

2nd Sunday in Lent (Year C)

Psalm 27

*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?*

*When evildoers assail me
to devour my flesh—
my adversaries and foes—
they shall stumble and fall.*

*Though an army encamp against me,
my heart shall not fear;
though war rise up against me,
yet I will be confident.*

*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!
If my father and mother forsake me,
the Lord will take me up.*

*Teach me your way, O Lord,
and lead me on a level path
because of my enemies.
Do not give me up to the will of my adversaries,
for false witnesses have risen against me,
and they are breathing out violence.*

*I believe that I shall see the goodness of the Lord
in the land of the living.
Wait for the Lord;
be strong, and let your heart take courage;
wait for the Lord!*

Lent is a complex and messy season. Some people love it. Others would prefer to skip straight from Ash Wednesday to Easter morning and bypass the whole thing. However, if the truism holds that the best things in life are worth waiting for, then God is certainly someone for whom we do much waiting!

While we wait for the resurrection, the season of Lent affords us much time to ponder the messiness of our humanity and our relationships with one another and God. Lent is a messy time when trust and fear shake hands and sit together for a while. Shame and confession mix with grace and the promise of redemption. Mourning over that which we have done fuses with our hope of that which God will help us to be. There you have it - trust and fear, shame and grace, mourning and hope - all these things together in one place at one time while we wait. Lent is a messy time of year.

When messes happen, we are forced to “straighten things out,” to organize the situation, and to make sense of the confusion. When life hands us trust and fear at the same time, the hard work of faith is sitting down and sorting the whole thing out.

Psalm 27 presents itself as a microcosm of a person’s messy faith. It twists and turns, stops and goes, swivels and sways - all the while, inviting us to ponder God’s presence in our messy lives. Together, we are going to take a stroll through Psalm 27.

God’s presence seems sure at the beginning of this prayer:

*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 psalmist gives a statement of pure and unrestrained trust in God’s protection. God is his light, his salvation, and his stronghold. However, for someone to appreciate light, they must have experience with darkness. In order for someone to be saved, they must be saved *from* something. In order to appreciate a stronghold, a person must know what weakness feels like.

*When evildoers assail me to devour my flesh—my adversaries and foes—
they shall stumble and fall.*

*Though an army encamp against me, my heart shall not fear,
though war rise up against me, yet I will be confident.*

The presence of God, it seems, has been needed because of the threat of evildoers, adversaries, foes, and armies - armies that encamp against the psalmist. Psalm 27 begins by asserting that the depth of the psalmist's trust in God is evidenced by the severity of his multiple threats. To say that "my heart shall not fear" might *not* be a statement of simple fearlessness; instead, it is possible that it is the direction in which the psalmist's confidence in God is leading him.

The direction of this psalm then turns our attention to what the psalmist ultimately has his sights set on - the house of the Lord:

*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.*

Amidst the messiness of where he is, the Psalmist nevertheless is very clear about where he wants to be. He wants to live in the house of the Lord all the days of his life and to behold the beauty of the Lord. Amidst his anxieties and stresses, the psalmist forces himself to believe that his current circumstances do not have the final word. Instead, the final word will be a divine destination full of peace and providence that will be afforded to him because of God's salvation and strength. The next movement of Psalm 27 describes God's faithful actions.

*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.*

There are times when we all want to hide - from danger, from stress, from fear, from enemies. The psalmist is no exception. He believes that God will hide and shelter him in the moments when he needs it most. God's strength will be his concealment within God's tent. He will be set high upon a rock, well beyond danger's grasp. These faithful actions on God's part will be matched by faithful responses by the psalmist:

*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.*

Because God has been his light, his salvation, and his stronghold, the psalmist has been lifted up from the depths of despair. His head has been lifted above his enemies. Because of this joyous turn of events, the psalmist will offer sacrifices; not quiet sacrifices but loud ones full of shouts of joy! The shouts will transform into a melodious song of praise directed to God who saves him!

So far in Psalm 27, we have a clear and concise song of trust, salvation, and the psalmist's faithful response. But now comes the messiness:

*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.*

A hint of desperation is introduced into the psalm that has been, up to this point, unquestioned confidence. However, it now seems as if that confidence has begun to be threatened by a situation of despair. Three pleas are made by the psalmist in the beginning of this messy turn of events: “hear,” “be gracious,” and “answer me.” Something has clearly happened to make this psalm turn direction so rapidly; the psalmist is not being heard or, at the very least, feels forgotten. Like a child crying out to his parents from a dark and lonely bedroom, the psalmist appeals to God to listen and to be gracious. The psalmist demands an answer! His desperation gives him understanding that what he really desires is to see the face of God. Before, it was God’s house. But now it is nothing less than God’s very face that the Psalmist wants! The psalmist is crying for an end to this divine game of hide-and-seek.

