

## Psalm 27 - My light and My Salvation

Today's psalm is a psalm of trust. Similar to psalms of lament like the one heard last week, psalms of trust are prayed from a situation of severe crisis. What this psalm calls the time when "evil people come to devour me", another psalm calls the times when "the oceans roar and foam" and "the mountains tremble". These psalms state very clearly that life in God's creation isn't safe, there are clear and present dangers.

The major difference between the prayers for help (laments) and psalms of trust is the dominant mood. Both types of psalms depend on God. Both at least imply a request for help. And both types include expressions of trust. But whereas the prayers for help or laments strike the dominant note of fear and desperation, the prayers of trust hit the chord of trust and confidence.

Psalms of lament can be seen as prayers of those who are younger, less experienced with life, who are going through their first times of crisis, while psalms of trust are the words of those who aren't being thrown from a bull for the first time. They've been thrown before, had the floor fall out from beneath them. And even though the crisis is horrible, on the basis of past experience, they trust that a brighter tomorrow will soon dawn.

Psalms of trust are perfectly clear on how dangerous and deadly life can be. But they are also words of trust from those who have been there before, who've had the bottom drop out, but who "cried to the Lord" and were saved.

*"The Lord is my light and my salvation, so why should I be afraid?"*

*"The Lord is my fortress, protecting me from danger, so why should I*

*tremble?”*

This is not a general statement about the nature of God, but a strong declaration of a very personal relationship. As Martin Luther insisted, theologizing about who or what God is will not sustain the heart in times of trouble. It is the confession that this God is “for me”, the stronghold of my life, that is crucial.

The boldness of the initial exultant cry of the opening verses, is followed by declarations of certain victory. Enemies will be over thrown; fear will be vanquished, “... *though wars rise up against me, yet I will be confident.*” If God is for me, who shall be against me?

Then the psalmist’s tone shifts. Rather than confidently toughing it out in the midst of his foes, he seeks safety in the house of the Lord. Rescued from the dangers surrounding him, he is placed securely out of their reach (“*in his sanctuary on a high rock*”) to dwell in the house of the Lord.

He will behold the beauty of the Lord, joyfully offer sacrifices, and fill God’s house with song. Here, God is unambiguously “for me”, and the psalmist is wholly devoted to God. Nothing comes between them, no distractions of the world, no assaults of the enemy, no uncertainty of God’s intent.

With “*Do not turn your back on me*”, the tone once again shifts. Having just talked of making melody to the Lord, the psalmist breaks out with an anxious cry. His desperation ratches up: “*Do not reject your servant in anger. You have always been my helper.*” Prayer to this God is a complex conversation. The psalmist now faces a different adversary, the former helper who would not abandon him to his misfortunes in the world.

Yet, even as he pleads, he offers a challenge to his God. Remember who you are, you who have been my help, you who are my salvation. The psalmist concludes not with another plea, but with pronouncement, perhaps even a challenge: *“Even if my father and mother abandon me, the Lord will hold me close.”* To take a child in your arms and raise him up is to claim that child as your own before the world. Whatever damage one’s adversaries inflict, they cannot destroy this act of divine adoption. God is not only my light and my salvation, God is the parent who remains faithful, always. Trust in God is echoed in Matthew’s Gospel: *“Seek the Kingdom of God above all else, and live righteously, and he will give you everything you need.”*

Again the psalmist implores God’s protection from his enemies and then concludes with a strong confession (*“Yet I am confident I will see the Lord’s goodness while I am here in the land of the living.”*) and with words of encouragement for his hearers (*“Wait patiently for the Lord. Be brave and courageous. Yes, wait patiently for the Lord.”*) He shares with his community what he has learned from his own passage through the valley of the shadow of death.

So the psalm begins and ends with proclamations of trust, which serve to reassure us as to who God is for us, and to remind God of who God is for God’s self. Luther wrote that if God came to his doorstep tomorrow and announced that on second thought he was not going to save him, he would respond, “Too late, I have your promise.” Not exactly a humble reply but an appropriate one in the circumstances, for this God has taken us up.

