

For discussion: Where do you see the goodness of God at work in the world?
In your life?

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?

These words begin one of the most beautiful psalms in the Hebrew scripture
A prayer which expresses deep faith and trust in God,
even in the midst of threat, struggle, and fear.

A prayer which models bringing our fear and longing for help to God,
while at the same time modeling trust and hope and courage
in God's abiding presence.

Madeleine L'Engle, one of my favorite authors and a woman of deep faith, once wrote,
"It's a good thing to have all the props pulled out from under us occasionally. It
gives us some sense of what is rock under our feet, and what is sand."

Reading Psalm 27, one gets the sense of a person of faith
who is experiencing such a time of trial in their lives,
and discovering that what is rock under their feet is God.

In this year when we are reading the gospel of John, we also find in this psalm
echoes of the themes that fill John's gospel –
themes of light and salvation,
eternal life and abiding in God here in this world.

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 very first words of the psalm introduce both faith and fear.

The Lord is known to be both light and stronghold;
yet the sense of fear is also very real.

The psalmist describes the sense of being surrounded,
being devoured by evil-doers.

Enemies have given false witness against them,
and threatened them with violence.

We, too, know what it means to face times of fear and challenge.
We know what it means to fear for our own and our family's security
in an increasingly uncertain world.
We fear for the future of the earth and the sustainability of human communities.
We fear for the safety of our neighbors, for our own safety,
for the way of life we cherish.
We fear for our health and the health and wholeness of the people we love.

Perhaps we can learn from Psalm 27 what it looks like to live in faith
in the midst of our fears.

*One thing I asked of the Lord; this I seek:
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.*

The psalmist names the highest good in their life, the one thing they seek,
as dwelling with God, and seeking God's face.
This immediately reminds me of one of John's favorite word and themes –
to abide.
What the psalmist is asking is to abide – to remain, to rest –
in the presence of God all the days of their life.
In the midst of their fear and struggle, they know that what they most need
is the experience of God's presence with them.
The act of prayer itself – the act of bringing both fears and hopes to God –
is itself a form of abiding, of choosing to dwell in God's presence.

"Come," my heart says, "seek his face!"

Your face, Lord, do I seek.

Do not hide your face from me.

Teach me your way, O Lord, and lead me on a level path

The one who prays this psalm knows that abiding in God doesn't mean
simply gazing at God forever.

The relationship with God, the blessing of God,
is meant to lead to a certain way of life.

If we know that God is our light – that Christ is the light of the world –
we also know that we are meant to reflect that light in the world.

To seek the face of God, who became human to dwell among us,
means also to see the face of God in our neighbors.

To deepen in our life of faith, to dwell completely in God,
also turns us constantly outward in love for the world.

And when we look with eyes of faith, we see that God is present in the world around us
– in people and in creation, in acts of love and moments of beauty.

And we can say, with the psalmist,

I believe that I shall see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living.

A few weeks ago, Bishop Meghan Johnston Aelabouni spoke at the Lutheran Advocacy Ministry Luncheon.

She talked about what it means to see God at work among us,

and what it means to be God's people who gather as God's church.

I'm going to read a section of her address,

and we'll hear more of her words later at the annual meeting.

Where is the church? In many ways this is THE question for these times and for these places—and, in fact, for all times and all places. There are many possible answers. Some say the church is too quiet, trying to find common ground, not risking losing members. Some say the church is on the streets of Minneapolis (and Santa Fe, and Albuquerque, and Las Cruces, and and and) singing and praying and then going out to nonviolently put their bodies on the line for justice. Some say the church is in the legislature, advocating for just policies for all neighbors! And some say the church is bringing groceries to neighbors too frightened to leave their homes, carrying on the work of accompanying the vulnerable without drawing attention that would put neighbors at risk. Some say the church is more divided than ever: some Christians see what is happening as evil and some as justice. Some say the church is more united than ever, denominations finding common ground in the biblical call to welcome the stranger and care for the neighbor. Some ask: who do we say the church is? Is it just bishops, pastors, priests and deacons? Isn't it all of us? Aren't we really asking, where am I? Some say the question goes deeper—that when we ask, where is the church, we are asking: where is God in all of this?

And some say: we can say a lot of things about where the church is or isn't, where it should or shouldn't be. But what's not in question is: where is Jesus? Where does Jesus take his position? Where do we find him? Martin Luther would say: we find him in the places of the cross—in the midst of the suffering, the oppressed, the persecuted; in solidarity and in love for those the world dehumanizes, demeans, and dismisses. Jesus once summed up the whole of God's instructions for humanity in two parts: love God with your whole self; and love your neighbor as yourself.

When we look with eyes of faith, we can see God in the land of the living.
We see the goodness of God in neighbor serving neighbor,
 in communities gathered in song and prayer.
As we gather for an Annual Meeting today,
 we recognize the goodness of God among us in this community of faith.
God is present in all the ways we work to serve and love the world around us.
God is present in our gathering for worship and song and study.
God is present when we welcome strangers,
 and when we share stories of our own experience to lift each other up.

We see and know the goodness of God in our community and in our lives,
 and so we hear the final exhortation of the psalm:
Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the Lord!

To wait for the Lord means to trust in God –
 to trust that God is present, even when we can't see it;
to trust that, when we wait in hope, we will know the presence and goodness of God.
It is to be invited into eternal life – the abundance of life lived in God's presence
 which begins now and lasts forever.
To wait for the Lord is to welcome courage and hope,
 and carry it into the world as God's people.
Be strong, my friends. Let your hearts take courage.
Wait for the Lord, who is our light and our stronghold and our hope.

Thanks be to God. Amen.