

Do Not Fear: Community is Here.  
A Sermon Preached by Jillian Flynn  
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana  
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**Psalm 27: 1, 4-9**

Will you Pray With Me? Lord, May the Words of my Mouth and the Meditations of all our hearts be acceptable unto you our rock and redeemer, Amen.

Over the holidays our family took a trip to Florida. It was our way of celebrating all the sacrifices we had made throughout the year while Hayden was working in Canada. As a result of him starting to travel when our son was just a few weeks old, we recognized that there were many memories our little family missed out on being apart throughout the work week.

So we loaded up a van with suitcases, toys, and lots of kid friendly snacks and embarked on a very long car ride with not only a 9 month old, but my in laws too in order to make some family memories. I wanted everyone to have memories of the baby's first trip to the beach, of feeding alligators as a family, watching fireworks on New Year's, and visiting countless sports arenas. For Jeffrey these memories will just be in pictures and pounds of food consumed, but I think our little family and my in laws that traveled with made a plethora of beautiful memories. But as a parent a lot of not so social media ready memories were made as well. The mommy needs sleep meltdowns, the baby blow-out diaper in the middle of the grocery, or my personal favorite the turn the other way when the baby started eating sand. Because behind every giggly family photo was a mommy or daddy repacking a diaper bag, making sure we had enough toys and snacks, remembering the lovies as we traveled from one destination to another, and budgeting every step of the way. Many moments were plagued with the question: what were we thinking taking a baby away from his home and routine for 10 days? The answer to this question came when I saw a little boy building sand castles and playing with a football with his daddy, uncle, and grandparents. That community, that love, those connections far outweighed the chaos.

I share this because I think many of us can resonate with the idea of two or more sides to every story. For parents there are the photos we post on social media with great pride, and then the million of photos of yelling and scrambling that had to be taken to get the one Facebook worthy memory. For others there is the joy of love and friendship, but also the pain of loss and grief. Or the love of having a job but the fatigue that comes from over functioning in that role. The lifetime of memories did not develop without the effort behind the scenes. Often times the gratefulness of rest comes after long periods of exhaustion. The doubt and fears are often present in the very

places we find love and laughter, sometimes at the same moment, but sometimes in moments of their own. Whether on vacation or at work or eating supper at home the challenges go hand and hand with the rewards. It is for this reason that the passage from Psalms read this morning grabs my interest. Within these few short verses the Psalmist expresses great sentiments of faith, but also shares great moments of lament with the Lord.

The statements “whom shall I fear” and “whom shall I be afraid” in verse 1 are Sunday Morning ready. You know the kid who answers every Sunday school question with “Jesus.” The psalmist has all the appropriate answers. And in moments of great struggle these expressions of trust can bring great comfort to many. We do not have to fear for God is with us. However, being skeptic, I begin to ask myself: did the psalmist really have to work that hard to find something to fear or something to be afraid of? I do not know about you, but I have sang this song before in moments of great struggle, but if I am honest with myself I do not have to look too far in today’s world to find someone or something which sparks fear or concern deep in my gut.

I want to stop the Psalmist before the psalm begins and simply begin listing all the people they should fear: those who choose violence of cooperation, those who choose prejudice over love, those who would rather hide behind a political title instead of thinking about each individual issue. I do not even need a person to be afraid of, what about the natural disasters, job loss, death of a loved one, or the suffering of someone I care about, I fear those too. So what do I do with all this fear? How can I acknowledge these worries while at the same time displaying trust in the Lord?

I believe our Psalm this morning helps answer this question. The writer continues seeking after the Lord even after his statements in Verse 1. His confidence in who the Lord is does not make his faith stagnant, but instead he continues asking to “live in the house of the Lord” and to “inquire in his temple”. He continues on to acknowledge that there are still “days of trouble” and “enemies all around”. For our psalmist the presence of faith does not mean the absence of fear, or the complete good riddance to enemies. There are more sides to the story of faith. The psalmist’s faith just equips him to deal with the yucky situations; when the fear comes there are clues on where to turn to for help. So, in verse 7 when the psalmist experiences this fear, he approaches the Lord in a state of lament.

