

Psalm 27:1, 4-9
Matthew 4:12-23

I remember the feel of the rounded wet concrete at the edge of the pool. I clung to it as I looked at the deep end of the swimming pool, certain that if I let go I would sink like a stone to the bottom of the pool. It's true that one can avoid this moment of absolute terror if one is enrolled in the down-proofing classes or learn-to-swim programs offered by most swim clubs, schools and YMCA's. But I did not benefit from that essential instruction and so at five or six, I doubted what my own eyes told me: that people with bodies bigger and heavier than mine could stray from the edge of the pool and avoid drowning. And certain death.

On that day I kept clinging for a good while—long enough for my parents, waiting to cheer and take a photo with their Instamatic camera, and my brother, who was encouraging me--- to get bored. And then I let go. And my head went under. And I bobbed right back up, and what I thought might be my last shining moment—turned into an amazing sense of ease as I frantically dogpaddled further and further from the poolside.

I often think of that sensation; it's become a personal parable of sorts, a handy memory in times of anxiety or fear when the prospect of "drowning" or "getting in over my head" appears again. The side of the pool is always there, tempting. I know firsthand—I've spent days and months clinging to rituals of security that really are nothing more than distractions from my own deepest purposes. I've dutifully appeared at social events that were safe and routine, carried out institutional obligations that were no longer life-giving for anyone, and clung to money when risking it might have offered an extraordinary opportunity to break through the heavy blanket of fear.

All of these thoughts came rushing back I was meeting with a group of friends recently. One of them, a counselor, asked an unusual question: "What fears have you conquered over the years?" And "what new fears have you acquired?" No one was eager to expose their private fears to a public hearing, so each of us waited for someone else to start the conversation. Finally, one brave soul shared some familiar fears, listing "the dark," "feeling left out," "needles," and "snakes." A couple harbored some distinct phobias: one woman was beset by astraphobia—the fear of thunder and lightning, while the other was deathly afraid of heights—acrophobia. Our more recent fears centered on matters of aging—"being over-medicated and parked mindlessly in a nursing home" and "a recurrence of my cancer."

I remember the theologian Paul Tillich named three dimensions of anxiety, and thought of how our small group had covered all three in our self-disclosure. People, observed Tillich, have to confront the anxiety of non-being—death, the anxiety of meaninglessness and the anxiety of fate—uncertainty, unpredictability. O.K., O.K., I know that technically fear and anxiety are distinct from each other and believed, by many scientists, to move along different neurological circuits in the brain. Fear has a

distinct object; anxiety is free-floating, a sort of universal dread. They are, however, close cousins, both warning us of threats to our well-being.

“The Lord is my light and my salvation; what shall I fear?” the psalmist asks. *“The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?”* These verses are two of the more than 300 references to fear in the Old and New Testaments. A wide range of emotions are captured in the Hebrew and Greek words for *fear*, from a sense of awe and immense respect to sheer heart-pounding terror. In Psalm 27, the creators of fear are identified as mudslingers, enemies, instigators of violence, and betraying relatives. To respond to their threats, the psalmist doesn’t appeal to a simplistic platitude, such as “When the going gets tough, the tough get going.” No, the Psalmist refuses to make light of the impending danger by urging everyone who is afraid to “make lemonade out of lemons.” If there is to be any encouragement, it is to come from outside of the fearful soul. Confident that the Lord is his light, salvation and stronghold, the psalmist asserts:

*For {the Lord} he will hide me in {a} his shelter
in the day of trouble;
{the Lord} he will conceal me under the cover of his tent,
{the Lord} he will set me high on a rock. (Ps. 27:5)*

No matter how severe the circumstances, they are not able to shake the Psalmist’s confidence in God. The Psalmist has experienced God’s faithfulness.

Peter Steinke observes that fear is a wake-up call. It arouses awareness of danger; it puts us on high alert. Yet it can also do just the opposite, overwhelming us and diminishing our alertness. Neuroscience links fear to the amygdala in our lower, primitive brain. This small structure scouts for trouble and in detecting it, sounds an alarm and tugs multiple neural cords. As it reacts quickly to the threat, it ignores fine distinctions and makes vast generalizations. Its strength is rapid processing, and its weakness is the lack of precision. With extreme fear, adrenaline flushes through our body, initially producing intense caution, but then flooding the brain and cementing attention on the object of fear. In this state, a fearful person can hardly shift attention elsewhere. Tunnel vision occurs. Fear takes over, crushing our imaginations and complex reasoning. The fearful one becomes locked into the present and loses the ability to envision something other than what is now threatening. Reality is pruned to the senses, to the synapses mediating fear, to the paralyzing moment.

