

“Do Not Be Afraid”

Introduction: Scattered throughout the birth narrative of Jesus that we find in Luke’s gospel, is the command: “Do not be afraid!” We hear the angel speak it to Zechariah (1:13), as he learned he was going to father a son named John who would be called to make ready a people for the coming of the Lord. We hear the angel speak it to Mary (1:30), as she learned she would become the mother of this Lord. We hear the angel speak it to the shepherds, keeping watch over their flocks at night (2:10), as they experience the glory of the Lord and then are told of his birth.

“Do not be afraid” continues to be heard by the followers of this Lord, Jesus, who speaks it to them throughout his life, and then even after his resurrection, and ascension (Ma. 14:27, 17:7, 28:10; Ac. 18:9, 23:11; Rev. 1:17).

Fear, it seems, dominates our human landscape, no matter where, or when, we live. In these days of Covid we fear illness and death. We fear becoming unemployed, or homeless, or even just alone. We fear those who look or vote or think or believe differently than us. We fear that life will never be the same again.

What do you most fear today, as you’ve entered this space, whether physically or virtually? Where do you need to hear Jesus say to you, “Do not fear?” Just take a moment and ponder that. . .

OT scholar Walter Brueggemann observes that the opposite of faith is not doubt; it’s fear. So let’s seek, as we acknowledge our fears, to think about how to meet them in a healthy way. Psalm 27 is an invitation by David to trust. How does David meet his fears? How does he help us think about nurturing our trust so that fear does not get the better of us? And, as we sit here just a few days from celebrating the birth of the son of David, the Son of God, how might his arrival figure in? [READ]

I. An “Open” Psalm (vv. 1-3)

A. Let’s begin by making three observations about the opening verses. First, Psalm 27 is what scholars call an “open” psalm. That is, it doesn’t give us the exact setting of when these events occurred in the life of David. We don’t know who the wicked, the enemies, or his foes are. We don’t know who was stoking fear through promoting falsehood. But the fact that we don’t know the specifics leaves the psalm “open” for us to insert, and to pray, our own foes and fears as they surface in our own settings.

Illustration: One example of this is a pastor and theologian from Namibia named Zephania Kameeta. In the early 1980’s, when southern Africa was struggling to shake itself free from the oppression of apartheid, Kameeta published a collection of psalms in which he inserted the experience of his people to help them pray about their foes and their fears. His use of Psalm 27 begins like this:

The Lord is my light and my liberation; I will fear no so-called world powers.
When their security forces attack me and try to kill me, they stumble and fall.

Even if the whole imperialist armies surround me, I will not be afraid;
I will still trust God as my liberator.

Teach me, Lord, what you want me to do, and lead me along in this difficult situation.
Do not abandon me to the worshippers of apartheid and their collaborators
who attack me with lies and threats.

One helpful exercise would be to rewrite this psalm in your journal, inserting along the way your foes and your fears, to help you pray them to God.

B. A second observation that we need to make is David's use of the word "when" in v. 2: "When the wicked advance against me to devour me." David expects to have trouble in this life. When these foes are dealt with, he knows others will arise. "In this world you will have trouble," Jesus reminds his followers (Jn. 16:33). On all people the rains will come, the streams will rise, and the winds will blow, he explains in a parable about faithful and faithless builders (Ma. 7:24-27). If our hope is to somehow escape trouble in this world, then our hope is misplaced.

C. A third observation is that despite this uncomfortable truth, David remains confident, a word that serves to bookend to his reflections (vv. 3, 13). It's a word which reveals that, to borrow from Paul in Romans 8, even the face of trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword, he trusts that God has his back (Ro. 8:35-39). How did David get to this place? How does he nurture such confidence, such trust?