In his description of Eden, Luther emphasized that it was a place where there was no fear – no fear of dying, no fear of other living beings, no fear of nature. It’s a wonderful vision, for we live in a world filled with

fear. However, there is a bold word to throw in fear's face – and in God's. *"I believe that I shall see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living!"*

For the ancients, there were only two kinds of light: the sun and the lamp. The sun: brilliant, unable to be stared at, and like God, the sun gives light, warmth, and life, and highlights beauty. No wonder pagans worshipped the sun. God's first concoction, and God's most primal gift to us, is light. On Day one, "God said, 'Let there be light,'" John's gospel echoes, *"God is light, and in him is no darkness at all."*

We're not much afraid of the light, but we do fear the dark and many other things. The antidote to fear, in our culture is security, locks, and guns. But, in God's kingdom, the fix for fear is this Lord who is our light.

When it got dark in biblical times, they lit lamps, not today's brilliant LED lanterns, but simple pottery lamps, with a single wick and flame, casting just enough light to see a short distance ahead. If we follow God's will, we do not know what the road will look like in a few miles or years. God gives us just a pottery lamp's worth of light, just enough to take a few more steps. With only the pottery lamp's light, God has to be trusted.

*"The Lord is my light .... so why should I be afraid?"* We fear the future, but with God as our light, that small flicker banishes the darkness; we are not alone. *"The one thing I ask of the Lord, the thing I seek most, is to live in the house of the Lord all the days of my life"*, is one of the Bible's most eloquent, emotionally powerful, visionary verses.

We ask a great many things of God, of ourselves, of others, and of life. But really, there is just "one thing" that finally matters, and to garner everything else but miss out on the one good thing would be tragic.

The world tells us to cram, to wrap our arms around as many things as possible. In trying to grab it all, we miss it all. What if you could focus, and be satisfied with just one thing? There is only one thing that is enough. The Psalmist speaks of it as “dwelling in the house of the Lord all my days”, that is, to be near God, even to be someone who worships God, not just on Sundays, but constantly, all day, every day.

The early Celtic people who lived in the British Isles believed that you could go to certain place to be close to God. These places were called “*thin places*”. Thin places are geographical locations scattered throughout Ireland and Scotland where a person experiences only a very thin divide between the past, present, and future.

This Celtic sense of place designated significant natural locations as “holy trees, holy mountains, holy wells”. They were fascinated by shorelines where water met the land, by fjords and rivers, by wells where water bubbled up from deep below, by doorways which were the meeting places, from the outside and inside. These places spoke of the meeting of transitions from one state to another, “where the veil between this world and the next is so sheer you can almost step through”.

When Christianity spread into the British Isles, the Celtic Christians preserved aspects of this ancient folklore for revering thin places. They broadened the understanding to encompass not only geographical places, but also moments when the holy became visible to the eyes of human spirit. Thin places, took on Christian meaning, where one was somehow able to encounter a more ancient and eternal reality within the present time.

Many of you have a particular place that is holy to you in a similar way: a beach you’ve walked countless times where water rolls onto the sand

in a familiar way, a place of reunion where God seems always close by and all is right with the world, a mountain vista that has taken you close to the stars and seemingly closer to God, a home church or family cemetery, or even your own yard and garden. Do you have a place where you can go and feel especially close to God? Or perhaps you can recall a place in time which you can remember and re-visit as a source of spiritual awakening, where you felt particularly connected to God.

What is significant about sacred places turns out to not be the places themselves. Their power lies within their role in summoning our inner resources and binding us to our beliefs. While places can bind us to our beliefs, so can memory, a piece of music, a special story, a word spoken at just the right time. If we think about it, most of us have experienced a “thin place” in which we can remember God seeming very close and very real.

These are passages of scripture that are particularly helpful in carrying us to a special place with God in our time. The words and images of this psalm lead us to such a place, a kind of thin place where human and divine meet in a beautiful closeness.

This psalm is a meeting place for a very close relationship! It starts with a statement of confidence and trust in God, who inspired this confidence by acts of faithfulness in the past, and therefore may be depended upon to relate to us in a similar manner in the future. This sense of dependence is boldly declared with the metaphor of God as “my light”, which is seconded by that of God as “my salvation”. Nowhere else in the Old Testament is God referred as “my light”. The effect of the language here is to convey a relationship with God that is intimately familiar. This psalm brings God very near.

