***FACING YOUR FEARS***

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Texts: Psalm 27 and I Peter 3:13-18a

*I think I can. I think I can. I think I can*. Do you remember those words spoken by the little train trying to convince itself that it could climb the mountain in the classic children’s story? It is a story of determination and the power of positive thinking, powered by a little self-encouragement. *I think I can. I think I can.* Faced with a challenge, sometimes we need a little encouragement, and with no one else around, we talk to ourselves. *You can do this!* According to psychologists and the Cleveland Clinic, such talking to yourself is not a sign of mental illness or insanity, though I wonder why folks would think that was likely anyway! That may relieve some of you who even now are talking to yourself and wondering, “Where is he going with this?” If that is indeed the question you are asking yourself, then let me answer it for you before you answer it for yourself – I am going back to the psalm where we started this morning.

Read in the context of our corporate worship this psalm sounds like a bold affirmation of faith:

*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?*

The psalm opens with a certain “Bring it on!” tone proclaimed to the world, a confident challenge to any and all foes. For six verses the psalmist makes bold declaration after bold declaration, ending with:

*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!*

Take that all you who would oppose me! With the Lord we can overcome any obstacle! His words not only give voice to his confident faith, but they inspire and encourage confident faith in those who hear them. And they set out bold credentials for urging us in the final verse:

*Wait for the Lord;*

*be strong, and let your heart take courage;*

*wait for the Lord!*

Were that the whole psalm we all might be ready to charge out and wait for the Lord with confident hope, courage, and patient faith – like the psalmist! But – and there always seems to be a but – sandwiched between those first six verses and the encouragement to be strong and wait in the last verse, there are a host of doubts and pleas and uncertainties to which the psalmist gives voice, leading us to wonder whether this psalm is really spoken to us or anyone else, or whether we are listening in to the psalmist talking to himself.

Taken away from its public setting, these words, whispered under the psalmist’s breath, take on a less certain tone, a more doubtful stance, like one who is trying to convince himself to hang in there in the face of adversity:

*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?*

Come on! Be strong! Spoken to himself the questions seem less rhetorical, less confident, as if the psalmist is trying to convince himself that the fear bubbling up within him can be tamped down so that he need not be afraid of all those threats which engulf him – the evildoers, adversaries, foes, armies, enemies, and false witnesses which he lists, those who are already breathing out violence against him. He keeps telling himself to be confident, not to fear, to be strong, but the fears linger. He affirms what God might do for him, what God has done for him, and speaks of God’s faithfulness, but his affirmations are tempered by the fear that God might abandon him. “*Do not hide your face from me*,” he pleads. “*Do not cast me off, do not forsake me, O God of my salvation*.” The psalmist keeps telling himself to believe, to be strong, while wrestling with those doubts and fears about the very God to whom he turns.

We like to think of our ancestors in faith as being steadfast, trusting God through thick and thin without question, doubt, or fear and then we hear Jesus cry from the cross, “*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me!*” For, the truth is our ancestors in faith were much like us – full of faith but also haunted by lingering doubts and persistent fears that led them to talk to themselves, or through their diaries or writings, to us. As one writer has phrased it:

*Real fear lives alongside honest faith. Bona fide doubt holds hands with genuine trust. In this psalm as in real life, both are unavoidable*.*[[1]](#endnote-1)*

The reality of life is that doubts creep in; fears arise; faith wanes. The God who we affirm to be ever present sometimes seems distant or strangely absent. We believe and then the world starts to crumble around us and evil seems to lurk around every corner, or tragedy after tragedy strikes our family and friends and we wonder how a loving God could allow such things to happen. We wonder, but still we pray for God’s help. Or we believe and then we read the headlines; we believe and then we receive the diagnosis; we believe in the immortal, invisible, omniscient, omnipresent, almighty God and then the bad guys win or innocents die and we wonder, “Where is that God?” We believe in theory and then we face the fearful reality of the world and our confidence is shaken, and “Lord, I believe!” becomes, “Lord, help my unbelief.”

