

Sunday, 21February 2016

[confidence in the midst of difficulty- Ps 27](#)

[Psalm 27](#)

I'd like us to look at the Psalm this morning. It is a psalm of confidence in God. It is about faith in the midst of difficulty. In the Eastern Orthodox Church this psalm is often sung for baptisms. The idea is that when Jesus was baptized he was immediately brought into the wilderness to be tempted. Being baptized was being made ready for the battle that lies ahead. We like to be a bit more chipper with our baptisms, but I wonder if the Orthodox view isn't a bit more realistic. Yes, God is with us, but that doesn't necessarily excuse us from hardship.

The psalm begins, "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?" (27:1). The Psalmist is asking a rhetorical question. If God is his protector and guide, then what possible reason would he have to be afraid?

That might seem a bit overly idealistic (maybe even a bit naïve) for those of us who have had to deal with difficulties in our lives. But, we need to look at the rest of the psalm to get a sense of what's being said. The very next line (v 2) talks about evildoers trying to devour his flesh. So the Psalmist can't mean that he will never encounter trouble because God is with him. All through the psalm he is talking about adversaries, foes, armies, war, the day of trouble, the rejection of parents, enemies,

and false witnesses rising against him in court who intend to do him violence. The Psalmist is very aware of how messy the world is.

The Psalmist is not saying there is no danger, but he is declaring that he has no need to fear. He says, “Though an army encamp against me, my heart shall not fear” (27:3). In our Gospel lesson the Pharisees say to Jesus, “Get away from here, for [King] Herod wants to kill you” (Lk 13:31). Jesus’ response isn’t fear. Instead he replies to the powerful king who wants to kill him, “Go and tell that fox for me...” (Lk 13:32). That is not the response of someone who is afraid. Jesus even makes reference to being killed as other prophets were. The thought of his death doesn’t seem to bring fear to him. As Christians we see Jesus described in Isaiah 53: “He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows” (Is 53:3-4). Jesus cut the path of salvation, not around difficulty, but through difficulty. We are sometimes tempted to think God is absent when we face difficulty in our lives, but the biblical point of view is that the cross is when and where God was acting most powerfully among human beings. God was working most powerfully in the midst of difficulty. So whatever the Psalmist, and the Bible in general, means by not having to be afraid. It doesn’t mean never encountering trouble.

There is no promise that we will be saved from difficulty. In fact, it seems to be the opposite. Jesus tells us, as his disciples, to take up our cross and follow him (Matt 16:24-26). He says, “If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first” (Jn

15:18). We are actually told we will encounter difficulty. So not being afraid isn't necessarily about being protected from difficulty.

One of the early church fathers, Cassiodorus (5th and 6th C.), was commenting on this psalm and said, "fear of the Lord ensured that he could fear no other". Fear of the Lord is recognition of God's power and that your ultimate end rests in His judgement. Fear of the Lord means recognizing that He is your Creator and that He has a right to give you directions about how to live and is justified in His expectations that you will live accordingly. Fear of the Lord means that you rest your life in His hands and recognize that He is the ultimate authority in all matters. There is no greater power than God, and fearing God means living like it. The Orthodox theologian Alexander Schmemmann once said, "We live as if he never came. This is the only real sin, the sin of all sins, the bottomless sadness and tragedy of our nominal Christianity" (Great Lent). We live as if something besides God has more authority and more power in our lives. Paul says something similar in our reading from Philippians today, "Brothers and sisters, join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us. For many live as enemies of the cross of Christ... their god is the belly" (Phil 3:17-18, 19). Fearing God means recognizing God's rightful place in our lives.

If God is the ultimate power and authority in the universe, then if we are aligned with God we have no ultimate reason to fear. If God has his hand on us, nothing can remove it except God. In Paul's letter to the Romans he says, "For I am sure 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” (Rom 8:38-39). He’s trying to think of anything that could separate us from God, and there is nothing. If God has his hand on us, nothing can take it away. This is the psalmist’s greatest desire- “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” (27:4). He wants to seek his face (27:8). He desires a close relationship with God. He wants to be hidden away where God is (27:5). He wants to be a member of God’s own household.

Actually, the Psalmist’s fear seems to mostly be around separation from God- “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!” (27:9).

Even in death he will not let go of us. It has fallen out of fashion to talk about life after death in some circles in the church. The worry is that if we focus too much on life after death we won’t think about this life here and now. I get that, but I also think that having a strong understanding that death is not our end allows us to have courage we might not otherwise have, and to be generous beyond what makes sense to the rest of the world because this life isn’t the end of us. We can live simply knowing that abundance beyond our wildest dreams is still to come. We can take risks to make this world a better place- standing up to tyrants and corruption- because we know that death is not the end of us.

Earlier in Paul's letter to the Romans he says, "For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us" (Rom 8:18).

