

Sermon – “Enemies”

Sunday, February 21, 2016

Scripture Readings – Psalm 27 and Philippians 3:17-4:1

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Our first reading is both a declaration and an appeal of faith, and a poem of prayer and praise. Listen to these words from Psalm 27.

*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. 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 God’s temple. 5 For the Lord will hide me in the Lord’s shelter in the day of trouble; God will conceal me under the cover of God’s tent; the Lord 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 God’s 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 God’s 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!*

The second reading today is found in the letter of Paul to the Philippians, beginning in the third chapter, verse 17, and continuing through the first verse of chapter 4. The apostle here speaks in a language of contrasts, of exhortation, and of faithful expectation. Listen for God’s Word to you in these words written by Paul to the community of believers in Philippi:

*17 Brothers and sisters, join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us. 18 For many live as enemies of the cross of Christ; I have often told you of them, and now I tell you even with tears. 19 Their end is destruction; their god is the belly; and their glory is in their shame; their minds are set on earthly things. 20 But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. 21 He will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself. 1 Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved.*

The Word of the Lord.

**Thanks be to God.**

The title of the sermon: “Enemies”

*The text: “I believe that I shall see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living.” Psalm 27:13*

“The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?” The Psalm<sup>1</sup> assures me of God’s power, and it praises God’s faithful deliverance. But it is not from a place of peace and rest that it exclaims of God’s strength, rather from a place of need. This psalm is both trust and request, faith and petition. It affirms God will save, in the midst of its asking God to save. “Hear, O Lord, when I cry aloud,” it asks, and “the Lord will take me up,” it declares. “Do not give me up,” it pleads, and “I believe,” it avows.

It is a wonderful language of faith in the midst of danger, a picture of trust in the middle of life where what is wrong and what threatens can be seen clearly but the way out is invisible. Courage of the heart is called for, and waiting, waiting for the Lord.

Some of us may readily recognize ourselves in this place, the place of adversity and trouble, with that which assails us quite evident, and our relationship with God having blurred lines between pleading for deliverance and faith in it.

But others of us may not know how to recognize ourselves here. “Enemies” is a word we do not much use. The Psalmist sounds strange to us with its talk of foes and adversaries, evildoers assailing and armies attacking. We are uncomfortable with the language of “enemies,” and for more than one reason.

The first is our cultural placement. As Christians, remembering that Jesus called the outsiders in, and sent the Gospel to the whole world, we have a healthy skepticism toward calling anyone by that word, “enemy.” We know Jesus commanded us to love our enemies, but it is more comfortable for us just to avoid the idea at all.

We are highly aware of the constant social forces guiding us toward ever more divisiveness. We know reducing the world’s conflicts to “us” vs. “them” affairs is best avoided, even as we regularly give in to the temptation to do so. We prefer, then, not to name others as “enemies,” and we accordingly shy away from the word altogether.

It is hard to condemn these motivations, and I will not do so here, merely recognize there is a certain tension between our extreme distaste for the concept of enemy and the constancy with which the scriptures seem to acknowledge the notion. Like all such tensions, it should provoke some thought in us.

But if the first reason we avoid speaking of enemies at least has wholesome intentions, the second is a definite mistake. The other reason we are uncomfortable with the idea of enemies is that we prefer to pretend they do not exist at all.

Surely it is no surprise to you if I say we spend a lot of our time in life with our heads in the sand, avoiding the existence of the things which endanger us. We can live for a very long time knowing

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<sup>1</sup> Psalm 27. Quotes are from the *New Revised Standard Version*.

something is wrong and will only threaten our well-being all the more if we leave it untreated, but refusing to acknowledge it is truly there. We don't follow a course that could make a problem better, because we then would have to openly accept the problem is real—never mind that it is real just the same, and will do us even more harm if we pretend otherwise.

We hide from what we know is coming, we hide from what we fear is coming, and I suspect a fair amount of the reason we spend so much energy fearing dangers that are infinitesimal and remote, like terrorist attacks or sharks, is because it is preferable to paying attention to the dangers right in front of us that really do threaten us here and now.

