

Sermon: In the Land of the Living

New North Church, Hingham

Rev. Steven Aucella

17 March 2019

Based on **Psalm 27; Luke 13:31-35**

The Bible is endlessly fascinating to me, and every week it gives us something new to think about. And while the world of the Bible is far from us historically, it still speaks to us today as God's word, always relevant and full of hope.

Having said that, when we read (or hear) Psalm 27, and what we heard was the whole psalm, we're hearing a fairly modern prayer to God. The first half proclaims the psalmist's confidence in God's protection, but the second half is a lament about God's (apparently) hidden presence.

The psalmist reminds us that we ought not to be bashful in how we approach our prayers and conversations with God. Listen to verse four again:

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.

So, 'one thing' is really three things. Which is fine, because God needs to know!

Also, in verse seven, 'Hear, O Lord, *when I cry aloud*, be gracious to me and answer me!' The psalmist isn't asking. He wants God's grace and he wants an answer. However, as we learned in the Book of Job, he'd best be prepared for God's response.

Then the psalmist's *heart* says, 'Seek God's face.' This is what we all yearn for. 'I believe that I shall see the goodness of the Lord *in the land of the living*' – in the here and now. 'Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage.'

The psalmist shows a fearlessness regarding a world that seems arrayed against him. 'Though an *army* encamp against me, my heart shall not fear; though *war* rise up against me, yet I will be confident.' We don't usually have to worry about actual armies encamped around us, or about war breaking out in our backyards, but we do have our own private concerns, concerns that are very real and dangerous to us. The psalmist's fearlessness also connects to the fearlessness – or perhaps it's bravado – shown by Jesus.

The way the reading from Luke starts out, and me being me, I had to know what happened earlier in that hour, so I looked it up. Jesus had just finished describing what the kingdom of God was like. Using parables, he said it's like yeast mixed in with flour, or like a mustard seed sown in a garden where it will grow into a huge tree. Then, answering a question about who would be saved in this new kingdom, Jesus closed his remarks by saying, 'Indeed, some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last.'

Then some Pharisees came to warn him about Herod, proving in the process that not all Pharisees were against him.

Sometimes, I think we have this image of Jesus being a mellow, easy-going hipster rabbi, but every now and then he gets our attention with sharp language. 'Get thee behind me, Satan,' he once said to Peter (Matthew 16:23, Mark 8:33). 'Let the dead bury the dead' (Matthew 8:22), he told a would-be follower. And then there was the time he said, 'Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword' (Matthew 10:34). Far from being laid-back, Jesus was a provocative fellow.

Which helps explain why he said to the Pharisees, after they were kind enough to tell him that Herod wanted to kill him, 'Go and tell *that fox* for me,' that I'll be here for three days and then I'm leaving for Jerusalem. For context, calling someone a fox in that time and place was an insult. Jesus isn't being folksy here; he's poking the bear. More precisely, he's challenging Herod, who was king in name only; Herod had no power over Jesus, either psychologically or politically. This is a case of the hen facing down the fox.

And then Jesus laments for those who would do him harm, for those who want no part of God's kingdom. Remember, Jesus had just said the first will be last. This is not good news to Herod, and maybe not to the Pharisees either. Jerusalem, supposedly the center of worship of God, was filled with people who would rather do business with Rome than repent. And it would be Rome that ultimately destroyed the Temple which was supposed to be protected by the people, so Jesus was right to lament for the city.

We have come to lament for the people of Christchurch, New Zealand, where forty-nine people were killed and another forty-eight wounded in shootings at two mosques on Friday.

Last October, we lamented a shooting at the Tree of Life Congregation in Pittsburgh, where eleven people died and another six were wounded.

We have witnessed many such attacks in recent years. A shooting occurs and we lament. It's a very human response to tragedy. We ask, how can we make sense of it? Who could possibly do such a thing? We must hunt down those responsible and bring them to justice. While it's almost impossible to comprehend the hate and anger contained within the people who perpetrate these crimes, we want to get even.

Then we comfort the grieving and get back to work.

The world is a messed-up place. Perhaps we really are surrounded by hostile armies; maybe there *is* a war rising up against us and we just don't know it. Many people seem only to know how to breathe out violence. Our lament ought to be for them.

Lent is not just about us journeying with Jesus to the cross; it's also a personal journey to our inward selves. More than once, I've called out to God; 'Lord, get me out of this; help me now and I'll change my ways' is usually how it goes. Each time, I had to ask myself which of my 'ways' needed changing now. The reality is, change is a life-long process and I'm usually unaware that I've changed in any way at all.

My continued presence among the living is proof enough for me that God hears our prayers. But the psalmist presents a dilemma, saying, *seek after* God actively; *trust* in God; *wait* for the Lord! But sometimes, we need God in our lives *right now*, no waiting. Even people like Mother Theresa have dark times, but they persist in their faith. They know that God really is our only hope, yet God's presence might not always be obvious. They also know that what can be seen on earth points to the presence of a hidden God.¹

Yesterday, a small group of people, mostly strangers to each other, got together to do a little work at a construction site in Duxbury to help build affordable housing for low- and middle-income families, and perhaps a few veterans.

Jesus knew who and what was working against him. He knew what awaited him in Jerusalem. But the fox does not control the hen house. Jesus made a point of telling Herod and the Pharisees that he was going to continue doing his work and that his work was more important, more lasting, and more needed than anything they could ever do.

Amen.

¹ Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, trans. Martin Turnell (New York: Harper & Bros., 1962), 234.