The enemies that surround us come in many shapes, sizes, and disguises. Some of them are real threats as the spate of mass shootings in our nation, and the foiled plots of domestic terrorists, and the erratic behavior of Russia and North Korea, and the persistent pandemic attest. Some of them are less tangible but no less real: the fear of failure or rejection or loss. Some of them threaten our futures and some hold hostage our pasts. Some of them attack our security, some our self-confidence, and some attack our faith.

Craig Barnes suggests that “*the real enemy of our faith is not doubt but fear*.”[[2]](#endnote-2) Fear may paralyze us or lead us astray. Fear may lead us to abandon faith or to compromise faith – to search for another savior – something more tangible. That is what happened to Israel again and again. In fear they turned to other gods, tangible gods, idols they could gaze upon for reassurance. But it was only God who could and would and did deliver them. Today there are a host of idols who would gladly take the place of God and calm your fears with more wealth or an arsenal of guns or more potent ammunition – offering something you can look at or hold in your hand to reassure you. Those who promote them play on our fears in hopes that we will abandon the teachings of Christ and embrace them as savior. They tempt us to disregard Christ’s teaching and God’s commands for our lives – love your neighbors AND your enemies, pray for those who persecute you – to suspend the rules of faith and faithfulness as inadequate when faced with the fear of modern threats. We may doubt not only whether God can save us, but also whether Christ’s demands of us as disciples are realistic in the face of 21st century threats – as if the threats are now greater or more complex or more daunting than they were in the 1st century when Jesus was nailed to a cross by the powers of Rome and Christians were persecuted and stoned and fed to the lions because of their faith.

Do you really think there are more things of which to be fearful these days? Or are fears just a convenient excuse for unfaithfulness? It is human to fear, but how do you handle the fears you face day to day? Do you abandon faith or embrace it? Do you abandon God or fall on your knees and pray that God will not abandon you? Do you talk to yourself, encourage yourself, with the stories of God’s faithfulness across the ages or have you long forgotten those stories and the God of whom they speak? Are you afraid, and if so, of what or of whom are you afraid?

*Though an army encamp against me,*

*my heart shall not fear*, says the psalmist.

*Wait for the Lord,*

*Be strong and let your heart take courage; wait for the Lord*!

To wait with courage is to wait, not without fear, but with faith. It is not to be fear-less, but rather to conquer the fear. As Nelson Mandela, a man well acquainted with courage writes in his autobiography:

*Time and again, I have seen men and women risk and give up their lives for an idea. I have seen men stand up to attacks and torture without breaking, showing a strength and resiliency that defies the imagination. I learned that courage was not the absence of fear, but the triumph over it*.[[3]](#endnote-3)

We cannot ignore all our fears or pretend they do not exist or expect that we will not fear from time to time. There are things for which we are and should be afraid. But faith can conquer those fears, for Christ has conquered the world, has conquered sin and death and all else that might harm us. We need not be afraid any longer, not because nothing is scary out there anymore, but because Christ is mightier than anything that can scare us or hurt us or even kill us. That is something you can tell all those who fear; it is something you can tell yourself when you are afraid. Or perhaps instead of talking to yourself you might make this anonymous prayer your prayer in the face of any fear:

*Lord, help me to understand that you ain’t gwine to let nuthin’ come my way that you and me together can’t handle.*[[4]](#endnote-4) Amen and amen.

1. Lindsay P. Armstrong, *Feasting on the Word*: Year C, Vol.2, Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, 2009, p.58 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. M. Craig Barnes, *The Pastor As Minor Poet*, Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 2009, p.99 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Nelson Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom*, Little, Brown & Co.: New York, 1994, p.542 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Source unknown, *The Complete Book of Christian Prayer*, Continuum Publishing Co.: New York, 1997, p.199 [↑](#endnote-ref-4)