

C Lent 2
2013 February 24
Psalm 27
"Wait for the LORD"

I suspect many of you have flown on Southwest airlines at one time or another. Perhaps some of you fly with Southwest all the time. From the very beginning of Southwest's business it has had a somewhat quirky, independent, offbeat persona. It probably comes from the very early years of the outfit, when it successfully defended its right to fly out of Dallas Love Field when all of its competitors had fled that airport for the shiny new Dallas-Fort Worth airport.

In particular, some Southwest flight attendants insist on entertaining their passengers, as well as keeping them safe and providing them with drinks, peanuts, and pretzels. I can remember one flight attendant from many years ago who moseyed up and down the main aisle with a ferret puppet which he could manipulate with his hand. That ferret ended up being stuck right in the face of those passengers unfortunate enough to be in the aisle seats.

I flew Southwest just a few weeks ago and ended up with another entertaining attendant on a flight from Las Vegas to Midland, Texas. Here is a sampling of what we heard over the cabin's intercom system. "Ladies and gentlemen, we know that some of you are very important people, but we don't care. Turn off your cellphones." A little later he said, "If you are traveling with small children, ... we are very sorry." As he was instructing us on the proper use of our seat flotation devices, he said, "In case of a water landing...yeah, right. Like that's going to happen between Las Vegas and Midland." When he was instructing us about using the emergency oxygen supply, he mentioned in the usual way that in case of sudden loss of cabin pressure masks would drop down from the overhead consoles, and we should make sure to put on our own masks before assisting any children with us. Then he said, "If you are traveling with more than one child you might want to assess in advance which one has the most potential." This flight attendant, as it turns out, was Hispanic and had a very slight accent. At the close of his safety instructions, he said, "Ladies and gentlemen, for your convenience and safety we will repeat these instructions in English in just a moment."

It is commonly understood that the life each one of us leads is a journey. Sometimes we can carefully plot the trajectory of that journey, and sometimes the journey goes in places we could never imagine. Disciples of Jesus in particular are on journeys whose ending and whose twists and turns cannot be predicted. To follow Jesus is to be subject to all kinds of detours that we might never have predicted.

Be that as it may, it is simply the human condition that we will find our best-laid schemes altered and thwarted. The writer of Psalm 27 is well aware of that.

The psalm obviously has two very distinct parts, the first six verses which are an ascription of praise and trust, and then verses seven through fourteen which are a lament and prayer of supplication. The psalmist, in one song, ascribes praise to the LORD, and proclaims his trust in the LORD, then prays almost desperately for salvation from that same God. Does that make any sense at all?

In fact, it does. If you ever make a careful study of the Psalms you will find quite a large number that are constructed like Psalm 27, containing statements deep of trust and, at the same time, fervent prayers for salvation. And not salvation in the spiritual sense, but salvation in a very physical sense.

Those of us on the journey with Jesus know what that's like. Sometimes we are able to trust implicitly and explicitly. Sometimes we are sure that the life of faith we have chosen is right, true, and even logical. At other times, doubt sneaks us on us. Sometimes it comes in times of great loss, especially in the face of deep suffering, either our own, or someone dear to us, or perhaps fellow human creatures we don't even know.

What does one really say, of any meaning, to the grieving parents of those twenty children mercilessly killed in Newtown, Connecticut? What does one really say, of any meaning, to those who lost dear ones when the Twin Towers fell? What does one say, of any meaning, to the families of those nearly 230,000 men, women, and children who died following the Indonesian tsunami of December 26, 2004? To the families of the estimated 17 million victims of Nazi mass extermination efforts? To the families of the millions who have lost their lives in battle over the centuries, of all nationalities? To the millions of victims, young and old, of disease and starvation, over many centuries?

So much suffering. The psalmist knows it well. He, in particular, is beset by enemies, some of whom are bearing false witness against him. In those days a false witness could destroy a person's income, security, and family. Perhaps these false witnesses are literal, or perhaps they are symbols of other dire adversities he is facing. What does he pray?

