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# Prayers vs. Fears

Psalm 27

A sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on March 13, 2022 by the Rev. Bruce Puckett

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Fears. We all have them. If we're honest, most of us have a lot of them. When we look at the world around us, there are so many things to fear. It doesn't take more than 30 seconds watching the news to see and hear just how many things there are to fear. And these fears of basically anything can grow out of proportion. At times fears become so overwhelming and all-consuming for people that they become a type of disorder, a phobia. The list of phobias is almost endless. Some fear heights until it becomes acrophobia, and others fear public speaking until it becomes glossophobia, and still others fear spiders until it reaches the point of arachnophobia. And this isn't even mentioning fears that cripple our world like xenophobia. Fears can get so bad that there's even the fear of fear itself, phobophobia. And while most of our fears never reach the point of a phobia, our fears often shape the way we live and move and have our being in this world more than we would like to admit.

In a world where there is plenty to fear, and justifiably so, we've adapted all manner of methods to address our deepest fears. In 2016, Forbes published a list of [14 Ways to Conquer Fear](#), and in the last two years another popular website compiled a list of ["8 Life-Changing Books on Overcoming Fear."](#) These are just a couple of the countless resources people have assembled to help others deal with their fears. The well-known NPR show "This American Life" did a segment a few years ago about a man who used a particular strategy for taming his fears. In a segment titled, ["The Battle of Words vs. Fears,"](#) Ira Glass tells the story of Michael Bernard Loggins who decides to get his fears out of his system by writing them down, in precise detail, numbering them as he went. Before he was done, he had listed 138 fears. His list of fears were eventually published as part of a book called *Fears of Your Life*. Some years later, Michael realized he had more fears to address, so he wrote another list titled, *Fears of Your Life: A Whole Brand New One*, where he wrote down another 45 fears. Here's just a small excerpt:

1. Fear of hospitals and needles. 2. Fear of school and dentists... 7. Fear of Dogs. 8. Fear of strangers. 9. Fear of time bombs. 10. Fear of Deep Waters. 11. Fear of noises and bumps in the middle of the night... 15. Fear of doors when they slams.... 19. Fear of toys that comes on by itself without anyone touching it...<sup>1</sup>

Loggins listed his fears hoping this process of putting his fears into words on paper would mean they no longer had the same power over him. There is a lot of wisdom to this strategy of naming fears as a way of releasing them. And don't we all need some freedom from our fears, from anxiety, from dread today?

The Psalmist knew a thing or two about fears and about addressing those fears before God. The Psalmist even seems to take a somewhat similar approach to Loggins in addressing fear in our psalm today. We might even call Psalm 27, "The Battle of Prayers vs. Fears." You see the Psalmist wisdom for addressing fears goes one step farther than writing down his fears. The Psalmist names his fears and then gives them to God in prayer. The Psalm begins, "The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the refuge of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?" The psalm writer is not suggesting that there are no persons or things that cause fear. He knows all too

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Bernard Loggins, *The Fears of Your Life*, (Manic D Press, San Francisco, 2004), no pages listed.

well that there is much to fear. Yet, the questions “Whom shall I fear?” and “of whom shall I be afraid?” are a kind of rhetorical pep-talk, reminding the Psalmist and all those who pray this psalm that in the light of the Lord, no thing and no one are to be feared.

The Psalm writer doesn’t stop with these questions. He gets detailed. He names the very things that are most terrifying, most dread producing, most anxiety creating in his present reality. He describes evildoers and adversaries and foes, all who might be working for his downfall. If he were writing in the listing manner of Loggins, he just might say, 1. Fear of bullies; 2. Fear of vandals; 3. Fear of people aiming to hurt me and those I love. 4. Fear of wars directed at me. 5 Fear of hordes of haters hoping for my demise. This isn’t an exhaustive list for the psalm writer. He could add other fears, and so could we. But in the early verses of Psalm 27, the writer proclaims a trust in God and God’s presence that drives his fears out of his innermost being. Where fear may have occupied his heart, praise and confidence in God’s presence, regardless of the situation, took up residence within him instead. The Psalmist seems to say that the blinders that fear creates are removed when he dwells in the presence of God. With the confidence of one who can see the beauty of the Lord, the Psalmist calls God’s presence a shelter for the day of trouble, a cover and protection in the time of assault, a sturdy place above the fray of trial and hardship, however it may come. These prayerful words about God’s presence are trustworthy and true. The Psalmist’s prayer serves as a way of moving him deeper into the space of presence with God, a space where fear does not have the final word. Prayer is a movement in trust toward God. Prayer is an activity of deepening relationship with God through verbal and nonverbal communication. And prayer acts to drive out fear because it roots us in the presence of the One who is the light, salvation, and refuge for all.

The sermon could stop there. Maybe the reminder of who God is and the call to be present with God through prayer is enough for today and enough for us as we journey through this season of Lent. But the psalmist doesn’t stop there. After all his talk of trust in God and his declarations and songs of praise, the Psalmist turns from talk about God to speaking directly to God. It’s as if in verse 7, life has gotten real. The trials and hardships of life have started bearing down, and those fears that earlier seemed so easily set aside have come back with vengeance. The prayers of praise turn to prayers of lament. I love how Eugene Peterson paraphrases the Psalmist’s cry:

“Listen, God, I’m calling at the top of my lungs: ‘Be good to me! Answer me!’ When my heart whispered, ‘Seek God,’ my whole being replied, ‘I’m seeking him!’ Don’t hide from me now!”  
(The Message, Psalm 27:7-9).

