

March 25, 2020

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

I offer these thoughts hoping they will inspire prayer and reflection. Please feel free to forward them to anyone who might find them meaningful.

**Fear, and how we deal with it.**

“Some wandered in desert wastelands, finding no way to a city where they could settle. They were hungry and thirsty, and their lives ebbed away. Then they cried out to the Lord in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress. He led them by a straight way to a city where they could settle. Let them give thanks to the Lord for his unfailing love and his wonderful deeds for mankind, for he satisfies the thirsty and fills the hungry with good things. (Ps. 107: 1, 4-9, NIV)

Psalm 107 is a testament to the dynamic relationship between desperate humanity and our loving, saving God. In four little sections, the psalmist depicts different circumstances in which people were in dire trouble, and then describes their responses to the trouble, and God’s responses to them. Their circumstances were all different; their fear and desperation were the same. The message of the psalm is timeless, and speaks directly to us, today.

The dynamic tension between human fear and God’s loving reaction to it is repeatedly illustrated in the Bible. Fear is a well-documented emotion in the Scriptures; so, also, is God’s admonition not to fear, but to trust in His protecting presence. We see it many times: confronted with danger, the unknown, or the seemingly impossible, people realize their frailty, and are afraid; God assures them of His presence, and tells them not to be afraid—over, and over, and over, from the beginning of the Bible to its dramatic final chapters. Patriarchs, Judges, Prophets, Disciples, Apostles, teachers, shepherds, Mary, Paul, Timothy—all experienced fear, and all were reassured and comforted by the promise of God’s presence and protection.

“After these things the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision, saying, “Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your exceedingly great reward.” (Gen. 15: 1)

“After the death of Moses the servant of the Lord, it came to pass that the Lord spoke to Joshua the son of Nun, Moses’ assistant, saying: Be strong and of good courage... This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate in it day and night... Have I not commanded you? Be strong and of good courage; do not be afraid, nor be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.” (Joshua 1: 1, 7a, 8a, 9,)

“But You are God, Ready to pardon, Gracious and merciful, Slow to anger, Abundant in kindness, And did not forsake them. Even when they made a molded calf for themselves, And said, ‘This is your god That brought you up out of Egypt.’ And worked great provocations, Yet in Your manifold mercies You did not forsake them in the wilderness. ... You also gave Your good Spirit to instruct them, And did not withhold Your manna from their mouth, And gave them water for their thirst.” (Neh. 9: 17b – 19.)

“Do not be afraid, Mary...” (Lk. 1:30)

“And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. And the angel said unto them, “Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people.” (Luke 2: 9-10 KJV)

“For He Himself has said, “I will never leave you nor forsake you.”” (Heb. 13: 5)

“Pray also for me, that whenever I speak, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it fearlessly, as I should. (Eph. 6: 19-20 NIV)

“Do not fear, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.” (Luke 12: 32)

Time and again we are taught that God can accomplish His will through us—no matter how weak or few in number we are—and that we should trust in Him without fear, for He will accomplish our salvation, and has proven Himself trustworthy. You’d think we’d eventually get the message—and, intellectually at least, we do: we know that God is present in the world; that He has guided events in human history; that He was physically present in the world in the Person of Jesus Christ; that He accomplished our salvation on the cross; and that He is present with us today in the Person of the Holy Spirit. Moreover, we know that God continually cares for us; we sing songs about it: “God Will Take Care of You”; “His Eye is on the Sparrow”; “Be Not Afraid”.

“The Lord is my light and my salvation; Whom shall I fear? The Lord is the strength of my life; Of whom shall I be afraid?” (Ps. 27: 1)

“I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills; from whence cometh my help? My help cometh even from the Lord, who hath made heaven and earth.” (Ps 121: 1-2, Coverdale)

“Do not fear, little flock...”

And yet, in the face of this pandemic, we are afraid: we do fear.

