

Reassuring a Fearful Heart

Two phrases often associated with the life and ministry of Jesus are “Follow me” and “Do not be afraid.” These correlate with two of our basic human needs: the need for connection – with other people and with the divine – and the need for safety.

Fear is vital to our existence. It allows our bodies to avoid or escape danger before our brains process what is happening. We need it to survive. Fear is also an effective tool. Politicians use it to get elected. Businesses use it to sell products and services. Some parents and bosses use it to control children and employees. When fear overwhelms us for extended periods of time, it is detrimental to our mental health.

This is the second of five Sundays during which we’re spending time with the Psalms, exploring how they relate to mental health. Each Sunday I’m talking about an aspect of mental health and suggesting a psalm or two that might address it.

Today we’ll be experiencing Psalms 27 and 29 in word and song. As the service progresses or sometime after the service ends, I invite you to create something in response to what you’re hearing or feeling. If you feel comfortable doing so, I encourage you to share your creations with the rest of the congregation.

Prayer: *May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.*

This morning I begin with a story from the worship resources for Anabaptist World Fellowship Sunday.¹ Each year, Anabaptist-related churches around the world are encouraged to worship around a common theme on a Sunday close to January 21. On that date in 1525, the first Anabaptist baptism took place in Zurich, Switzerland. Anabaptist World Fellowship Sunday provides an opportunity to remember our common roots and celebrate our worldwide koinonia. This story, written by Jeremiah Choi of the Hong Kong Mennonite Church, is titled “Hong Kong Fears for Religious Freedom.”

Mr. Choi writes: *Over the past year, Hong Kong has undergone tremendous political changes. The police crackdowns have been repeated one after another. How should the church manage in these times? How should believers deal with this?*

When I was growing up, I thought that my generation lived in the best times, because we had electronics, computers, microwaves, televisions, fiber optics and space: things that did not exist for the generation before us.

Now, in Hong Kong, we are entering a generation of “unknown”. We don’t know what will happen tomorrow in regard to our relationship with China. How will increased Chinese control of Hong Kong impact the church? The religious system in mainland China is very different from Hong Kong. The impact of the new National Security Law is unknown, with some people thinking it will make Hong Kong and its churches safer, while others are very uneasy. Some worry that this is the end of Hong Kong.

Whatever happens, the church in Hong Kong is facing unstable conditions and civil unrest, with economic downturns, layoffs, corporate failures, etc. – and that is not even including the impact of the pandemic.

Facing the unknowable uncertainty in front of us, we can learn from the Chinese church during the Cultural Revolution in China. The number of Christians in the Chinese church was about 90 000 in 1900, rose to one million in 1949, and then during the very hard years of the Cultural Revolution rose to 10 million by 1996, and 17 million in 2006. Although religion was severely restricted in China through the entire century, Christianity still has vitality and influence in China, in many small, unregistered churches. Unofficial figures estimate that there are more than 40 million Christians in China today.

¹ [awfs_2021_en_fin_0.pdf \(mwc-cmm.org\)](#)

There is hope for Hong Kong churches, even though we may live in the future with much more uncertainty and restrictions on our churches, losing our comfortable freedoms. The church can thrive and grow in spite of many restrictions, as we have seen in China.

Jeremiah Choi's account of the churches in Hong Kong doesn't include personal stories of fear and traumatic stress, but I'm sure there are many he could tell. Although the circumstances and details differ, these stories exist in every community around the world.

Witnessing or experiencing a horrifying event in which your own well-being, or that of another, is threatened can result in traumatic stress.² Traumatic stress arises from a variety of circumstances. It could result from intentional human actions such as sexual or physical abuse, torture, kidnapping, terrorism, assault, death threats, witnessing violence, or even committing violence against another in self-defense. Or it could come from unintentional human actions, including accidents or disasters such as fires, explosions, vehicle accidents, or nuclear accidents. A third source of traumatic stress is natural disasters such as earthquakes, floods and tsunamis, drought and famine, avalanches, tornados, attack by an animal, or even a life-threatening illness such as a heart attack or cancer.

When danger is sensed, the amygdala, an almond-shaped structure in your brain, acts as your alarm system. It floods your body with hormones, putting you in a state of hyper-arousal so you can fight the danger or flee from it. Your heart rate and respiration increase, and blood rushes to your muscles to produce extra strength. Your sight and hearing sharpen. After danger is gone, most bodies and brains return to a state of calm equilibrium. In PTSD, post-traumatic stress disorder, the brain keeps producing stress hormones and acting as though the danger persists long after it's gone.

Many people deny they have PTSD and try to cope with symptoms on their own. They may deny how bad things are so that they can move on. They may try to numb the pain with drugs or alcohol. Or they are too terrified to even think about the past.

The most basic requirement for healing is finding a safe place. Symptoms of PTSD cannot be treated for those who remain in a situation where the trauma is still happening.

Another basic requirement is seeking outside help. Trauma changes the way brains work. Brains are complex; the interrelationship between biological, social, psychological, and spiritual factors means that it is very hard to recover on your own.