The Psalmist is facing down trouble and trial, and it seems that there is reason to fear again. Isn’t that just like real life? Just when we think we’re able to fully rest in our trust of God, life happens. Your company downsizes. There’s a serious car accident. You fail your midterm. There’s a new variant. You find a lump. A war begins. Inflation skyrockets. You lose a crucial client. Rent is due, and there’s no money left. Your life partner tells you they’re leaving. The list could go on and on. So much fear; so much anxiety; so much dread. For most of us, if not all of us, trusting God is not a once and for all action. For most of us, life with God is the journey of trusting God and then learning to trust God again and more deeply when times of trial come. Perhaps the Psalmist is offering us a way of deepening our trust in and relationship with God when fears rise and dread threatens to overwhelm us. The Psalmist seems to be demonstrating that both prayers of praise and cries of lament are acts of deepening our life with God. We trust in God’s provision and protection. Then the trials come, and the fears well up within us, and we cry out to God so that

even in the midst of hardship we will not be alone. We move from prayers of trust in God through praise to prayers of trust in God through lament. This is the journey of faith and faithfulness that we travel throughout the whole of our lives.

Psalm 27 doesn't give a rose-colored, Pollyanna view of life with God. There are no promises that as soon as we trust in God all things will be well and all hardships will cease. Instead, we're given light to see God's persistent presence no matter what the circumstances. The Psalmist says that even if our closest of kin and our most trusted relations turn away and abandon us, God will not. The assurance of God's presence and the ability to call on God in joy and in lament means that fear and worry, anxiety and dread, don't have the final word. In the battle of prayers vs. fear, God wins. So, after expressing his lament, the Psalmist proclaims, "I believe that I shall see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living." He makes a proclamation of faith rooted in God's goodness. The writer seems to be setting an example for what can happen when we've named our fears and released them to God. With the blinders caused by fear removed, God lights the way for us to see glimpses of God's goodness around us, right where we are even in the midst of distress.

My friend loved Psalm 27. He hung on to the words of this psalm as his prayer and promise as he walked the death dealing road of cancer. I heard him claim time and again, "The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?" He was determined not to fear cancer. He was determined that cancer would not have the final word in his life. As he walked the wilderness road of surgeries, radiation treatments, and experimental therapies, he believed with all his being that he would see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living. He spoke the words of this psalm as if they were his own, even as he approached the end of his life. Some might say that he died waiting to see God's goodness in the land of the living, as he desperately hoped he would be cured of his cancer. Yet as I walked with him in his last days, I learned of the glimpses of God's goodness that filled his final months. I often saw for myself the graces of a community that surrounded him with love and support. Together we saw God at work as my friend addressed broken relationships within his past. When his strength failed, I saw my friend serve others through notes of kindness and words of encouragement, even as he was served by doctors, nurses, and friends. In the final months of his life, there was no doubt that we were seeing the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living.

On his deathbed, one of the last things my friend said to me was, "This is not the end." I think he believed he would rally again and continue his journey with cancer. But I believe he was speaking to something even more profound rooted in his journey with Jesus, the one who was his light and salvation. Like the writer of Psalm 27, my friend was making a statement of trust and hope that went beyond the very real fears that surrounded him. He had lifted prayers of praise, and he had cried out in lament, and in the end, he trusted the goodness of the Lord who was there with him in that hospital room and every day prior. His final words to me were words of encouragement, words that let go of the fear of death in trust of the One who on the first Easter morning overcame fear and death once and for all.

Psalm 27's final words are also words of encouragement. Perhaps the Psalmist spoke this word to those who would read the prayer later, or maybe even he was saying it as an encouragement for himself. "Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the Lord!" He could have said, "This is not the end." This season of fear is not the end. This season of anxiety, of hardship, of dread, of loss, of doubt, of mourning, is not the end. The situations that threaten to overcome you, the hardships that are stoking your anxiety and dread, the

dire realities all around that fuel fear in you, all of these things are not the end. Wait on the Lord because the goodness of the Lord is the end. Life in Jesus is the end. So be strong and take courage. Even small acts of trusting God such as crying out in lament will free us to see the goodness of the Lord who is the refuge for our life and our salvation.

As I close this morning, I want to invite you into a concrete act of trust. Like Loggins who demonstrated the power of naming his fears and like the Psalmist who shows that freedom from those fears is rooted in the trust of God, I invite you this morning to name a fear that you want to release to God. Use the bottom portion of the insert in your worship guide to write it down. And as a sign of giving your fears to God, I invite you to tear that section off and drop it in one of the offering plates as they come around today. And while this act of trust and others like it will need to be followed by future acts of trust, I believe that God will use these acts as God illuminates the goodness of the Lord right where we are. So be strong. And let your heart take courage. The Lord is your light and salvation. Whom shall you fear? Amen.