Whatever difficulty we deal with here and now, the future God has in store for us will outshine it by a long shot. The future God has in mind for us is for us to be eternally connected to the Source of all beauty, joy, and love, and intimately connected to a community of people marked by healthy and healed relationships. It is a life where it is impossible to get bored and where we are continuously maturing and growing into the likeness of Jesus. You might remember the line from Amazing Grace, "When we've been there ten thousand years bright shining as the sun, we've no less days to sing God's praise than when we first begun". That's not describing an eternal church service, I think it's describing that sense of awe we have when we are overwhelmed by beauty, joy, and love, and when we are living in that state perpetually we radiate thanksgiving to God. It is a life so amazing that any description is dull by comparison, and our imagination can't even come close to grasping it.

Living a life free from fear means recognizing that God has His hand on us and nothing can remove it; and that He is planning an amazing eternal future for us. Whatever we endure here is temporary, no matter how painful. ... Which is easy to say when you're not in the middle of a painful event. Imagine Mary watching her son dying on the cross. Nothing could comfort her in that moment. We could try to tell her that this is temporary and that something good will come out of this, but that would probably just offend her. ... Looking back on that event now we can see the cross in a different light- but at that moment it

looked like meaningless and unredeemable suffering. Now the cross has become a symbol of hope and victory.

There are three truths that can help us overcome fear if we can hold onto them. 1) God is all-powerful. 2) God is always present. And, 3) God is all-loving. First, God is all powerful. God is the Creator of the universe. We can't even begin to imagine the power of a being like that. So of course if God holds onto us, no power can make Him let go. Second, God is always present. In Psalm 139 the psalmist imagines where he can go to get away from God- "Where shall I go from your Spirit? Or where shall I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there! If I make my bed in the grave, you are there!" (Ps 139:7-8). Can we realistically imagine being able to hide from God? God is always with us. Third, God is all-loving. We might imagine God being powerful, and being present with us, but If God doesn't love us, or if we aren't in a loving relationship with God, then we have no reason to hope. In fact if God was negatively disposed towards us that could be really troublesome. Thankfully we are told that God is not just "loving", but that God is love (1 John 4:8). God's primary attitude towards us is love. He loves you more than you have ever been loved by anyone, and more that you can imagine being loved. If these three things are true (that he is powerful; he is with us; and he loves us) then we have no ultimate reason to be afraid.

St. Athanasius lived in the 3rd and 4th centuries. He lived while Christians were being persecuted. You might have heard about Christians being thrown to the lions to be devoured for the amusement of bloodthirsty crowds. This is when Athanasius lived. He says that Jesus has defeated death so Christians no

longer had to be afraid of death, "...it is the very Saviour that also appeared in the body, who has brought death to nought, and Who displays the signs of victory over him day by day in his own disciples. For ... one sees men, weak by nature, leaping forward to death, and not fearing its corruption nor frightened of the descent into Hades, but eager with soul challenging it; and not flinching from torture, but on the contrary, for Christ's sake electing to rush upon death ... [Christ] supplies and gives to each the victory over death ... For who that sees a lion, ... made sport of by children, fails to see that [death] is either dead or has lost all his power" (On the Incarnation, xxix.3-5)... "For man is by nature afraid of death and of the dissolution of the body; but there is this most startling fact, that he who has put on the faith of the Cross despises even what is naturally fearful, and for Christ's sake is not afraid of death" (xxviii.2). The martyrs are examples to us that we don't have to be afraid even when our very lives are threatened. This will not be the end for us. We don't have to be afraid because God is holding onto us and nothing can take away the eternal future God wants for us.

Another reason we can have confidence in the midst of trouble is that if we are truly dedicating ourselves to God and living the way he wants, then whatever trouble comes against us is actually coming against God. The Psalmist asks God, "Teach me your way, O LORD, and lead me on a level path..." (27:11). He wants to live in line with God's will. Part of the Blessing for Abraham was this, "I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse" (Gen 12:3). This means that God would so entwine his life with Abraham that whoever opposes Abraham would find themselves fighting against God.

When the Apostles were arrested in the book of Acts for proclaiming that Jesus had risen from the dead they were brought before the council to be questioned. A member of the council, the wise Gamaliel said, “keep away from these men and let them alone, for if this plan or this undertaking is of man, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You might even be found opposing God!” (Acts 5:38-39). If we allow our lives to reflect God’s will for us, then we will have the same kind of status as God’s people. Those who attack us will find themselves not attacking us, but attacking God. They will be able to cause us some amount of trouble, yes. But, ultimately, like Jesus we will not be overcome by trouble. Jesus said, “In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world” (Jn 16:33).

We will not be saved from experiencing difficulty. That difficulty could even be transformed by God for our good (for example, to teach us patience). We will experience difficulty, but that doesn’t mean God is not with us. Whatever difficulty we experience is temporary. Because of the work of Christ nothing can remove God’s hand from us. Ultimately, we have no need to fear. When facing difficulty, instead of fear we take the Psalmist’s advice, “Wait for the LORD; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the LORD!” (27:14).