Even with the plainest meaning of “enemy,” a person who means us harm, the most common reaction is to ignore the threat. Research suggests that most physical violence between people is far more predictable than we think. Predicting it is often not a problem of lacking signs that it is coming, but rather a problem of not really believing the signs when we see them.<sup>2</sup> We talk ourselves out of being afraid or uncomfortable with someone who is giving off clear signals of being dangerous, in much the same way as we hear a fire alarm, the thing designed to tell us when there is a fire, and inexplicably decide that it is certainly not *really* a fire. Until we are forced to do otherwise, we love to insistently believe there is nothing threatening us.

But we do have disease and injury, we have the circumstances and evils of the world, we sometimes do have people actively to take advantage of or harm us, we know we have snares which would turn our lives astray, and we do have those troublesome, self-destructive elements of our own personalities. Surely we do have everyday enemies enough to relate to the Psalm if we're honest. The biggest enemy, however, the one that takes everything from us, is our own mortality, and this is the one we most adamantly pretend away.

For most of human history this was a hard task. Doctoring was crude. Disease was mysterious and unavoidable. People hunted or farmed and saw some kind of death constantly.

But these days, well, chicken comes to us already breaded and shaped like coasters. Modern medicine has reduced young deaths tremendously, an excellent thing, but with the interesting effect of having pushed death largely out of the typical experience of growing up. One hundred years ago, most people were experientially familiar before they became adults with people close to them dying. Now, most are not.

This is most certainly a good thing. In fact, as the father of a young toddler who delights in life, I inwardly weep at the fact that he will have to know of any of this. For you see,

My son does not know that death occurs  
He knows the joy of amazement of being  
and of beauty and comfort and of human connection  
And he knows now's distress when restraint deters  
his engagement with the marvelous objects he's seeing  
But of *gone forever* he has no conception.

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<sup>2</sup> See Gavin de Becker's work in *The Gift of Fear*, for a fascinating and helpful exploration of this.

It truly *is* an enemy, death, and a tragic thing even that anyone should ever have to come to awareness of such a fact.

But it is worth considering how it has changed our sense of the reality and inevitability of death that something which used to happen around us constantly now happens mostly somewhere else, in special places that people go when they are near the end. We don't even expose young people to *aging* anymore, much less death, because there are also special places where old people go to live, which may well provide for older people's needs in important ways but which also means young people only encounter agedness in limited, occasional doses, when they visit that odd place, completely alien to everyday life as a child or young adult knows it, where wheelchairs and nurses roam the halls.

Even funerals themselves have their own special, carefully distant places in our contemporary culture. Once upon a time a visitation would likely be in one's own home. Now we don't keep that so near us; we send it away to a "funeral home," a location we only have to visit for that one sort of event when it happens. Mourning afterward, something that used to have the formal respect and acknowledgement of public culture in such rituals as wearing black for a period of time, also makes us uncomfortable, by extending the duration of our encounter with death. And so those who have suffered loss are left feeling guilty if their everyday lives are shadowed with grief for some time to come, if they can't immediately get over it and return to normality the moment the grave is covered up.

This all adds up to a world in which we can effectively convince ourselves that death is an anomaly rather than the norm. We can go about our day-to-day lives with it compartmentalized away, with anything that reminds us of it—age, sickness, or ritual—relegated to places we only go when we must, and for as short a time as possible.

Have you ever noticed how much we as a culture utterly worship youngness? We focus our media constantly on youth culture. Our movies and television shows nearly all have storylines that follow people in the first half of life. We spend billions on products to help us pretend we are younger than we are. We often treat a person's age as something rude even to say out loud, as if it is somehow an embarrassing thing to have been around a while.

We avoid thinking about old age because it reminds us that seasons of our lives and the opportunities found in them can be gone forever. We avoid thinking about old age because it unavoidably contains decline. And most of all we avoid it because we know what comes after it, and we really want to avoid thinking about that. "Ashes to ashes, dust to dust."<sup>3</sup>

It all seems rather odd, if you think about it, that we should so stubbornly refuse to consider or spend any time contemplating something which is the future destination of all of us. Most of us will live in old age for a certain amount of time, and all of us will reach an end of our lives. Objectively speaking, the obvious thing for us to do would be to try as *much* as possible to absorb this fact and think about what that means for us. The sensible thing would be to let the fact of our mortality be

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<sup>3</sup> A phrase which comes into our culture through the Church of England's 17<sup>th</sup> Century ritual for burial of the dead, and originally derives from the language of Genesis 3:19: "By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return" (NRSV).

fully present and from the beginning inform our understanding of what it means to live a wise and fruitful life, so that we don't waste our lives pursuing fleeting things, squandering ourselves on vanities and chasing after wind.

