

St John United Church of Christ
Rev. Barbara Lohrbach
March 4, 2007

Psalm 27

“Whom shall I fear?”

Fear is a very potent emotion. Since September 11, 2001 every aspect of our lives seems polluted by fear. The reality is that fear has been part of the human experience forever. In the story of Adam and Eve, they are afraid when they hear God in the garden after they eat of the tree of life. Fear is a human response to danger, to the unknown, and to the guilt we feel when we've been “caught.” Fear is not wrong in and of itself. In fact, fear is a great motivator to be careful. Obsessive fear, on the other hand, can leave us unable to cope with the world around us.

Fear plays upon our natural feelings of vulnerability and turns them into expectations that we will never be safe, especially in the light of terrorism. Those fears also play upon our ability to trust those around us...the teacher or minister who works with our children and who might be a pedophile, the homeless person wandering the streets, the person who looks like a terrorist, the person of color who represents the stereotypes of who is most likely to be a criminal.

Fear is a natural response when we find a lump somewhere on our body or experience another change in our bodies, like a sudden weight loss. Fear is a natural response when the severe storm alert becomes a siren in the night. Fear is a natural response when we hear that there has been a car accident. Fear is a motivator that keeps us from driving while under the influence and fastening the seat belt in automobiles.

We all know about fear. We know about the confidence that the psalmist has in God. We all move between confidence in that God and the fear that comes from living. Four-year-old Sasha awoke one night frightened, convinced that in the darkness around her were all kinds of spooks and monsters. Alone, she ran to her parents' bedroom. Her mother calmed her down and led her back to her room, where she turned on a light. Reassuring Sasha that no monsters were present, mother said, “You don't have to be afraid...you are not alone. God is in the room with you.” Sasha replied, “I know that God is here, but I need someone in this room with some skin!”

Like a four year old afraid of the dark, we know there are no monsters in our room during the day but we can't live with that assurance at night. We need the continual reassurance of a parent to see us through till dawn. The psalmist, like most of us, moves back and forth between fear and faith. Persons of faith will experience fear

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and doubt but they won't stay there. Like the psalmist, they know they will see the goodness of the Lord in the Land of the living

“The Lord is my light and my salvation. Whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?” The focus of the writer is on whom we fear. Whom shall I fear? In our world—it depends upon to whom you are listening.

The world of the ancient psalmist had no Department of Homeland Security. Security was only in the hands of the ones who had the brute force power at any given time. And security for women and children was not even on the radar screen. Laws, courts, and justice were more dependent on the mood of the one holding power. In our “civilized” world, we have learned that laws and courts and departments of justice cannot guarantee security in world where anger, hatred and distrust still have sway over individuals and communities.

I grew up in the sixties and seventies when people say life was simpler and more secure. If that is true, then why do I remember the fear of not having a bomb shelter when the Soviet Union could wipe out the United States with a nuclear bomb? Disaster drills during the Cuban missile crisis were more common than tornado drills. I grew up in a community that was all white and I heard the grown-ups talk about the colored and integration and it all sounded frightening to my ears. I grew up with the assassination of a president and in the era of Vietnam and I knew about the evil that human beings could do to one another. No...life is not now nor has it ever been secure in the way we want it to be.

In David Richo's book, *The Five Things We Cannot Change... and the Happiness We Find by Embracing Them*, he lists these 5 things:

- Everything changes and ends.
- Things do not always go according to plan.
- Life is not fair.
- Pain is part of life.
- People are not loving and loyal all the time.

It seems that David Richo must have been reading Psalm 27 when he crafted this list. “Though an army encamp against me, my heart shall not fear; though war rise up against me, yet I will be confident. If my father and mother forsake me, the Lord will take me up.” Richo goes on to write these words:

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When we are sure we can't get through another minute and we do, that is the grace of the Creator life in us. When we are sure we can't find the light and we do, that is the grace of the Light of the World in us. When we are sure that we can't take one more breath and we do, that is the grace of the Spirit breathing through us.

“I believe that I shall see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living. Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the Lord.” This is the final declaration of the psalmist who believes with confidence and trust that God will bring us through all the insecurity—not without changes and pain and human failure, but in spite of all that.

The psalmist does not speak about what we fear, but about whom we fear...the adversaries, the enemies, the armies, the false witnesses breathing out violence, and even father and mother. We fear each other. We fear the stranger. We fear those we've been told to be afraid of. We fear the one who is different from us.

As parents we often fear the reactions of others to our children. When they are little, we fear that they will make too much noise or bother someone. When they become adolescents we fear that how they dress will make us look like bad parents. Truth is our parents went through those same fears. I remember when I was a teenager...miniskirts for the girls and long hair for the guys were in. Then hippies and the flower child scene. Now it's something else.

Our son David's favorite color was black. His clothes were mainly black and he wore the big wide leg pants with lots of metal studs and all. He had the big chains and collars that looked like dog collars. And he'd die his hair—blood red, very black, teal (not all at the same time). One of the grandmothers at church pulled me aside one day and said, “Now Barbara—remember that this is how David needs to express himself. He's searching for his identity, and it cannot look like you. And remember that it's only hair and clothes and that he's still coming to church. So pick your battles carefully.” And then she told me about her grown son, whose father had a fit when the son's hair was shoulder length in high school. She said, “I told my husband...it's just hair. Let him have it while he still can.” And then we laughed—her husband's head was as bald as a bowling ball.

Unknown to me until later on was the kindness of one of the men in the church to David during those teenage years of finding oneself. When this man died of cancer, David was greatly saddened. I didn't know the connection and asked why.

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David told me that Jerry was the one grown-up who would come and talk to him during coffee hour. Didn't matter how weird David looked, Jerry would come over and ask him how school was going and talk about lots of things, but never...never how David looked. He was one of the reasons David kept coming to church.

“Whom shall I fear?” It doesn't have to be anyone...for deep inside of each of us is the mark of God. We should be cautious and careful, but we do not have to walk in fear. Yes, we look different, we speak different, we eat different foods, we come from different places and cultures...but we laugh, we cry, we hurt, we hurt others, we recover, we experience grace and we all bleed red. When you are afraid, let your heart take courage. In the words of Ann Lamott, “Courage is fear that has said its prayers.”

One final quote from *“The Optimism of Uncertainty”* by Howard Zinn, author of *A People's History of the United States*.

“To be hopeful in bad times is not just foolishly romantic. It is based on the fact that human history is a history not only of cruelty, but also of compassion, sacrifice, courage, kindness. What we choose to emphasize in this complex history will determine our lives. If we see only the worst, it destroys our capacity to do something. If we remember those times and places — and there are so many — where people have behaved magnificently, this gives us the energy to act, and at least the possibility of sending this spinning top of a world in a different direction. And if we do act, in however small a way, we don't have to wait for some grand utopian future. The future is an infinite succession of presents, and to live now as we think human beings should live, in defiance of all that is bad around us, is itself a marvelous victory.”

Let your heart take courage.