Setting aside the interesting question “Why do we fear?”, let us first seek a way to deal with our fear by considering the people in Psalm 107, for, in a very real way, their story is our story; their experience is our experience; their trouble is our trouble; and their fear is ours.

First: “Some wandered in desert wastelands... They were hungry and thirsty.” *We are in a wasteland, a wasteland devoid of social interaction, religious gathering, normalcy, and fellowship. We hunger and thirst for the societal nourishment we took for granted a few short weeks ago; we hunger and thirst for physical safety and peace; we hunger and thirst for reassurance and hope; we hunger and thirst for confidence and joy. **God’s holy word speaks to us, today.***

Second, Third, and Fourth: “Then they cried out to the Lord in their trouble”. They realized and acknowledged both their vulnerability and their inability to save themselves; they believed that God was present with them, and that He would hear their cries. They did not cry out into some sort of universal void; they cried out specifically to a God they knew was near, and would hear; and they acknowledged His presence by crying out to Him. Their very act of crying out was important; God wants us to acknowledge that we need Him and that we are not omnipotent, but that He is. *We need—now, yes, but also always—to acknowledge our dependence on God, for all things necessary for our salvation. We need to call to mind that God is present among us, and that He hears us when we cry out to Him. We need to proclaim these truths by expressing them to God in prayer. **We are dependent on God. God is present among us. God hears us.***

Fifth: “and he delivered them from their distress.” In response to their pleas, our loving God demonstrated—as He so often has—His presence, attentiveness, love, and mercy. This psalm, along with the entire Bible, is a declaration of God’s love, care, and faithfulness. *We need to remember that He has promised to save in the past; He has saved; He does save; He will save, now, on earth, and eternally, in heaven. “Then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken it and performed it,” says the Lord.* (Ez. 37: 14b) **God saves us.**

Sixth: “Let them give thanks to the Lord for his unfailing love and his wonderful deeds for mankind, for he satisfies the thirsty and fills the hungry with good things.” This is true cause for rejoicing! God’s love **is** unfailing, and his deeds for mankind **are** wonderful! The cause for thanksgiving is not merely a one-time completion of wonderful deeds in the past, but His continuing saving activity in the world. The psalmist does not say “for he **satisfied** the thirsty,” but rather “for he **satisfies**”; He satisfies us and fills us, even today, even in our social-distancing, even in our isolation, and even without our Christian gatherings. “Come, all who are thirsty, come to the waters,” (Is. 55:1). *We can rejoice, for when we come to God in prayer—and when we seek Him in His word—He satisfies us with Jesus’ Living Water (Jn 4: 14); He fills us with His love. **God satisfies us. God fills us.***

What “Blessed Assurance” God sends us in His holy word! God wants us to acknowledge our dependence on Him; God invites us to come to Him in our need; God is present with us; God hears us; God loves us; God saves us; God satisfies us; God fills us; God sustains us; Thanks be to God!

*“Do not fear, little flock...”*

What a friend we have in Jesus,  
All our sins and griefs to bear!  
What a privilege to carry  
Everything to God in prayer!  
Oh, what peace we often forfeit,  
Oh, what needless pain we bear,  
All because we do not carry  
Everything to God in prayer! (Joseph M. Scriven, 1855)

Heavenly Father, Blessed are You and Blessed be Your glorious Name! We praise You for revealing Yourself to us in Your holy word, in your glorious creation, in sunshine, rain, spring, and new life, and in the saving care You show for Your world and its people; We thank You for being present among us, Lord, and we thank You for hearing us as we cry out to You in fear, now, during this time of trouble and uncertainty, and always; Guard and protect us and our loved ones, Lord, for we are helpless, and our entire hope is built on Your merciful care; Send Your Holy Spirit upon us to open our ears to Your voice, and our lips to You in prayer; Satisfy us with Your word; Fill us with Your love; and Sustain us with the peace the world cannot give; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Tom Stockton