

## MESSAGE – LIVE LIKE A WARRIOR

I don't usually preach on the Psalms. They are lovely poetry; powerful prayers. They are great for meditation, as they speak to all the yearnings of the human heart – they express great love and joy, as well as fierce anger, despair, and forsakenness. Wherever you find yourself in life, there is a psalm that can help you to reveal and articulate the deep longings within. The psalms are wonderful – truly inspired writings.

And yet in my sermons I tend to shy away from the psalms; I generally focus on the action sequences. Maybe it's easier to preach about Elijah calling down fire on a mountaintop, or Elisha *siccing* a pack of bears on a bunch of no good punk teenagers.

But when I read the psalm for this morning I couldn't turn away.

Kyoungsoo said that this psalm in particular requires a rather mature reader – that we need a somewhat experienced and deep faith to grasp the ideas presented here. I do believe that she is correct, and I also believe that we are up for it. Let's dig in.

But just in case, James writes 'If any of you lack wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and wisdom will be given to you.'

So, 'Lord, give us receptive minds and tender hearts. Let your word take root in us and grow from a humble seed to a mighty tree, that our limbs would provide shelter and our fruit provide food for all those around us. Amen.'

A little context for you; Psalm 27 is thought to be written by David, during the time that he was on the run from Saul. He spent a while on his own; some time pretending he was crazy to avoid identification and persecution, and some time living in caves.

At one point David had a crew of three or four hundred misfits who joined him, but against them was the entire Israelite military. David was hopelessly outnumbered – though not unmatched.

This is what he wrote:

Though an army encamp against me,  
my heart shall not fear;  
though war rise up against me,  
yet will I be confident.

Why? Why should David be confident? He was pursued by an entire nation, led by his former mentor who used to chuck spears at David just for fun.

Did David not think that he was going to die? Even if he were to survive, what kind of life could David expect? Already he had gone from living a life of privilege and influence under Saul's roof to acting like a madman, and now living in a cave.

It brings to mind the descriptions of Osama bin Laden from a few years back. After the twin towers attack bin Laden was one of the most feared men on the planet; the point man for an organization that was a threat to the very existence of the western world.

This great fearsome man was found huddled in a cave in the desert – dusty, hungry, cowering. This would appear to be what David was headed for as well.

Even if he continued to elude Saul, what kind of life could David expect? A life on the run, constantly looking over his shoulder, living as far from civilization as possible, few comforts.

And yet David writes ‘I shall not fear. Yet will I be confident.’

I think there’s some wisdom in what he wrote, especially if we also consider what he didn’t write. David did not write that God would destroy Saul and his armies. David did not write that he would rise to power and vanquish all his enemies. David did not write that he would occupy the palace and lead Israel to a glory and splendour that it had never seen before.

David wrote about his confidence in the face of almost certain destruction.

This brings to mind something Jesus said to his disciples. ‘Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.’ Jesus said this as part of a larger warning that the forces of the world were going to come after them. The disciples, like David, should expect the rulers of the world to set their sights on them, and pursue them.

‘Don’t fear those who kill the body.’ We’re all going to face death. None of us will live forever in this present form – we will die. That is what Ash Wednesday reminds us. We will all die.

Living in fear of death is foolishness. How crazy is it to live our lives trying to avoid something that will eventually take us no matter what we do? What a waste of time and effort. What a waste of life.

Jesus cautioned his disciples about the one who can destroy both soul and body. Who is that? I’ve heard some people say this means God, that we should live in fear of God rather than men, but when I read the bible I don’t get the impression that God wants to destroy. God creates.

The one who would destroy both body and soul is Satan, the deceiver.

God created human beings to live in freedom and confidence. Adam and Eve, walking in the garden naked. They had nothing to hide, nothing to cover up. They had no fear. They spoke with God freely, as their friend and creator.

That all changed after their encounter with Satan. Suddenly we find the two humans hiding, shameful, and fearful. The one who destroys the soul does so by convincing us to give up our birthright as favoured children of God.

A damaged soul lives a demoralized, diminished life marked by fear, insecurity, and impotence.

I suspect most of us have seen the movie Braveheart. The famous quote from that movie is ‘Everyone will die, but very few truly live.’

