

“Here and Now”

Psalm 27

Ten Vital Verses—Verse #2

Sunday, July 2, 2017

Covenant Presbyterian Church

As Presbyterians we do not take the Bible literally, but we take it seriously. Written by humans who were inspired by God, the Bible is where we look for God to guide us, comfort us, and challenge us in our calling to be Christians.

Over the summer, we’re going to look at Ten Vital Verses—ten selections from the Bible which are considered vital to whoever is offering the sermon that particular day. Last week we began with Galatians 5:22-23.

By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Those of you here last week got a small card, with the invitation to write that vital verse or any Biblical verse on your card.

The first three Vital Verses are on page 3 of insert.

We have extra cards here today.

Today we turn to the book of Psalms for our Vital Verse.

John Calvin, one of the theological pillars of the Presbyterian church, believed that the Psalms could and should be used for prayer. He encouraged people to read and study a psalm over the course of several days, listening for what God might teach and making the psalm into a prayer.

Our Psalm for today, Psalm 27 is a good one for such prayer. Another good one is Psalm number 1, which we read last Sunday.

If by chance you are looking for a new way of connecting with God, I encourage you to pick a psalm and read it every day for a week or two, study it a bit, and make it your prayer.

Psalm 27 reflects a range of emotion and engagement. Like many psalms, sometimes it is written about God, in the third person, as an affirmation; and sometimes it is written in the second person, speaking directly to God. And in

our psalm today, the final verse is like an exhortation to a congregation, suggesting that this psalm could have been used in a worship setting.

You've already heard from the beginning of the psalm, how the writer is aware of danger, and is both calling out for help and affirming God's abiding presence.

Psalm 27 echoes one of the most consistent message in scripture: Do not be afraid. Note that the message is not: "There is nothing to be afraid of." Hardly. The psalmist recognizes that life is scary and challenging.

The encouragement is to not be afraid, a message that runs throughout the Bible. Indeed, one pastor I know says that "do not be afraid" appears 365 times in the Bible—one for every day of the year. If that's true, we'll need to be extra careful on Leap Year, on February 29.)

Our section reading includes the final four verses of Psalm 27. After the acknowledgement of the chaos and danger of the world, after the prayer for courage to not be afraid, after the affirmation that God is our light and our salvation and our stronghold the psalm closes with

- a prayer for guidance,
- an affirmation of hope,
- and an offer of encouragement to any who would listen.

Listen for God's word

Teach me your way, O Lord,
and lead me on a level path
because of my enemies.

Do not give me up to the will of my adversaries,
for false witnesses have risen against me,
and they are breathing out violence.

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!

Today I want to clarify a common misunderstanding about Christianity. Being a Christian is not primarily about getting into heaven after we die. Too many people see the Christian faith as the effort to get a ticket to eternity, after life ends here on earth.

While there is ample reason to be hopeful in God's love surrounding us after we die, our life here and now is very important to us, and to God.

Being a Christian is primarily about living with faith, hope, and love for the sake of the Kingdom of God, right here and now.

One way I've seen this misunderstanding of Christianity play out is in the history of Latin America, where wealthy elites, including church leaders, essentially told the poor people to endure their suffering and await a reward in heaven.

While there is very good reason to hope in the future, when this understanding of heavenly hope is used to pacify people trapped in unjust situations of suffering, it is tragic.

Another way I've seen this misunderstanding of Christianity manifest is when someone dies, and well-meaning people of faith tell those who are grieving "Don't cry. Your loved one is in heaven now."

Yes we can affirm that our loved ones are in some of heaven, with the wonderful and mysterious promises in the gospel about the future, but we can still be sad in the here and now, since we miss them.

Life here and now matters very much.

"This is the day the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it!"

Look at Psalm 27.

Even though the psalmist is surrounded by evildoers who seek to devour his flesh, by an army encamped around him, by all sorts of trouble, he is able to affirm: I believe I will see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living.

Jesus made it clear that life here and now matters. According to Mark's gospel, he began his ministry affirming this:

Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

Then he began feeding hungry people, healing sick people, welcoming outcasts with love. He was very focused on the here and now.

And he taught his disciples to pray: thy Kingdom come, thy will be done on earth, as in heaven

I've seen this kind of faith in action in the ministries of this church:

- Building homes
- Feeding hungry people
- Caring for lonely and sad people

I see it in the ways the people of this church live their lives, serving the common good:

- people involved in education, helping students learn to make this world a better place,
- people involved in government, politics, and law,
- people in business, labor, and family life,

People are doing what they can, where they are, making good choices, to make this world a better place.

We do these things because at some level, we believe that we will see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living, and we believe that we are called to do what we can to make God's kingdom of reality.

I want to tell you about one other place where I see God's people doing what they can to make the goodness of the Lord a reality.

South Sudan is one of the most impoverished and struggling places on earth, with famine and warfare tearing the country apart.

For several years, the money you put in the offering plate has been going to support the ministry of Leisa Wagstaff, a PCUSA mission co-worker.

She is working with refugees, internally displaced people.



She is working with education, supporting schools and teachers.



She is training women and girls vital skills and business concepts.



In a recent mission update, she wrote:

Somehow the South Sudanese continue to have hope. It is hard, though, when looking at the harsh realities of their lives within a shattered socio-economic and political setting: no food, water, adequate medical care, crops in the fields, dwellings to call “home,” opportunities to study or generate income, worry-free moments, family structures or communities to lean up-on, or peace. Yet, they persevere and always acknowledge God’s amazing grace and mercy. What a witness to the world!

As July 4th approaches, as we celebrate our country with our lofty goals of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, with the hope of justice for all, we can renew ourselves as Christians, seeking the goodness of God, the kingdom of God, the justice and righteousness for all people, right here and now.

I believe I will see the goodness of God in the land of the living. I see glimpses every day Amen.