

SOME CURES FROM THE PSALMS

2. "Cure for Fear"

Psalm 27, 1 John 4:12-21

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Last week I started this summer sermon series on "Some Cures from the Psalms." I said that this title probably promises more than it can deliver in a cure. However, I wanted to get your attention, to ask the question, "Why do I allow some of these things to bother me so?" I also encouraged you to read through the Psalms for the summer. How many have taken me up on that? If you weren't here last week you can still get on board by starting this afternoon. Start with Psalm 1 which declares right in the first words, "Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the world.... You are like trees planted by streams of water."

Last week we talked about worry, today it is about fear, and in two weeks we will tackle depression. Most of us know a lot about fear. We have our own little and not so little fears don't we. A couple of our volunteers told me yesterday that they were down here at the church working late one night and the lights went out! (The lights do go out in the entire building every night at 10:00 p.m.) This can be a dark place when the lights go out. They grabbed their keys and ran for the car. We are fearful of a visit to the dentist, we are afraid of crossing the street with no crossing guard, we are afraid we will lose all our money, afraid of losing a job or of a disaster striking. A woman returned home from an evening at the theatre, when she was startled by an intruder. She caught the man in the act of robbing her home and yelled: "Stop! Acts 2:38!" ("Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus for the forgiveness of your sins.") The burglar stopped in his tracks. The woman calmly called the police and explained what she had done. As the officer cuffed the man to take him in, he asked, "Why did you just stand there? All the lady did was yell a scripture at you. "Scripture?" replied the burglar, "She said she had an Ax and two 38s!"

Psalm 27 is one of the more positive Psalms in the Bible. It opens with the words, "The Lord is my light and my salvation, whom shall I fear?" Isn't that a great question? "The Lord is the stronghold of my life, of whom shall I be afraid." Who should we fear and of whom shall we be afraid?" The list could be long couldn't it?

A lot has gone wrong for the Psalmist. He paints a fearful picture. He doesn't go into specific details but there are evildoers everywhere who threaten his flesh. There is an army just waiting to devour his life. In the face of all that was going wrong around him the Psalmist is able to offer a song of praise and a bold statement about faith. He says with no sound of doubt in the words of the psalm that God will *hide me in his shelter in the day of trouble; he will conceal me under the cover of his tent; he will set me high on a rock.* Do you hear the tension between fear and faith? Having seen the worst he is able to affirm that when all else is gone, "God remains." God is the one who is faithful to his creation. How can I fear anything if God is my light and my stronghold?

In the light of this psalm, faith's opponent is not doubt. The psalmist does not question the presence of the goodness of God. He does help us see that fear is the foe of faith. Great are the troubles that loom over the psalmist, but his faith in God equips him with strength to endure "the day of trouble." Remember the scene in Mark 5 when Jairus comes to Jesus and begs him to cure his daughter? Jesus says to him, "Do not fear, only believe." (Mark 5:36) Fear is the foe of faith. However, the goodness of God can be greater than life's trials. Focus on God and believe.

So there we are barely five minutes into this sermon and I have answered the cure for fear! If only people would believe it. Easy done, preacher, but how do you know that it works? I think that if we go back to the beginning, back to Genesis, we can begin to see how life was meant to be lived. Back to Eden, to that lovely garden, a place of peace, the way it was, the way it should be, before life broke down into gossipy mistrust—we now all live east of Eden and we live in fear.

In 1 John 4 it states that love is there from the beginning, and in Christ it was reborn for all of us. *Love, John says, come first from God.* That love was revealed in that God sent his Son into the world to take away our sin—God is love. How astounding! How familiar, how original: God is love . . . and we don't believe it.

A baker was asked to print 1 John 4:18 on a wedding cake. He forgot and instead printed John 4:18. 1 John 4:18 says, "There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear." On the other hand John 4:18 says (remember this is a wedding cake) "For you have had five husbands, and the one you now have is not your husband." Perfect love does cast out fear, but I don't know about the poor baker!

Fear comes, John adds, when love is absent or when love is not acknowledged. *There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. We love because he first loved us. Those who says, "I love God," and hates their brother or sister are liars?* (1 John 4:18-20) As the church sign read the other day, "God loves you more than Kanye loves Kanye." Period . . . end of life . . . end of point.

There are two children in a home, a new born and an older sister three or four. The baby awakens in the middle of the night. The older sister causes trouble, interrupts at the most awkward times, and demands attention when the baby needs attention, and won't let the parents alone and stamps her feet and . . . you know what I mean. On the surface the child is very jealous or a nuisance or selfish or full of . . . something. It doesn't make it any easier to listen to, but the child is afraid, afraid that she is not important any more, and somehow her behavior is saying, "Hey, wait a minute, I need your love; I need to feel your reassurance . . . I'm still here."