Treatment usually focuses on managing symptoms, because they won't go away overnight. Learning ways to identify stress in the body is a common component of PTSD treatment. This may include deep breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, visualization of calming scenes, meditation and prayer.

The 27th psalm could be used as one component of alleviating stress and allaying fear. Of course, reading a psalm doesn't replace medication, therapy, and other forms of treatment for mental illness. But there can be therapeutic value in using these ancient poems to improve mental health.

Psalm 27 is one of the scriptures chosen to be read by Anabaptist-related churches around the world today. Let's hear it from the New Revised Standard Version.

¹ 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?

² When evildoers assail me
to devour my flesh—
my adversaries and foes—
they shall stumble and fall.

² Information about PTSD comes from *Close to Home: Dealing with PTSD*, © 2017 by MennoMedia, [CTH PTSD Handout.pdf](#) (faithandliferesources.org)

³ Though an army encamp against me,
my heart shall not fear;
though war rise up against me,
yet I will be confident.

⁴ One thing I asked of the LORD,
that will I seek after:
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.

⁵ 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.

⁶ Now my head is lifted up
above my enemies all around me,
and I will offer in his tent
sacrifices with shouts of joy;
I will sing and make melody to the LORD.

⁷ Hear, O LORD, when I cry aloud,
be gracious to me and answer me!

⁸ “Come,” my heart says, “seek his face!”
Your face, LORD, do I seek.

⁹ 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!

¹⁰ If my father and mother forsake me,
the LORD will take me up.

¹¹ Teach me your way, O LORD,
and lead me on a level path
because of my enemies.

¹² Do not give me up to the will of my adversaries,
for false witnesses have risen against me,
and they are breathing out violence.

¹³ I believe that I shall see the goodness of the LORD
in the land of the living.

¹⁴ Wait for the LORD;
be strong, and let your heart take courage;
wait for the LORD!

This psalm can be divided into two sections: a confident expression of faith and a cry for help.³ In the first six verses the psalmist expresses trust in the Lord as a refuge and a desire to dwell in God's presence. The writer pictures the enemy as wild, vicious beasts and as a hostile army. Yet in the face of attack, the Lord provides shelter. There is one stronger than the enemy. The psalmist's confidence comes from knowing God, from experience with God.

The writer then expresses singleness of purpose – to be a member of God's household, to live in perpetual communion with God. The psalmist asks for divine guidance, seeking for answers to the difficulty facing them. Three images – shelter, tent, and rock – depict the feeling of security in God's presence where no foe can touch the desperate one. The psalmist will respond with praise, offering sacrifices out of gratitude and telling others what the Lord has done.

But the fear hasn't disappeared entirely. The singer again begs not to be abandoned. There are ten imperatives, ten demands, in verses 7-12: hear, be gracious, answer, do not hide, do not turn, do not cast me off, do not forsake me, teach, lead, do not give me up.

And then, in the final two verses, the psalmist returns to an expression of confidence in God's protection in this life, while pointing toward the hope of the next life. The psalm ends with an exhortation to wait, inviting others to trust through courageous hope in God.

Psalm 27, as a psalm of trust, is designed for tough times. Yet there are mysteries beyond human understanding. When tragedy strikes, people cry out to God. Why us? Why here? Why now? The psalm moves from "Whom shall I fear?" to "Wait for the Lord!"

However, life doesn't move in a straight line from desire to fulfillment. Psalm 27 celebrates human hunger for God amid dangers and delays. It teaches us to honor and nurture our desire for God. It confirms the importance of worship and the foundation on which we as believers build our lives. Use of this psalm can help us identify our fears as well as the source of our strength. It can help us to take courage in the one who is our helper. Our frightened hearts need not have the last word.

Let's hear this psalm again, this time from the New Living Translation. Then we'll sing a song based on the last verse of the psalm.

- ¹ The LORD is my light and my salvation—
so why should I be afraid?
The LORD is my fortress, protecting me from danger,
so why should I tremble?
- ² When evil people come to devour me,
when my enemies and foes attack me,
they will stumble and fall.
- ³ Though a mighty army surrounds me,
my heart will not be afraid.
Even if I am attacked,
I will remain confident.
- ⁴ The one thing I ask of the LORD—
the thing I seek most—
is to live in the house of the LORD all the days of my life,
delighting in the LORD's perfections
and meditating in his Temple.
- ⁵ For he will conceal me there when troubles come;
he will hide me in his sanctuary.
He will place me out of reach on a high rock.

³ Background on Psalm 27 drawn from James Waltner, *Psalms, Believers Church Bible Commentary*, Herald Press, 2006, pp. 146-150.

⁶ Then I will hold my head high
above my enemies who surround me.
At his sanctuary I will offer sacrifices with shouts of joy,
singing and praising the LORD with music.

⁷ Hear me as I pray, O LORD.
Be merciful and answer me!

⁸ My heart has heard you say, “Come and talk with me.”
And my heart responds, “LORD, I am coming.”

