heal our emotional wounds. It is one thing for us to feel fear, it is another thing for us to live in fear. Too often, we turn fear into something that occupies our whole lives. Part of the problem with fear is what it does to us when we give it that much power. We cling to whatever it is we fear losing – we hold on for dear life! In the process of trying to control what we can't control, and trying to cling to what we cannot hold, our fear can bring out the worst in us.

To such a society, the psalmist gives us this prayer, even a plea, for patience, trust, and the ability to wait for the Lord, even when there is no sign that our prayers may be answered. It prompts the listener to faith which is characterized by perseverance. It contains a curious back-and-forth between expressions of confidence and the fear we feel at times. It would appear that the Psalmist is struggling in some kind of situation that naturally provokes fear. The Psalmist speaks of flesh being devoured, struggling like he or she is under siege in battle. Yet in the midst of fear comes that expression of confident faith that God's presence will keep him safe. It is God's presence that calms the fears as written, "The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?" This back and forth between intense feelings of fear and confident declarations of trust in God remind me of that night back at the end of July when life suddenly took a dramatic change here in Shasta County. Forever ingrained in my memories are the forest service and Search and Rescue personnel descending on our parking lot, escaping the flames with irreplaceable relics of the Old Shasta library. I can't remember the faces of some of our County Supervisors, but I sure remember the faces of those who showed up for shelter with their pets. Surrounded by so many frightened folks, I went in and out of being afraid – one minute I was saying to myself, "This is insane, we need to get the blank out of here" and the next minute came this incredible calm and focus regarding what needed to be done in partnership with our protectors, the National Guard at the corner stoplight. Psalm 27 seems to tell us that when we deal with a situation in which we are afraid, it is normal to waver between fear and faith. The psalmist prods us to recognize that the opposite of faith is not doubt but fear. Such radical faith and trust is hard enough to generate in good times but so much harder to sustain in difficult times. So the real question becomes, how do we stay confident in the

protection of God's presence. The answer, I believe, rests in first understanding that protection and shelter in our perception is not the same as God's. Often when we demand refuge from danger, it translates to not having our house burnt down, not being gunned down in worship or not being in a plane crash. But that is not the protection the scriptures are alluding to, nor is it the reality of our existence. Listen to verses 7-8 which I had Bud hold off reading until now ("Hear, O Lord, when I cry aloud, be gracious to me and answer me! "Come," my heart says, "seek God's face!" Your face, Lord, do I seek.) So here the Psalmist calls out to God to hear him and be gracious and then seems to find an answer within his own heart. Like that still, small voice Elijah heard, the Psalmist "hears" his own heart telling him to seek God's face. It is another instance of that phrase which is guiding our Lenten journey to Easter, "Speak O Lord, for your servant is listening." The Psalmist is listening and hears within his own heart words of encouragement, not abandonment.

Alan Brehm says that the point of all this is that we can learn to pray in such a way as to be aware that we are constantly surrounded by the presence of God. In that awareness, we find a sense of safety that can calm our fears, no matter what the circumstances may be. I don't mean to say that this is easy. The kind of prayer the psalmist is alluding to is a discipline that takes time and practice to master. The psalmist calls it "seeking God's face." You can't do that without putting your whole heart and soul into it. This kind of praying, which is also a form of listening, is something that involves training and practice but it is attainable. It begins with accepting the reality that God is always with us and within us. We have to remind ourselves of that on a daily basis especially with so many frightening things going on around us. Because of this truth, the Psalmist proclaims one of the most beautiful statements of faith in the Bible in

vs. 13: "I believe that I shall see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living." Not in some far-off heavenly existence, but here and now. The Psalmist trusts that God will make whatever happens to him turn out for good, very similar to what Paul says in Romans 8:28: "We know that all things work together for good for those who love God." There is nothing easy about living under this paradigm. It takes "training," a spiritual discipline that needs to start off our days and end our days. We do this so that our faith overshadows our fears in an act of what the psalmist calls "waiting for the Lord." The psalmist brings together all 14 verses in the final one, "Wait for the Lord, be strong, and let your heart take courage, wait for the Lord!"

M. Scott Peck, famous psychologist and author, tells a story of a woman who was suffering from extreme depression. She had experienced a lot of stress, loss, and disappointment in her life and she was simply afraid to live another day. On the day of one of her scheduled appointments with Dr. Peck, she called to say her car had broken down. He offered to pick her up on his way into work, but he had to make a hospital call before he got to the office. If she was willing to go with him, he could pick her up for their appointment. She agreed. When they got to the hospital, he had an idea. He gave her the names of 2 of his patients who were recovering there and told her that each of them would enjoy a visit from her. She was afraid but he assured her that many of the thoughts he had shared with her in counseling would guide her through the visits. If she would listen to her heart, she may find that courage she so desperately needed. When they met again, an hour and a half later, the woman was on an emotional high. She told Dr. Peck that making the visits and trying to cheer up those patients had lifted her spirits, and that she was feeling absolutely wonderful. Dr. Peck responded by saying, "Well, now we know how to get you out of your depression. Now we

know the cure for your problem.” The woman responded, “You don’t expect me to do that every day, do you?” We are in for some daily training, dear friends, if we don’t want our fears to get the best of us. You see fear is natural, but it is also self-focusing. When our lives stop focusing on ourselves, then our fears will likewise take a back seat to our faith. When we invest our efforts in being compassionate to others and confident in God’s shelter which comes from within, then we find our lives infused with courage and awe at a God whose face comes into view right before our very eyes. Wait for the Lord, dear friends, be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the Lord!