

Putting Fear in Its Place

February 21, 2016

Psalm 27

The Psalms put fear in its proper place.

Fear is our right response to real danger. Fear is God's gift—designed to protect us. If you cross the street and a truck speeds toward you, fear makes you react before you have time to think. When danger is real, fear is our friend.

Often, however, we fear things that don't exist. Research shows that about eighty-five percent of the things we worry about never come to pass. We waste tremendous energy on imaginary dangers. Worse yet, we imagine that by worrying we have prevented disaster.

A man spent every day patrolling around his house with a massive club. He walked that circuit so often that he wore a rut around his house. A new neighbor noticed the rut and raised a question.

"Why," asked the neighbor, "are you walking around your house like that?"

"Because," replied the man, "I have to keep my home safe from tigers."

"But this is Iowa!" exclaimed the neighbor. "There are no tigers in Iowa!"

"See, it works!" replied the man.

How much time and energy do we spend guarding against all the imaginary tigers in our lives?

Let's put fear in its place.

"The LORD is my light and my salvation," declares the psalmist, *"whom then shall I fear?"* The psalmist is not describing the absence of fear. That's what we want. Do an internet search on your phone or tablet. Search for "freedom from fear." In a half second, you'll get tens of millions of results.

We want freedom from fear. But courage is not the absence of fear. Fearlessness requires simply that you stop caring about anything or anyone. Fearlessness is a form of despair. Courage is the capacity to act **in the midst of** our fears, not in the absence of fear.

The Psalmist claims the courage that comes from the LORD. We Christians must read the psalms through the "lens" of Jesus. That is especially true in Psalm twenty-seven. Maybe you noticed the word "salvation" in the first verse—*"The LORD is my light and my salvation..."* That Hebrew word is always the name for Jesus.

Jesus puts our fear in its place.

This psalm takes me immediately to Romans, chapter eight, verse thirty-one. *"If God is for us,"* Paul asks, *"who is against us?"* If God does not hold back God's own son, Paul continues, why would God hold back anything else from us? Who can condemn you if God has embraced you? "Who will separate us from the love of God in Christ?" Paul asks.

Paul's answer rings out like an Easter trumpet. *"For I am convinced that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all*

creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (verses thirty-eight and thirty-nine).

Grace puts fear in its place. If you are waiting for today’s main thought, that’s it. **Grace puts fear in its place.** I want you to carry that theme with you today and this week. **Grace puts fear in its place.**

Fear is the tool of the powerful. We see that in today’s gospel reading. Some Pharisees warn Jesus that Herod Antipas, the ruler of Galilee, has plans to execute Jesus. That’s no imaginary threat. Herod has already put the head of John the Baptist on a platter. The powerful often use fear to manage people.

Jesus puts Herod in his place. “Go and tell that fox that I have better things to do than worry about him.” A fox is an insignificant animal who is more nuisance than threat.

God will accomplish God’s purposes, Jesus says. Herod will not determine Jesus’ path. Jesus rejection in Jerusalem will not deter him. Soon he will ride into town as Messiah and King. Soon death will be defeated. Herod is an annoying footnote on the path to God’s light and salvation.

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Back to Psalm twenty-seven for a moment. The Psalmist knows how to manage fear. The Psalmist fills his imagination with the presence and power of God. The psalmist longs “*to behold the beauty of the LORD and to inquire in his temple.*”

Where you focus is what you imagine. Worship can fill your thoughts with the beauty of the LORD—with images of God’s love, peace, mercy and joy. We need that filling weekly. And we need to top off the tank daily. That’s why regular worship and daily devotions are so important for our emotional and spiritual health. Worship, prayer and scripture will crowd out our fearful fantasies if we focus there.

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Jesus can equip us to faithfully follow him in this culture of fear. God created us to sense real threats. Let’s not squander that gift by worrying about the threat of tigers on the Iowa prairies!

Because of our God-created sensitivity, fear sells. Ratings for news programs go up when threats are reported. Media outlets distribute anxiety to enhance profits. We who follow Jesus are called to resist and reject such media tactics.

Because of our God-created sensitivity, fear moves us to action—often in the absence of rational thought. Fear is being used these days for political manipulation. Herod used that tool two thousand years ago, and nothing has changed. Fear is a prominent tool in political campaigns today.

When someone tries to scare us into action, we should ask a simple question. “Who profits from my fear?” That question creates a space in our spirits where Jesus can put fear in its proper place.

Because of our God-created sensitivity, fear makes us retreat from others. That leaves us isolated and vulnerable to attacks by Satan. One way of putting fear in its place is to ask if our fear cuts us off from the community of the Church.

Expect the LORD to come through for you! That’s the final word of the psalm. “*Be strong and let your heart take courage!*” **Grace puts fear in its place.** Let’s pray...

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