D. Before we go there, we might just think about the places we can be tempted to turn, in our western world, to try and fight our fear. We might turn to politics believing that those who we have voted into office will certainly make the world a better place and root out all evil. We might turn to the military, believing that our might is so superior that it can conquer any opposition we may face. We can turn to our investments, believing that the stock market will always, eventually, reward us. We might turn to psychology, searching for the various coping skills that discipline offers. None of these options are bad, just vastly overrated! If they become ultimate locations of our trust, we will eventually discover that they will all let us down, and may lead us into evil instead of protecting us from it.

II. David's Rule of Life

A. David knew that to remain confident in the face of fear he must intentionally seek the Lord. In the psalm, we get a glimpse of David's "rule of life," those practices and habits that he deems essential in this regard. As he describes it, they fall into two categories: worship and community.

1. The words that highlight David's worship are seeking, gazing, sacrificing, singing, calling, and listening (implied). He seeks God's face, he gazes at God's beauty, he sacrifices with shouts of joy, he sings and makes music, he calls upon God's mercy, and he listens for God's direction. All of the actions help him to center his life in God, and to remember and celebrate what God has done and promises to do. Recall that forgetting what God had done was one of the primary ways God's people in the days of the Judges found themselves being led into evil. By way contrast, these acts of remembering help David to locate his life, not in the path of evil and fear, but in the grand story of the goodness and grace of God.

Illustration: A friend was describing to me this past week the game of Corn Hole that he had just finished making as a Christmas present for his grandchildren. He was pretty pleased with the way it had turned out, with exception that the circles he had cut (through which one attempts to toss your beanbags) with the aid of a jigsaw, were not perfectly round. A jigsaw has a way, he explained, of taking you off track.

Worship helps to bring us back on track, to center our life in God. It helps put our foes and our fears in a much larger perspective so that they don't get the better of us and threaten to defeat us.

2. Importantly, such worship was not only done alone. When David entered the temple (the tabernacle or "sacred tent" v. 6 it still was at that time), he would worship with others. We need one another in this journey of faith, this walk of trust. God rescued us, we've said many times, not to live as his followers in isolation but in community. In addition to having a mission together, we need others to encourage us, to hold us accountable, to tell us we're not crazy (or that perhaps we are!), to share and walk with us in our fears. "*Our Father who art in heaven,*" remember, is how Jesus calls us to pray.

B. Now, you might be thinking, you've just told us, pastor, how important worship and community is to our life of faith and to our ability to not let fear get the better of us, but you also told us a few minutes ago that we can't come together to worship for the next three weeks! What gives?!

Well, first of all, these circumstances are both unprecedented as well as, hopefully, temporary. We're "pushing pause" in order to seek the safety of all during a very serious phase of this public health crisis.

Second, thank you God for the wonderful technology we have available to us to help us stay connected. Please take advantage of our weekly virtual worship, or being in a zoom group or on a conference call (go to freeconferencecall.com to get a number and access code). These are extremely helpful ways to keep walking together and fighting our fears together.

Third, it's worth noting the OT text that is part of the lectionary readings on this fourth Sunday of Advent is 2 Samuel 7:1-16. The text describes the desire of David, who is now king of Israel, to build a magnificent house for God, who up to now in his life with Israel has been "living in a tent." That is, the place of worship for Israel has been this portable tabernacle. In response, God answers David through the prophet Nathan that he doesn't really need a building in which to reside as he's been moving with his people from place to place since the days he delivered them from slavery in Egypt. Furthermore, God would go on to say, it was his plan to build a house for David and David's descendants, which would be a kingdom that would endure forever. The King who would rule forever would be known as the son of David, as we learn in our advent texts.

God, it is helpful to remember in these days of Covid, doesn't need a building. And, as we remember in the Christmas season, God is primarily with us, not in a building but in the person of Jesus who "tabernacled among us" (the literal translation of "made his dwelling" Jn. 1:14). Now, after his death, resurrection, and ascension, he dwells with us and within us by the person of his Spirit, who cannot ever be locked down, no matter where, physically, we worship.

This good news, combined with his promise to return to put all things right and fill the world with his glory, is the best way to nurture our confidence in the face of our foes and our fears. So may the living God remain with us as we meet virtually, until we meet again, physically.