

Rev. Lauren Baske Davis
First UCC Northfield
Sermon on Psalm 27
Nov. 13, 2022

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Psalm 27: 1-4, 11, 13-14

¹ *The Lord is my light and my salvation;
whom shall I fear?*

*The Lord is the stronghold/refuge 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;
this I seek:
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...*

¹¹ *Teach me your way, O Lord,
and lead me on a level path.*

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!*

Sermon

There was a lot of discussion on the staff the last week and a half over what today's worship service would be like. We wondered, with the midterm election this past week, what people would be feeling. *How* people would *be* as we gathered together. We went back and forth on scriptures for today, and I settled on this one.

In the book of Psalms, you can find poetry that exhibits nearly every human emotion. And being "neither optimistic nor pessimistic, but full of hope," as Pastor Cindy guided us last week, I chose a psalm of trust. Because no matter what the election results were/are, God is working for good, in the long run. As MLK Jr. said, "the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice."

This psalm felt right, not knowing what the temperature of our nation would be after Tuesday. On Wednesday evening, Jon remarked to me, "Oof. My body is coming off of the adrenaline of the election—what would happen, what wouldn't, if the fears people were having would come true, if there would be a red wave or a blue wave or no wave." We viscerally know

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what it is to look at the news each day and say, “oh no, what now?!” So the words of the psalmist felt right: “this I seek: to live in the house of God all the days of my life.” Because we know what it is to have things that are hard knocking at our doors so to speak. Grief, shame, addiction, illness. But as the psalmist says, God is our “light and my salvation,” “the refuge of [our lives]; of whom shall [we] be afraid?” Hope—and trust—can take us far indeed.

For the psalmist, God is the very epitome of light and salvation. Since they’re the first words of the psalm, they’re easy to gloss over and say, “oh, yes, mmm-hmm, of course.” But I think we do so because the word salvation might feel heavy to those of us who were part of religious traditions that made it a zero-sum game where there is clearly a winner and clearly a loser. That is not what salvation was intended to mean.

What if we took a moment to reclaim this salvation language we want to abandon? It’s undeniable that salvation language has been used and weaponized to say who’s in and who’s out, laden with guilt and shame. But in the Bible, for the scripture writers, salvation wasn’t understood in the ways we think it was; in the ways it has been usurped in the past several hundred years.

Take these stories from the Bible. A few weeks ago, we heard the scripture where Zacchaeus, the tax collector, and infamous for cheating people, was told, by Jesus: “Today salvation has come to your house.” Or look at the ten lepers that Pastor Cindy preached on a couple of weeks ago, where one of the ten lepers turns around with gratitude for healing. Jesus tells him, “Your faith has made you well.” Jesus says the same thing to the woman bleeding for 12 years, who touches the hem of his cloak and is healed. “Your faith has made you well.” In the Greek though, in each of these stories, it actually says the same thing: “Your faith (or hope or trust) has *saved* you.” Saved. As in salvation. So listen to the psalm today—the scriptures Jesus knew by heart—which promises that God is light and salvation.

In short, salvation wasn’t meant to be focused on the afterlife. It was about life now. About making it better for people now. Finding the healing they needed, now. Salvation for the psalmist is new life while we’re still alive: “seeing the goodness of God in the land of the living.” Salvation doesn’t need to be a heavy or manipulative word. It is meant to be transforming and life-giving.

Preacher Barbara Brown Taylor tells a story¹ about being invited to speak at a church in Alabama. She asked the priest who invited her, “What do you want me to talk about?” Being the author of many books, as well as a professor, she had a lot of material to draw from. The priest replied, “Just come and tell us what is saving your life now.”

She said that the priest’s words were “as if he had swept his arm across a dusty table and brushed all the formal China to the ground. I did not,” she noted, “have to try to say correct things that were true for everyone. I did not have to use theological language that conformed to the historical teaching of the church. All I had to do was figure out what my life depended on. All I had to do was figure out how I stayed as close to that reality as I could, and then find some way to talk about it that helped my listeners figure out those same things for

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, *An Altar in the World*, New York: HarperOne, 2009.

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themselves.”