Or, as a teenage son or daughter, doing dumb and awful things to get attention: screaming back at the parents, slamming doors, declaring their space and distance, stepping over boundaries. They scream or run away or pout or get even any way they can, and look like they are ingrates. They look like they do not want to be your child. He seems so big and loud and tough and competent. I'll tell you a secret: he is afraid. It's tough to find your way these days. It's definitely more difficult than it used to be. She's not tough and thoughtless or spiteful or hateful. She is

afraid, afraid of growing up, afraid of responsibility, afraid that he will fail, afraid of sex, afraid ... well you name it.

Then, there are the parents, grown-up and growing older—successful for the most part, but hidden voices deep inside keep calling out their weakness. How it hurts to give up one's youth and to watch another generation and this child “pulling up roots” as the famed child psychologist Eric Erickson wrote, “but pulling them up out of the soil of the parent's own heart, and it hurts.” And the parents scream back or thump the floor, declaring authority and supremacy—just like Mom and Daddy used to do when life was simpler. Hey, it looks like they are tyrants. It looks like they hate their parenthood. It sounds like they do not care. Let me tell you a secret: They are afraid ... afraid they have not been good parents, afraid they have let you down.

Then—long ago and far away, I knew a couple married twenty years, who came to me because they were having trouble. They had stopped talking to each other months before. Both were very successful in what they did in the world. He was running a big multi-state construction company and she was way up the food chain in one of the largest companies in the state. They knew they were sinking into whatever hell they had constructed. It was trouble brought on by this need to be everything we do not want to be so that we can do the things we do not want to do, to run the race we do not want to run, to win the prize we do not want to win, to prove the things we do not need to prove. My goodness, it's no wonder a marriage suffers, and that we all suffer. Marriage takes the fall-out of all the shattered dreams and broken hopes—the madness and the worries which originate in the lives of the would-be married partners.

This couple had made it. They had the perfect kids, the perfect house, two great cars, the model American couple, money in the bank, 401K's well on the way to being fully funded. But she said, “We aren't happy anymore. When we get home we make a B-line to the bar to pour our favorite drinks and to reinforce ourselves, dull our senses, for the evening. I often think he hates me because I am getting older.”

He looks at me and says, “I can't say anything right anymore. No matter what I say it is wrong. I've given everything to her and now she resents it so much and hates me.” You know what I said to them? Of course you do if you have been listening to this sermon: “I said, “She doesn't hate you ... she's afraid. He doesn't hate you ... he is afraid, too. She is afraid of growing older. He is afraid of being used and not appreciated. And both of you are afraid that all you live for isn't worth it, all the false props under everything will tumble down. It is fear!”

Then there are the other fears: Fearing God, you do not need to fear God and his punishment, because that is the root of a lot of fears, that somehow we are not worthy, that God will sit in judgment, rapping the gavel. 1 John says you do not need to fear God, that in love God sent us Jesus Christ, you are forgiven and made new and whole again in his sight—and he loves you—not because you are worth it but because we are God's children.

Fearing death, that can be another biggie. Paul writes in Corinthians that “the last enemy has been defeated.” Do you believe it? Some do, some don't. I know because you tell me. We say “I believe in the resurrection.” If we follow Jesus and God's love here on earth we can follow Jesus and God to wherever they have prepared a place for us. No need to fear the last enemy.

And Luke keeps noticing the “fears” throughout his gospel. Fear came at the most inappropriate times. Listen to this run of things that Luke calls to our attention:

*When the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary, her reaction was fear!
When there was a terrible storm on the Sea of Galilee and the disciples thought they
would perish, and in their anxiety they called out to Jesus, he said, “Take
heart, have no fear, it is I.” When the waves were calm they were afraid.
When the women got to the empty tomb—they were not afraid of the tomb,
they were afraid when they found it empty.*

And the list goes on and on. When the angels came and when the paralytic walked ... you know what I mean. Every time the supernatural impinges on the natural world, fear comes.

And at the last. Love casts out fear. God is love, and God is the opposite of fear.

One last conclusion before we go. Suppose you have a child who is afraid; how do you treat that child? Well, you pick that child up and you hug her and you try to understand him/her and you tell them that everything is going to be okay and you embrace them with words of kindness. John reminds us, “As God has loved us, so ought we to love one another.” (1 John 4:11)