With a willingness to call upon God as “light” and “salvation”, the psalmist also admits a very human need for help in times of despair and anxiety. One biblical scholar noted that the “book of Psalms is one of the most important books in the Hebrew Bible because of its exquisite ability to seize human experience like a harp and strum on every one of its strings”.

This psalm is a thin place for meeting God where, as in our everyday lives, the strings of our experience strum both the soft notes of gratitude and trust, and the shrill ones of anguish and despair. With low notes and high notes, the psalm invokes an intimate relationship with God.

We often ask one another, or our children, how was your day? It is a kind of question that usually comes from someone who really cares but is often met with a vague response like, “Not bad”, or “OK”. Most days we probably forget to notice.

I read a story about a mother who has a rather different way of asking that question. As she tucks her children into bed each night, she asks them: “Where did you meet God today?” And one by one they tell her: a teacher helped me, there was a homeless person in the park, I saw a tree with lots of flowers on it. And she tells them where she met God. As the children go to sleep, the stuff of their day has become the substance of prayer. They enter a thin place and the presence of God is very near.

This story reminds us, and the writer of the psalm knows very well, that to seek and find thin places where we feel close to God, requires practice. It requires a disciplined rhythm to discover that the places to encounter the very presence of God are all around us. They wait to be discovered. You find them down the halls of schools and hospitals, in places at work and the familiarity of home, places where it becomes

clear that God is very near.

Today's psalm invites us to pray, to meditate on its metaphors and meaning – that we may come very close to God and discover: *“The Lord is my light and my salvation, so why should I be afraid? The Lord is my fortress, protecting me from danger, so why should I tremble? We shall see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living.”* This is a thin place. This is a word we can trust.

**Amen.**



## PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE - AUGUST 20, 2023

Loving God, we are not altogether convinced that darkness is a thing of the past. Many people in this world of ours feel their world is one of darkness and gloom. Pressures crowd in upon us and get us down; bereavement, illness, money, worries about family, trouble at work or not having work, drugs, alcohol, boredom, doubt, weariness, and futility.

Caring God, we find that world issues overwhelm us: war, poverty, climate change, disease, unfair trade and so on. It does not help when we feel that as Christians we should be doing so much better than we are. Gracious and loving God, we rejoice that you are with us in our troubles, you know us and you love us – always.

Even though we have made a mess of things, you remain faithful. We rejoice that your Son came not to a perfect world, but to a broken world, our world; to bring light to the darkness, our darkness. We pray for our dark and dreary world, a world in need – in need not just of a technical fix, but in need of love and grace, forgiveness and new life, hope, peace and fellowship, in need of renewal, in need of your presence.

We pray for our bishops, pastors, deacons, teachers, and lay leaders. Inspire them to help guide us to your light. We pray for the millions who have been displaced by war, conflict, violence or persecution, the biggest global refugee population since the year World War II ended. Inspire us to reach out, support and care for refugees living in darkness.

We pray for all who suffer: physically, mentally, or emotionally; those undergoing medical treatments, are hospitalized, undergoing therapies, or healing from substance abuse. We pray for the lonely, the homeless, the abused, the abandoned, the unemployed, those facing discrimination based on gender, sexual orientation, culture, disability, or physical appearance.

We pray for all the lands that are damaged by fires. Protect those who have to evacuate, or have lost their homes; encourage others to invite them into their home; protect firefighters, paramedics, and all people who work for emergency services. We pray for shelter, for those who support others with courage and empathy, and for strength and new hope for all

in need. We pray for rain and relief in this difficult time.

We pray that you would come alongside us and all those for whom we pray, that you would show us Jesus, the light of the world, the one who came (and who comes) to rid us of sin, to give us life and health and peace, peace that passes all understanding – not a temporary respite from trouble but the strength to overcome it and ultimately to receive life eternal.

We pray for those in darkness (of whatever kind) – let us pray that they may see and know the light of Christ. The Lord is my light and my salvation. Hear our prayers, Lord, spoken and unspoken and answer them for Jesus' sake.

**Amen**