At the end of the movie the main character was beaten and tortured, but still refused to submit. When he was finally killed, his last act was to cry out ‘Freedom!’

His body was killed. His soul remained strong.

This is a very Christ-like image. Jesus recognized that the state could exercise control over his body; Pilate could have him whipped and killed. But Jesus never bent the knee to worldly power. He refused to submit his soul or his identity.

That is the destruction of our souls – when we bend the knee to any worldly power because of fear. When we let ourselves be controlled or manipulated by any earthly authority that can only exercise power on the bodies that we are going to lose anyway, we have forfeited our very identity and being. A life lived in fear is a tragic thing to behold.

This is not to say that never submit. Far from it. But as free and powerful children of God we submit by choice, not by fear.

Yesterday I officiated a wedding at which the young couple pledged to submit to each other and to God. Not out of fear or compulsion, but out of love.

This follows Jesus' model of submission. Jesus refused to submit to Pilate's threats of force. He refused to serve Pilate and his demands. But Jesus willingly chose to serve God, and all of humanity, because of love.

This is what God created us for. This is why we have free will. God wants us to willingly choose to love and serve – Him and one another. God is not a God of compulsion, God is a God of soft invitation and encouragement. God invites our loyalty, God does not demand it.

This is how you will know if what you are submitting to is worthy. If you bend the knee because of fear – fear of violence, fear of loss, even fear of missed opportunity – then you are surrendering your freedom, and your birthright.

If you bend the knee willingly because of love, compassion, or mercy then you are exercising your freedom and living into your birthright.

David continued to write:

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.

David had the wisdom to realize that as long as he focused on his circumstance – the armies arrayed against him, Saul breathing out murderous threats – he would weaken and eventually give in to despair. The deceiver would win, and David would be destroyed, body and soul.

The same is true for us. The world is against us. Governments, industries, the economy, obnoxious aggressive neighbours, scary young people downtown – all of these seem to have more influence than us. They are a threat to our physical wellbeing. Even if we negotiate through all the dangers around us death will still eventually find us. For all our twisting and turning through life we all have an appointment in Samarra that is unavoidable.

Like David, we need to seek after the house of the Lord, the beauty of the Lord, and to inquire in his temple.

We are already gathered in the house of the Lord – step one is happening.

Now we look for the beauty of the Lord. The beauty of God is demonstrated time after time in the bible. From his first act of creation as an outpouring of love, to seeking out and clothing our first parents when they fell, leading his people to freedom, feeding them, comforting them, washing their feet, even dying for them. The bible is a thousand pages of love story that reveals the beauty of God. And this is only part of the story – each of you will have your own direct experiences of God's beauty.

Thirdly we inquire in God's temple. The temple is the place where Jews gathered to pray and offer sacrifices. So prayer, and our gifts of service to the people in our community and beyond bring us into God's presence. *Ora et labora* – prayer and work – the foundation of the monastic orders for centuries.

When we turn our eyes from the armies arrayed before us and toward the beauty of the Lord, then we discover what David meant when he wrote:

'Now my head is lifted up  
above all my enemies around me.'

Did that mean that David had won and all his enemies were dead? No.

It means that David, though living in a cave, was living with dignity as a free man. He was not dominated or controlled by fear. His body was at risk – as all of ours are at every moment – but his soul was intact.

In his exuberance he wrote that he would see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living. This faith of ours is not about deferred life – what happens after death should not be our primary concern.

Connecting with the presence of the Lord in the land of the living – in this present world, this present life – this is the liberation that Jesus spoke of.

Once we know God in this present life we can be confident that he who loves us now will continue to love us through death and beyond. After all, Jesus passed through death and came back to life to tell us about it. He who began a good work in you will surely see it through to completion.

I am not discounting or diminishing the life to come, but let's not worry unduly about it. That's fear at work. Seek to know God now, and rest confident that the constant, faithful God is in charge.

The message of Psalm 27 as I understand it is that though the forces of the world will be arrayed against us, our heads are lifted up. We will all still have to pass through death, but we won't do so without first living fully – abundantly - in this present life.

Wait for the Lord;  
be strong, and let your heart take courage;  
wait for the Lord.

I speak to you this morning in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Amen.