Many scholars suggest that this psalm is actually two different Psalms put together during editing because there is both the faith in verse 1 and the crying out in verse 7. The emotional shift in verse 7 seems to go against the notion of the psalms being written in a singular moment. Verse 1 comes with so much confidence: “The Lord is my light”, “the Lord is my stronghold.” The Psalmist does not hesitate or waver. These sentiments are strikingly different from the ones found in Verse 7, as the Psalmist pleads to come, “Hear O Lord when I cry aloud”, “answer me.” It makes complete sense to see these as written / said by two different people or at least at two different times. Maybe one was said in the morning before the struggles of the day and the other one

was said after a no good very bad day. A journal with two different entries may be the nature of this Psalm. One writer sounds ready for the war while the other pleads for help and courage.

However, it is also not too farfetched to see the unity in this Psalm. A Psalmist who even in the strongest moments of faith still needs time and space to cry out to God, that is a faith displaying honesty. To view the two portions of this Psalm in unity is to paint a picture more like reality, one where a person experiences a multitude of emotions amongst their humanness. With this unity the Psalmist paints a reality where God remains ever present with God's people regardless of the emotions and paints a picture of a God who can handle the tears just as well as the confidence. Great statements of trust come alongside great fear displaying how trials and trust go hand and hand.

Having an image of God who is bigger than all moments of life, both the highs and lows can be the very thing that leads one to feel that they in reality have nothing to fear. This image however does not make the truth that life is extremely vulnerable any less true. One cannot control the chaos that abounds due to human frailty. As a result, suffering presents itself even into the lives of believers. One commentator puts it this way, "Faith in God does not spare God's servants from difficulties but equips them to live with courage and hope despite difficulties" (NIB). Friends that is the story behind the pretty vacation photo, the tears behind the songs of praise, that difficult times can and still arise, but the God we serve did not promise easy and the same God gave us these emotions. The God who made creatures with emotions is big enough to handle us, even in moments of difficulties. Have faith you are never alone.

So yes! there still exists things to fear in the world, but we do not have to walk in that fear alone. The psalmist today reminds us of this fact not only by speaking of his relationship with God, but also by sharing his heart's desire "to live in the house of the Lord." At first glance this seems to be a desire for heaven. But the Psalmist leaves room for there to be houses of the Lord on earth. As the Psalm goes on, we hear of how the Psalmist is living in an earthly fashion, "for He will hide me in his shelter in the day of trouble, he will conceal me under the cover of his tent." The Lord's shelter referenced here, the tent that conceals the Psalmist, is thought by scholars to be the temple, or his place of worship. In other words, it is center of worship that God can use to walk alongside God's people.

In his commentary James L Mays explains that this is not so much a physical protection, the church protecting the body from harm, but one of emotional and spiritual protection, such that trust can be fostered and strengthened within religious communities. This is the help of having a temple, a church, a tent to rest under when enemies come. It is not so much people guarding you like they are secret service, but people walking hand and hand with you through the tough times. It is the lessons of faith learned, the families formed, the food to feed your soul. Community, whether physically in a church building or somewhere else, is one of the gifts God gives us so we may

feel close to God even before entering Heaven. Community helps believers to remain confident the work of the Lord is not a work of solitude. Our church family, our friends, or loved ones, they are blessings from God, so that we do not have to live in isolation. They are the pieces of God, the saints among us.

Today as we ordain and install individuals to active service as Elders, and Deacons let us remember that this church is not what we serve, but the God who breathes life into it. These officers will work so that the pieces of the beauty of our Lord within these walls can continue to function smoothly. Their time is not just checking a box off of a to-do list nor is this service today simply occurring to appease the larger Presbyterian system. Today, and all the events happening are how we celebrate the gift which is the Church. They, like all of us, have a chance to use our gifts and talents to serve the lord and support all creation. Such service is one way in which we behold the beauty of the Lord. Such service occurs as to not only remind us that we are never alone, but also to remind those accepting a position as a church officer that we as a church have promised to support and uphold them throughout that journey. Together everyone plays a role in the protection known as the church.

So if you find yourself like me asking: seriously God there is nothing to fear? Try and remember that when those fears do come, when you cry out for the Lord to hear you, that you have little miracles all around you in the community God has given, the saints who went before us, the Church begun in Christ's name, and always within the Holy Spirit working in all of us. When we work together, we experience more of the Joy that is our Lord and we have nothing to fear alone.

Benediction: Seriously God, nothing to fear? Well sure there are things to fear, but God has blessed us with a community to walk those difficult moments with.

11 Finally, brothers and sisters,[a] farewell.[b] Put things in order, listen to my appeal,[c] agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you.