

Sermon – March 13, 2022

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Psalm 27

Several years ago, I was with a group doing a sleepout-under-the-stars on top of the highest peak of a mountain. There was a big flat open space up there where wind and glaciers had carved the rock smooth, so it was perfect for folks to throw down a bunch of sleeping bags and make an evening of it. The stars were incredible, and while the moon was out it was surprisingly bright. It wasn't quite full though, so it wasn't like you could read a book by it or anything, but it was enough to see the hand in front of your face.

Well, in the middle of the night I felt the old call of nature, so I had to get my boots back on and head off into the woods for a bit. The moon was still out, and it was bright enough for me to get a pretty good distance before the tree cover got dense enough to block out the moonlight. So I started walking before I even *thought* about fishing my flashlight out of my pocket.

I was already under the treetops by the time I *did*, and realized that it wasn't a switch or a click-on, but one of those flashlights where you have to twist the top right or left... until finally...

I was mid-stride, right foot in the air, when the light came on. *Psheeww!* And a *good thing* it did. I froze, right leg in the air... over a five- or six-foot drop. The stretch of rock I was on abruptly ended *just* past my left foot... the only thing supporting my entire body weight.

You know that weird feeling you get when for some reason you think there's *one* more step on the stairs, and you put your foot down in complete confidence, and there *isn't* a step and it, like, throws your entire worldview into question?

If I had continued my stride, and in the darkness blindly put my foot down—on *nothing*—I would have had about a *second* to be confused as to what happened to the *ground*, before I cracked my *skull* open on a rock.

Instead, in the moment I needed it most, I managed to find the light. (With the flashlight mercifully pointing *downward* and *not* into my *eyes*.) And that *light* managed to stop *my* headlong descent into darkness, thanks be to God.

Needless to say, I had a few things to pray about after I had *safely* put my foot down.

The Psalm we heard today was *so* human. It reads like a ping-pong ball, the Psalmist bouncing back and forth between complete *trust* in God's protection, and *desperate* pleas *for* it. There's a Russian proverb that became popular in English during the Cold War: "Trust, but verify." As certain as the Psalmist might seem at first—proclaiming their *trust* in the Lord's protection—it soon begins to sound like, *whatever's* going on in their life and in their world, they're in *serious* need of some verification. The same Psalm that reads, "though an army encamp against me, my heart shall not fear;" continues a few sentences later with, "Hear, O Lord, when I cry aloud, be gracious to me and answer me! ...Do not cast me off, do not forsake me, O God of my salvation!"

The Psalmist walks in darkness, trusting in the protection of God on all sides... but is in truth in *desperate* need of a light, to shine forth and to illuminate the pitfalls and the safe paths... and crucially, to *prove* that they are not truly *alone* in the night.

Does this sound familiar to you today? Fear. Armies and adversaries. Pleas for shelter in days of trouble; the search for joy and singing and beauty in the face of false witnesses and violence. Like the Psalmist, do you, today, yearn for guidance, a level path, a stronghold?

In times like this, I can't help but quote the prophet Habakkuk:

"O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen? Or cry to you 'Violence!' and you will not save? Why do you make me see wrongdoing and look at trouble? Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise. So the law becomes slack and justice never prevails. The wicked surround the righteous—therefore judgment comes forth perverted."

Phew...

We ask it all the time: why do bad things happen in this world? If God is love, if God's love is for us, why does God allow war? Why does God allow suffering? Why does the God who promises us protection in one Psalm remind us of the injustice of the world in the next?

And yet, what God revealed through Christ—whose crucifixion and death we will remember on Good Friday—is that suffering *is* felt by God just as acutely as it is felt by *us*. Every single, painful, unfair moment of it. When *we* hurt, God hurts. When we *cry*, God cries. And for that matter, when we laugh, God laughs with us.

The promise of Christ—God living *as* us, walking *with* us, and offering us the power of the Holy Spirit—is that God will *always* be among us, there to hold our hand when we are alone, to put an arm around us when we are weak, and to hold us when we weep. To give us strength, to give us consolation, and to offer us *peace*. To be our light in the darkness, to guide us to a better path, to inspire us to stand tall against whatever assails us, and to empower us to aid *others* like us.

And that same God promises that our suffering *will* end. That one day—whether it's tomorrow or next week or fifty years from now, whether it's in the land of the living or what comes next—one day the turmoil of today will be but a breath of memory on a mirror, fading into nothing. That all this shall pass, and peace *will* prevail on Earth as it is in Heaven.

God is right here with us in the here-and-now... *and* God is watching over the long haul—striving alongside us toward our desperate prayer: "Let there be peace on Earth."

The words of the Psalmist: "I believe that I shall see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living." Whether it be among Ukrainians fighting or fleeing, LGBT youth facing erasure or oppression, or ICUs around the world that are not yet empty... the goodness of the Lord *is*

present. God is *at work* in the places of deepest darkness. God is striving to provide shelter for your day of trouble, and God is straining to lift your head up above your enemies all around you.

It may be nearly impossible to see; the branches growing thick above our heads may blot out the moon... but that's because we haven't turned on our flashlights yet.

"The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?"

What I'm trying to tell you is that even now, even as you "hear of wars and rumors of wars," even as—in the words of the Gospel of Matthew—"nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places..." God is among you, and *God is at work*.

And I hope... for the sake of our world... that God doesn't have to work alone. Because as helpless as this world may make us feel at times... God promises we are *not*.

*Sometimes* faith is... walking in the dark, trusting that God is out there.

Who among you is ready to grab a flashlight and prove it?

Amen.