⁹ Do not turn your back on me.
Do not reject your servant in anger.
You have always been my helper.
Don’t leave me now; don’t abandon me,
O God of my salvation!

¹⁰ Even if my father and mother abandon me,
the LORD will hold me close.

¹¹ Teach me how to live, O LORD.
Lead me along the right path,
for my enemies are waiting for me.

¹² Do not let me fall into their hands.
For they accuse me of things I’ve never done;
with every breath they threaten me with violence.

¹³ Yet I am confident I will see the LORD’s goodness
while I am here in the land of the living.

¹⁴ Wait patiently for the LORD.
Be brave and courageous.
Yes, wait patiently for the LORD.

This psalm of David shows the value of worship, whether that is individual, or group, in person or online. This psalm reflects the range of emotions that we’re free to share with God and each other in worship: confidence in God’s presence, and fear that God is absent. All are part of worship.

The song “Wait for the Lord” comes from the Taizé community. Taizé music emphasizes simple phrases, usually lines from Psalms or other books of the Bible. These lines are repeated over and over as an aid to meditation and prayer. As you sing “Wait for the Lord” allow the words to sink deep into your soul.

Song: *Wait for the Lord*

Sometimes quiet meditation and relaxation are effective ways to address our fears. At other times, loud, bold statements work best. Let’s listen to the confident words of Psalm 29⁴ and then sing a song of defiance against the storms of life.

¹ Ascribe to the LORD, O heavenly beings,
ascribe to the LORD glory and strength.

² Ascribe to the LORD the glory of his name;
worship the LORD in holy splendor.

⁴ Psalm 29, *New Revised Standard Version*

- ³The voice of the LORD is over the waters;
the God of glory thunders,
the LORD, over mighty waters.
- ⁴The voice of the LORD is powerful;
the voice of the LORD is full of majesty.
- ⁵The voice of the LORD breaks the cedars;
the LORD breaks the cedars of Lebanon.
- ⁶He makes Lebanon skip like a calf,
and Sirion like a young wild ox.
- ⁷The voice of the LORD flashes forth flames of fire.
- ⁸The voice of the LORD shakes the wilderness;
the LORD shakes the wilderness of Kadesh.
- ⁹The voice of the LORD causes the oaks to whirl,
and strips the forest bare;
and in his temple all say, “Glory!”
- ¹⁰The LORD sits enthroned over the flood;
the LORD sits enthroned as king forever.
- ¹¹May the LORD give strength to his people!
May the LORD bless his people with peace!

Song: *My Life Flows On*

The 29th psalm begins with a summons to praise, pointing to God’s holy splendor, awesome and incomparable.⁵ It continues with a crescendoing declaration of the supreme power and majesty of the Lord. God’s arrival is astounding, rolling over the sea, across the mountains, and on into the desert. Nature itself proclaims the greatness of God. In response to this majestic display of power, the worshippers cry “Glory!” Psalm 29 concludes with the Lord’s enthronement. God subdues the chaos and is more powerful than all that resists. The Lord’s kingdom is invincible and eternal.

The final verse also affirms God as the source of comfort and assurance. In a dry land, the sound of thunder is the welcome voice of life-giving rains. A psalm that begins with an appeal to the heavenly host to proclaim the glory of God ends with a prayer for peace on earth, for shalom. Only a deity with great strength, as described in this psalm, has the power to bestow peace. Having assumed the rightful place as eternal king, the Lord becomes the source of comfort and hope to the people.

We can use this hymn to proclaim who God is and to combat our fears. The external circumstances of life may not change significantly, but we can be emboldened with the determination to live in God’s power. Let’s listen to the psalm again, this time from the *New Living Translation*.

- ¹Honor the LORD, you heavenly beings;
honor the LORD for his glory and strength.
- ²Honor the LORD for the glory of his name.
Worship the LORD in the splendor of his holiness.
- ³The voice of the LORD echoes above the sea.
The God of glory thunders.
The LORD thunders over the mighty sea.
- ⁴The voice of the LORD is powerful;
the voice of the LORD is majestic.

⁵ Background on Psalm 29 drawn from James Waltner, *Psalms, Believers Church Bible Commentary*, Herald Press, 2006, pp. 155-159.

- ⁵ The voice of the LORD splits the mighty cedars;
the LORD shatters the cedars of Lebanon.
- ⁶ He makes Lebanon's mountains skip like a calf;
he makes Mount Hermon leap like a young wild ox.
- ⁷ The voice of the LORD strikes
with bolts of lightning.
- ⁸ The voice of the LORD makes the barren wilderness quake;
the LORD shakes the wilderness of Kadesh.
- ⁹ The voice of the LORD twists mighty oaks
and strips the forests bare.
In his Temple everyone shouts, "Glory!"
- ¹⁰ The LORD rules over the floodwaters.
The LORD reigns as king forever.
- ¹¹ The LORD gives his people strength.
The LORD blesses them with peace.

I invite you to return to these psalms when you experience fear. God is our light and our salvation, a strong voice in the storm. Thanks be to God.