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!

If my father and mother forsake me, the Lord will take me up.

The psalmist’s pleas become even more desperate as he fears God’s anger. Wishing not to be turned away, the psalmist reminds God of who God has already been: his help and his salvation. The positive imperatives we heard before have been replaced by three negative imperatives: “do not turn away,” “do not cast me off,” and “do not forsake me.” The psalmist’s list of demands grows as his fear of abandonment deepens amidst his desperate cries! Yet even in his despair, the psalmist displays trust that even in the most terrible of circumstances - that of his parents forsaking him - even then will God come in to save the day.

Teach me your way, O Lord,

and lead me on a level path because of my enemies.

Do not give me up to the will of my adversaries,

for false witnesses have risen against me,

and they are breathing out violence.

The desperation of the psalmist and his cry for help leads him to ask for wisdom. Begging to be taught the way of the Lord, he cries out to be led on a level path. Too long, he says, his enemies have caused him to stumble and fall. Too long, he says, his feet have not had level ground. The psalmist does not simply want to be picked up; he wants to be taught where to walk after he has been helped to his feet. He needs to stand on firm ground because false accusations have been hurled at him and he needs a good defense attorney. Only God’s protection will save the psalmist from the breaths of violence.

The final movement of Psalm 27 returns us to the strong confidence displayed in its opening and closes with a wise word of waiting:

I believe that I shall see the goodness of the Lord

in the land of the living.

Wait for the Lord;

be strong, and let your heart take courage;

wait for the Lord!

The tension caused by the messiness of Psalm 27 is brought to a strong resolution in a statement whose hopefulness cannot be matched in perhaps all of scripture: *I believe that I shall see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living!* If one listens closely enough, you can hear the psalmist beating his fist on the podium for emphasis during this moment of unabashed hope. The hardships, the trials, the tribulations, the battles, the stress, the desperation, all of it has done nothing but strengthen his resolve to

place his complete trust in the land of the living, the dwelling of God's redemption. The one who has asked to see the face of the Lord believes that he *shall see* the land of the living. His faith is placed in that which he has not yet seen but that which he believes he shall see. He knows that he must wait. And so, Psalm 27 ends with a quiet but firm instruction to wait for the Lord. As we do so, we are to be strong and to let our hearts take courage. That is the work we have to do while we wait.

Lent is a messy season. And Psalm 27 is the perfect psalm to embody it. As we wait for the empty tomb and prepare ourselves to make room for resurrection, Psalm 27 invites us to ponder God's nature and our relationship with God amidst times that are confusing, stressful, and anxious. Faith is the hard work of living in the messy space between trust and doubt. That messy space is lifted up by Psalm 27.

Where are you in this psalm?

Maybe, in this moment in time, you are sure and confident that God is your light and your salvation. Your life has had its struggles but things are going pretty well. The job is steady and the relationships are in place and healthy for the most part. Then perhaps you are in verses 1-3 of Psalm 27.

Maybe, in this moment in time, you are getting up there in years and are reflecting on the length and complexity of your life. The reality of death seems closer to you that it did fifty or sixty years ago. You are wondering, with a mixture of anticipation and anxiety, where "it" is all heading. Then perhaps you are in verses 4-6 of Psalm 27.

Maybe, in this moment in time, you are feeling abandoned. Your prayers feel as though they are hitting a brick wall. Nothing seems to be going right. The days of happiness seem painfully outnumbered by the dismal ones. It feels as though God is looking in every direction *but* yours. Then perhaps you are in verses 7-10 of Psalm 27.

Maybe, in this moment in time, you are feeling confused and overwhelmed. There are things that seem outside of your comprehension because this life just seems so complex, and misleading, and treacherous. You seek God's wisdom because it just feels like your feet can't find solid ground. Then perhaps you are in verses 11-12 of Psalm 27.

Maybe, in this moment in time, you are feeling grateful for God's providence in your life. You've known hardships. You've known pain and suffering and loss. And yet, here you are, standing on firm ground, thanks be to God! You have seen a lot but you know there is one thing left to see that you know you will: the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living! Then perhaps you are in verse 13 of Psalm 27.

But *all* of us, no matter our circumstances, are together in verse 14 of Psalm 27. Together, we wait for the Lord. Together, we help one another to be strong and to have courageous hearts amid life's hardships. Together, we wait because we do believe that we will see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living. That is the beautiful messiness of the season of Lent. The land of the living is on its way!

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen!