

Rev. Dr. David Holyan
“Divine Security”
First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood
Sunday, January 26, 2020

Matthew 4:12-17

Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the lake, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled:

‘Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali,

on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—

the people who sat in darkness

have seen a great light,

and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death

light has dawned.’

From that time Jesus began to proclaim, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.’

Psalm 27:1, 4-9

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?

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.

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.

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.

Hear, O Lord, when I cry aloud,

be gracious to me and answer me!

‘Come,’ my heart says, ‘seek his face!’

Your face, Lord, do I seek.

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!

Let us pray. Gracious and loving God, as we open ourselves to the power and mystery of your spirit, I ask that you would take all that we carry within and the words that we've offered in song and in prayer and in reading from Scripture, the words that you've laid upon my heart this morning to share. Touch, bless, and transform all of these into the living word of God, Christ's Word made flesh in each of us. And let your words speak to us, comfort us, guide us, and this day, especially, feed us. We ask this in the faithful Name of Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

If you notice in your bulletin, the lectionary reading for today was a truncated version of Psalm 27. It was supposed to be verse one, and then verses 4 through 9, essentially cutting out verses 2 and 3 and leaving out verses 10 through 14. When I made the worship sheet for this Sunday some months ago, I read the passage and thought, "Oh, there's enough there. It'll preach." I didn't really pay too much attention to it and thought that that truncated reading was the right thing to do. But as I came back to the text this week, and especially after I read the whole thing and began reading the commentaries, a lot of them talked about the lectionary committee, the people who decided to truncate the reading. We're trying to sanitize the Psalm, leaving out the part about evildoers who assail me by devouring my flesh and adversaries and foes. In a sense, they were saying, "We don't want to talk about the hard stuff. We just want to lift up the good stuff." And in so doing, they cut out verses two and three. And for some kind of unimaginable reason, at least to me, they left out the final four verses, in which I believe we find the gospel, the essence of the message that the Psalmist is trying to give to us. And so as I did sort of what we learned in seminary, a literary review of the passage, you kind of put it into chunks. And you ask yourself, "What is the message of each section trying to say?" And when I did that this week, I realized that there's a flow to this Psalm. And it's something that I believe the Psalmist wants us to get. So the only way to get at it is to look at the whole thing.

In the beginning, it's about fear. In fact, the Psalmist says, "Whom shall I fear? Of whom shall I be afraid?" And then later in verse three, "My heart shall not fear, even though it does fear, because of enemies and evildoers and people that want to devour our flesh." It's a sense setting up the whole Psalm to be about fear, and then our response to fear. And one of the things that I learned, and I want to sort of share this in a sense of having you witness in your own life, fear is an amazingly powerful motivator for us. It's something that we pay attention to. And what I learned this week is it's part of our reptilian response, which we've talked about before. When something happens that we think is a possible threat to us, we fight, we fly away, or we freeze. In a sense, it's that unconscious or subconscious part of our brain that says, "I must survive." And whenever there's something that we're afraid of, we respond without thinking. We react to it and this was brought home to me in a rather surprising way this week. One of the favorite things in my whole life is to scoop up our dog Ella and snuggle on her. Ella is a 10-pound Havanese that's the cutest thing on earth who does not like to be picked up [laughter]. And so the trick that I've learned is that when I take her out and she's done doing her business out in the backyard, she goes up two steps getting ready for me to open the door. I unhook her leash, and as I unhook her leash and go for the door with one hand, I scoop her up with the other just before she goes around the corner to get her treat and usually, it's very successful. This week, according to the six teeth mark that I have on my hand, it wasn't very successful. Ella had a fight, flight, or flee response. And believe me, I think she fought. I scooped her up, my hand was too close to her mouth, she turned and got me twice telling me, "Don't do that. I'm afraid." After a moment, she settled and life sort of got back to normal even though my hand was bleeding. So be it. Tough lesson learned.

All of this I kind of put together as I come to this passage, the psalm. And I want us to think about our reaction, our response to those things that make us afraid. For some reason, and I think it's the biological fight, flight, or flee response or freeze, we remember the bad things a lot easier than remember the good things in life. If I were to ask you where were you when you first heard about the attacks on 9/11, almost all of you can tell me exactly where you were, what you were doing, and what it felt like. If I asked you what your celebration was for your 29th wedding anniversary, most of you would stare at me with that weird look on your face and go, "Well, I have no idea [laughter]." It's because we remember things that create fear, and we have a harder time recalling things that create joy and happiness and peace in our lives. And it's not something we decide to do, it's biological.

And what I want to do is sort of talk about our brains and our reactions to things on sort of levels and the lowest level is that reptilian response, "There's something that's threatening me, and I need to do something." In a sense, it's what Ella did to my hand. After we're afraid, the normal response as the psalmist points out too is to seek protection. We want to fight, flee or freeze because we want to protect ourselves, wall ourselves off from the threat and make sure we're okay. The psalmist wants to live in the house of the Lord all of their days, wants to be hid in the shelter of God, to be in God's tent, in other words, wants to be safe. Again, a natural response. When we're afraid, one of our first instincts is we want to be safe.

And then I think it moves to a higher a level of our thinking. In the third movement of the psalm, after there's that sense of being afraid, that desire for protection, fear creeps back in a little bit, and you end up with supplication that's happening. "Lord, please

don't hide your face from me. Please don't turn your servant away in anger. Please don't cast me off please don't forsake me, God, please, of my salvation. Keep protecting me. Keep being gracious to me. Answer me when I cry out to you, the psalmist says. And again, I think that's a natural rhythm to how we navigate through life. It's the fourth movement, the part that the editor, so to speak, cut out of the passage and left on the floor, that for me is the most fruitful for us to think about, because I think it represents the highest level of thinking. In a sense, it's a more mature response. We're afraid. We want protection. We kind of think, "[inaudible], is it going to work out or not work out? I hope it works out." A lot of that is self-talk, and the highest level is when we open ourselves to that thread or that danger or that misunderstood reality that's out there. And this is what the psalmist invites us to do. When we're in those tough situations; when we're feeling our heartbeat get a little bit faster and our nerves sort of squeezing our guts a little bit more, the psalmist says, "Teach me your way, Oh Lord. Lead me on the level path because of my enemy. Don't give up on me. I believe that I shall see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living." And then the last piece. "Wait for the Lord. Be strong. Let your heart take courage. Wait for the Lord." To me, the fourth movement is what Karen pointed out when she read that Jesus told the people, "Repent, for the Kingdom of God is near." Change the way you think, for the Kingdom of God is near. Change the way you respond to situations in life that scare you because the Kingdom of God is near. And how are we to change? We're to be taught that those moments are not scary. They're not burdens. They're not hills to climb or valleys to descend, but they're level paths and God's teaching us something.

We can believe that we'll see God's goodness emerge out of the midst of whatever struggle it is, and most importantly, we're taught to be patient; to wait for the Lord; to be strong in a humble kind of way and to let our hearts take courage. And then, finally, again, because it's an important aspect of it, wait for the Lord. Too often we see something going on. We make a snap judgement. That's it. We make it permanent because it threatens us in some way and we never have the opportunity-- we never avail ourselves the opportunity to learn and grow as the psalmist wants us to do. I've always looked at this psalter as the prayer book of the Old Testament. I know that I often go to the Psalms when I'm preparing to do a memorial service or even a wedding. I go there for my own devotional life, reading the Psalms weekly. But what I came to understand this week more than most is that besides being the prayer book of life, the psalter is also the handbook of life. It's giving us tangible advice how we can live our lives. And it's doing so in a way that makes real the gospel of Jesus Christ. Don't give up. Be open to learning. Trust that there's goodness even in the hard things. Be patient. Be strong. Have courage. Wait. All of this to me is gospel and it's a learned response. It overrides our basic biology with a higher level thinking and understanding, a more mature sense of what's going on in the world. And this whole dynamic was brought home to me at the last church that I served. The church had spiritual formation as one of its primary ministries and every year brought in speakers who were well-known for talking about spiritual matters.

One year, a woman came and gave a presentation on spirituality and prayer and the power of transformation in someone's life, and we had lunch afterwards. And then we broke into small groups. And the discussion was going around about learning lessons and how long that takes. And one of the men who I remember vividly, his name was Jeff, talked about how he learned, in his 50s, that he had a pattern of living. That was something that he wasn't even aware of until just recently. The pattern was that he would get a job, everything would be great for about five years; success, promotion, feeling like he's making a valuable contribution, and then things would start to kind of nosedive. He became less effective and afraid and began to sort of sabotage his own success. And he noticed that when he did that he would leave that company, get a new job, start all over, be successful, have promotions and then nosedive and quit and over and over and over again. And he shared with us that he had been in therapy about this, and he did what he called excavation work. He was wondering what voice was telling him that he couldn't maintain a successful presence in a company. And he said he was able to trace it all the way back to one night when he was in high school. He had gone out with some friends, missed his curfew by an hour, when he came home his dad was waiting for him in the kitchen. Jeff came in, his dad confronted him, smelled some alcohol on his breath and said to him, "I am so disappointed in you." That message was a message that Jeff played over and over and over and over inside his head. In fact, he was so afraid of disappointing people that he quit on his own terms, in his own time, before they could voice their disappointment. In a sense he created that disappointing outcome even though everything about him up until those moments said, "You're successful."

I think that when Jesus says, "Repent for the Kingdom of God is near," Jesus is teaching us this way of thinking of putting new tapes in our head. Teach me Lord. Be with me. Let me see your goodness. Let me be strong. Let me take heart. Wait for the Lord. All of those are messages that say, "I can get through this situation a little bit differently. I don't have to be afraid. I can trust." I think the most important aspect of that though is the last part. Wait for the Lord. And I found this poem entitled Patient Trusts. Above all, trust in the slow work of God. We are quite naturally impatient in everything to reach the end without delay. We should like to skip the intermediate stages. We are impatient of being on the way to something unknown, something new, and yet it's the law of all progress that it is made by passing through some stages of instability and that it may take a very long time.

And so I think it is with you, your ideas mature gradually. Let them grow. Let them shape themselves without undue haste. Don't try to force them on as though you could be today what time will make of you tomorrow. Only God could say what this new spirit gradually forming within you will be. Give our Lord the benefit of believing that his hand is leading you and accept the anxiety of feeling yourself in suspense and incomplete. This poem from Teilhard de Chardin talks about the importance of being patient and open. And I believe it's what the psalmist is also showing us to do. Showing us how we can live our lives with faith. Amen.