Hear, O Lord, when I cry aloud,
 be gracious to me and answer me!
'Come,' my heart says, 'seek his face!'
Your face, Lord, do I seek.
Do not hide your face from me.

Do not turn your servant away in anger,
 you who have been my help.
Do not cast me off, do not forsake me,
 O God of my salvation!

There are many psalms, or parts of psalms, that share this theme. A prayer of supplication. A prayer for help. Surely those millions who have suffered in years and centuries past, and their families and friends, have prayed prayers like this one.

The psalmist really doesn't offer an answer to the question of why. He simply acknowledges that it is part of the human journey to face trial, illness, grief, and implicitly, death.

However, what the psalmist does do is explicitly remind those who will be singing his song, and reading his words, that the LORD can also be trusted. That, of course, is the other side of the human journey.

He writes,

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?

When evildoers assail me

to devour my flesh—
my adversaries and foes—
they shall stumble and fall.

Though an army encamp against me,
my heart shall not fear;
though war rise up against me,
yet I will be confident.

For he will hide me in his shelter
in the day of trouble;
he will conceal me under the cover of his tent;
he will set me high on a rock.

How can it be that in one and the same psalm the writer can express both innate trust and fearful supplication? He can do that because he has also traveled the human journey, in particular in the company of his own people, the Jews, and in the protection and presence of the one and only living God, the LORD, the God of Israel. So, in this psalm, like so many others there exist side by side fear and hope.

If the psalmist can express doubt and fear, than surely we can as well. If the psalms do not serve to convince us of that, we can always read the Book of Job. One commentator has written this: “Examined doubts refine our understanding and illuminate our experience of God as we filter our beliefs, sifting wishful thinking about the God we want from the challenging wisdom of the God who is.”¹

Ah. Doubt, trial, grief, suffering. At least sometimes these will help turn us away from the God we want to the God who is. There are other scriptural efforts at explanation, as well, but this is enough for today.

This psalm doesn't seem on its surface to have much to do with the Season of Lent, but perhaps at a more profound level it really does. During this season we are to examine ourselves, our own lives, our own journeys. We do not have to look too long before we identify times and places when we experienced doubt, when we wondered if God was really there, and if so, why God didn't do something.

On Thursday nights a group of us are gathering to study four of the great themes of the Bible. Last Thursday we considered the theme of God's relentless presence, God with us, always and in all circumstances. The writer of our study materials asserts that in the first cries of an infant, he or she is really asking, is anyone there? Is anyone there to feed me, to care for me, to shelter me? Is anyone there?

In the same way, this writer claims, when we are able to contemplate the end of our lives, we ask the same question. Is anyone there? Is there anyone there when this life comes to an end, when this body finally gives out. Is anyone there?

1 Lindsay P. Armstrong, *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Volume 2, page 58.

His answer, and the answer given to us in Psalm 27 is: Yes, there is someone there. In the final two verses of the psalm, as in several others like this one, he returns to the promise of hope and indeed, God's presence.

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!

Wait for the LORD. The word in Hebrew means more than passive waiting. It means expectant waiting. The kind of waiting that we do at Advent. In some way, we do the same thing during the Season of Lent. We are waiting. Waiting for what? We don't completely know. We know that we are anticipating the horrible suffering and death of Jesus, Messiah, Son of Man and Son of God. And even though we pass through these forty days every spring, their meaning and significance always remain slightly beyond our grasp.

In our gospel lesson for today, Jesus says that he longs to gather his people and shelter them like a mother hen gathers and shelters her chicks. The psalmist identifies that same innate and irrepressible impulse in the LORD, who hides the writer in his shelter and conceals him under the cover of his tent, who sets him high on a rock.

Such is the length and height and width and depth of the LORD's love for each one of us, and for all of us together, as we travel our Lenten journey in particular spring.

Wait for the Lord;
be strong, and let your heart take courage;
wait for the Lord!