The beauty of the question, “what is saving your life right now?” is that the answer may change. Depending on where you are in your life, what’s going on in the world, the answer to what is saving your life is not the same from one year to the next or even one day to the next. Barbara Brown Taylor’s answer to what was saving her that day was this: “My life depends on engaging the most ordinary physical activities with the most exquisite attention I can give them...What is saving my life now is becoming more fully human, trusting that there is no way to God apart from real life in the real world.” I wonder what is saving your life right now?

I have permission [from Gina Washburn] to tell you that at Care Team this week, Gina shared a poem by 13th c., Sufi mystic, Rumi. This poem, his work, it “saved my life,” she said. This is what was saving her right now. We all have something that is saving us right now. It requires courage and vulnerability to admit it. But maybe we all need a little saving. Especially right now. The poem Gina shared said that that being human is like being a house. Where joy, depression, meanness or some other awareness knock on our door like unexpected visitors. Rumi writes, of those struggles or joys, those unexpected visitors,

*Welcome and attend to them all!
Even if they’re a crowd of sorrows,
who violently sweep your house
empty of its furniture,
still, treat each guest honorably.
[They] may be clearing you out
for some new delight.*²

I am so grateful that Gina shared what had been saving her. It’s a reminder that when shame, grief, anxiety, and depression knock at our door, we can welcome them in. God will be with us there. They don’t have the power to edge God out of the room.

So, what’s saving you right now? Is it lighting candles to brighten your home as the days grow shorter? Is it having a friend over for coffee and pie? Is it a small group at church or coming to worship Sunday morning or evening? Is it getting up at ungodly early hours to play Pickle Ball at the gym with friends? Is it the first few sips of coffee in the morning before anything else has begun and for just a moment everything feels right?

What are the things that make you say, “I believe I will see the goodness of God in the land of the living!” amid all other evidence to the contrary? I’ll tell you my list of what is saving me. It’s not my gratitude list. These are the things that give me life: my cats and dog who are so loving and funny, (except when my dog eats the couch). It’s my dog, who helps my elderly cat over the pet gate when he has a hard time climbing it—two species helping each other without the human help whatsoever. It’s waking up early and being in the quiet darkness drinking coffee. Yoga. And when its warm, having my hands in the dirt, gardening. We all need a bit of saving.

² Rumi, Selected Poems by Rumi, Translated by Coleman Barks, Penguin Classics, 2004.

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What are the things that are saving you? Honor, welcome, and savor them; so that you may come home to yourself. So that you may say, as the psalmist does, “I believe I shall see the goodness of God in the land of the living.”

A friend of mine from college who is now also a UCC minister recently shared the good news that she is expecting a baby after the heartbreak of infertility and a very openly shared story of infertility. But the getting there was long and painful. She and her spouse had turmoil, frustration, depression, anxiety, hopelessness, guilt, and hollowness knock on their door through this journey. She described the painful hormone shots, the tears, the clinic appointments, and the experiences they had leading up to becoming what she calls “regular pregnant.”

When she was just about to have the appointment for implantation—the big appointment—she was away with friends and her spouse called to tell her he couldn’t be at the appointment. He had Covid. They both held their breath. Then they both wept. After all of the steps taken to get to this point, to create a healthy embryo, for her body to be extra hospitable to it, it could all be ruined. She would have to go alone.

But then something saved her. Her friend volunteered to go with her and hold her hand through the appointment. And there she was—with all women in the room during the procedure—surrounding her with compassion and care. She said she felt like a beloved little chick encircled by mother hens. That day, salvation had come to the house of that procedure room. It was a moment where surely she saw the goodness of God in the land of the living.

This is what salvation was, in large part, for the ancient people who wrote the psalms, the gospels, and the other books of the Bible. Salvation was—and is—about a new life now. In the midst of struggles of this life. What is saving you? Whatever it is, surely because of it, you are seeing the goodness of God in the land of the living.

God who is salvation, who is in that thing that is saving your right now, is rooting for you. God who is light and salvation is saying to *you* yes, let your house be my house, now and always, I am here with you, salvation is now. In small and big ways, you are seeing the goodness of God in the land of the living. Yes, trauma, shame, grief, anxiety, depression, sorrow, transition, overwhelm may knock at your door. Welcome them in as Rumi suggested, see what they have to tell you. And no matter what knocks on your door, dwell in the house of God. No matter what happens, you will still also see God’s goodness in your life. May it be so.