Rabbi Abraham Heschel claimed that the primary role of a prophet is “to cast out fear.” Here, the psalmist uses poetry in the service of prophecy, showing us a way to transform fear into positive energy, to convert danger into possibility and to shift power from the daunting present to the things that might be. “I believe,” the psalmist exclaims, “that I shall see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living.” Even though present moment looks to reject God’s goodness, the Psalmist trusts that which is not seen. God will be faithful—“the Lord will take me up.” This pledge is the heart of the gospel. God will not let God’s promises return empty. In Christ all things will become new.

Maryann McKibben Dana writes that Psalm 27 reflects a relationship with God that is deepening in intimacy. Verse 4 discloses a person content to simply live in God’s house: “One thing I asked of the Lord ... to live in the house of the Lord all the days of my life.” As the psalm progresses, though, the person needs a more intimate relationship with God. “Your face, Lord, do I seek.”

Any person of faith reading these words can relate to the psalmist’s struggle. There are times when we just need more of God. Times when our hearts lead us to search for God’s face. For the writer of

Psalm 27, whose “enemies are all around,” McKibben Dana writes, “the worst-case scenario is not defeat, but alienation from God.”

The hope of Psalm 27 lies in a God who is always willing to be found. The psalmist is confident in the God who has aided and appeared to him in the past. “He will hide me in his shelter ... he will set me high on a rock” (v. 5). These past experiences of God drive the psalmist’s current search. He trusts that God is there. He trusts that God is not hidden. Our spiritual lives may run dry, our hearts may be restless and searching, but God is present and ready to be found.

When we are fearful, we forget the plot of the story. God is not only the author of all things, the God of Genesis, the Mother of all creation, the beginning Source but God is also the God of promise, of the things that will be, of new creation, of the future, of tomorrow. God is the Alpha and Omega.

Moving from the vision of the moment to a wider view of the future with firm confidence in the Lord, the psalmist says:

*Wait for the Lord;
be strong, and let your heart take courage;
Yea, wait for the Lord! (Ps. 27:14)*

Through the centuries, these and other words of the Psalter have been a reservoir of nourishment for those broken by the harshness of life in a post-pandemic world. The psalms are a regular touchstone in our Christian worship, and for good reason. According to scientific studies associated with brain imaging, the amygdala in our brains respond powerfully to calm words, gentle touch, and kind, welcoming faces. All tamp down the activity of the amygdala. Human presence, groups singing, prayers and voice are all resources for a “new creation.” So, to those of a fearful heart or anxious spirit, the Lord “will come and save you” (Isa. 35:4). Take courage. God is a God of the things that will be.

Interestingly, today, January 22, is the day Thornton Wilder’s play “Our Town” premiered at the McCarter Theatre in Princeton, New Jersey, in 1938. “Our Town” is about ordinary life in the fictional town of Grover’s Corners, New Hampshire. The play was revolutionary for its time, primarily because of its spare, minimalist staging; Wilder wanted to tell a universal story, akin to the Greek tragedies — and so he stripped down the production of scenery and props, and had a group of characters who had died in Grover’s Corners comment on the action, like a Greek chorus. “Our Town” opened to mixed reviews, but eventually became a beloved American classic. The play won the Pulitzer Prize for drama in 1938.

One of the play’s signature moments is when the Stage Manager says: “We all know that something is eternal. And it ain’t houses and it ain’t names, and it ain’t earth, and it ain’t even the stars... everybody knows in their bones that something is eternal, and that something has to do with human beings. All the

greatest people ever lived have been telling us that for five thousand years and yet you'd be surprised how people are always losing hold of it. There's something way down deep that's eternal about every human being."¹

Inhabitants of time that we are, we stand on such occasions with one foot in eternity, just like the characters in *Our Town*. In this place, we are well aware of fear, especially our fear of death. God, as Isaiah says (57:15) "inhabiteth eternity" but stands with one foot in time. The part of time where God stands most particularly is Christ, and thus in Christ we catch a glimpse of what eternity is all about, what God is all about, and what we ourselves are all about too.

¹ *Our Town*, Thornton Wilder, 1938. Samuel French, Inc.; Revised ed. edition (February 6, 2013)