But we do not do the sensible thing; we instead hide from the fact of death, and we spend our lives denying our aging, ignoring where we are headed, and determinedly living in a culture of eternal youth. We fear, you see.

And that fear, and the need to answer it, points us over to the New Testament.

Our second reading, from Philippians, also speaks of enemies. But it does so in a much different way. While the Psalmist knows of danger and shows faith in God, waiting to discover the Lord's deliverance, the apostle Paul knows already of Christ and urges us to recognize and trust in him as that deliverance. Paul uses an odd sentence: "For many live as enemies of the cross of Christ; I have often told you of them, and now I tell you even with tears."<sup>4</sup> What does this mean?

The phrase, "enemies of the cross of Christ" sounds at first uncomfortably divisive. Perhaps it conjures in our minds images of dressing in armor and going out, sword in hand, to engage the enemies of Christ in battle, or at least dressing in suits and going on television to fight them in our ever-continuing culture wars.

But that misses part of the wording. Paul doesn't speak of "enemies of Christ," he says, "enemies of the cross of Christ." What does it mean to be the enemy of the cross? Well, what is the cross? The cross is the instrument of the Crucifixion. It is the death that Christ endured, the path that he walked. It is, moreover, the way that Christ calls us to walk as well. "He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.'"<sup>5</sup> Some version of that command appears in Matthew, Mark, and Luke.<sup>6</sup>

We have an odd promise of salvation from this man Jesus, not the sort of salvation we naturally expect or ask for. "Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain;" Jesus tells us in the book of John, "but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also."<sup>7</sup> Or in Luke, "Those who try to make their life secure will lose it, but those who lose their life will keep it."<sup>8</sup>

Jesus does promise deliverance from every enemy, and from death itself, but the way to deliverance that he preaches is not one of protecting our worldly prosperity; rather, it is a call to surrender all. We want to be happy by clinging to our youth and our life forever, yet our salvation does not lie in perpetually extending our flawed lives, but in laying them down. As disciples of Christ we do not seek to increase our earthly treasure and build ever-greater walls protecting it in the

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<sup>4</sup> Philippians 3:18 (*NRSV*).

<sup>5</sup> Mark 8:34 (*NRSV*).

<sup>6</sup> See Matthew 16:24 and Luke 9:23.

<sup>7</sup> John 12:24-26 (*NRSV*).

<sup>8</sup> Luke 17:33 (*NRSV*).

hope that they will hold; rather, we seek to dismiss our earthly treasure and let it go, in favor of something greater and lasting that will take its place.<sup>9</sup>

The book of Philippians, from which we read today, is full of that theme. It speaks of Christ having emptied himself and accepted death.<sup>10</sup> It speaks of counting what was thought to be gain as loss.<sup>11</sup> It speaks of enemies of the cross of Christ as people we can easily be: those whose “minds are set on earthly things.”<sup>12</sup>

We do not ever see people defeating death on this side of it, and that is why we fear it is an undefeatable enemy. With no hope of defeating it, our only recourse is to live as long as we can as if that doom will not come. It is in our lack of hope that we avoid it and pretend we are not headed toward it. But there is a hope of defeating it, and that hope as we have heard it in Christ requires us to encounter it, and to accept it, and to come up again on the other side of it. Knowing this, our rightful course is not to ignore it at all. This is part of why we intentionally put our mortality before ourselves year after year in Lent. If the way of the resurrection leads through the cross, then we must not be enemies of it but allies, taking up our own cross and surrendering as Christ surrendered, joining then likewise in the victory that Christ won.

We “must walk this lonesome valley,” but Jesus Christ goes ahead and prepares a place for us, and like the Psalmist, we “believe [we] shall see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living.”<sup>13</sup> Praise be to Jesus our Savior, to whom soon enough we shall sing “Thine is the glory, Risen, conquering Son,” knowing his power conquers all our enemies. “The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?”<sup>14</sup> Amen.

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<sup>9</sup> See Matthew 6:19-21.

<sup>10</sup> See Philippians 2:1-8.

<sup>11</sup> See Philippians 3:4-11.

<sup>12</sup> From Philippians 3:19 (*NRSV*).

<sup>13</sup> Psalm 27:13 (*NRSV*).

<sup>14</sup> Psalm 27:1 (*NRSV*).