

“Whom Shall I Fear?”

Sermon by Pr. Renata Eustis

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Psalm 27

“The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?”

This is the verse that I have held on to for as long as I can remember. It’s a rhetorical question that centers me—especially at times when I *am* afraid. It reminds me of who God is—what God has done for me—how God has been there for me--and remembering *that* makes a difference.

There’s a flow to this psalm that I think is true to what the life of faith is like. It starts out with a remarkable statement of faith—faith in the midst of real trouble. Flesh-eating evil-doers are after the psalmist. A whole army is waging war against him. And he runs into the sanctuary for safety—this is the place of protection—the place where he can worship and bring offerings of thanksgiving.

Then at verse 7 there’s a shift. It’s a plea for help. A cry out to God to be able to see God—to know God is with him in this trouble. “Do not give me up to the will of my adversaries.” If you’re praying like that it’s because it doesn’t feel like God is with you. You’re afraid those who are coming after you are going to get you.

But once again, there’s a shift at verse 13, to a clear and confident profession of faith: “I believe that I shall see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living.” “Wait for the Lord.”

The message of this psalm is similar to these words from Jesus about the birds of the air and the lilies of the field. We don’t need to worry. We can trust God with our lives because God is a god who will take care of us—who will protect us.

I love those words—*but what do they mean?* What do they mean in a week when our hearts have been seared with the image of Oscar and his small daughter, Valeria—lying dead, washed up on the shore of the Rio Grande, with their arms around each other. What does it mean to say that God is the stronghold of our lives? Or that the Lord is our light and our salvation?

Four years ago, 9 people were killed in Mother Emanuel Church during Bible study. What does it mean to say that God will “hide me in his shelter in the day of trouble” in the face of that? Is there any truth in these words?

We’ve had an awful lot of mass shootings that have all been terrible tragedies, but there was something different about what happened at Mother Emanuel. It’s affected me in a different way and I’ve tried to tease out why. Part of it is that it happened in a church but even more is that our denomination, the ELCA, was so connected to it. The shooter, Dylan Roof, was raised and confirmed in an ELCA congregation. And two of the people killed were pastors who had been educated at Southern Seminary, the ELCA seminary in Columbia, SC.

The other piece that really got to me was that the people in that Bible study had welcomed Dylan Roof into their group that night. They were together for a whole Bible study and as they bowed their heads to pray he

took out his gun and told them he came to the church to kill some black people. What kind of protection is God giving there?

Two weeks ago—on the fourth anniversary of this massacre—there was a limited release of *Emanuel*, a documentary about what happened. I really wanted to see it, and I was grateful to go with a group from here. I would see it again and, when it's released more widely, I encourage you to see it because it is so powerful and so inspiring.

Today I want to draw some connections between Psalm 27 and Mother Emanuel.

If ever there was a picture of a church as the stronghold—as shelter—Mother Emanuel is it. This African Methodist Episcopal Church was founded in 1816 by freed blacks who left the Methodist Church because they were being discriminated against.

It's in Charleston, a port where 40% of blacks who were enslaved in the U.S. passed through. Charleston is a place where you remember that the Civil War was not so long ago.

For people whose forbearers were enslaved, the words of Psalm 27 could be speaking of Mother Emanuel: “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.” This is the place—this is the community—where people are lifted up—where people know their true worth even though many false witnesses try to tell them otherwise.

Mother Emanuel is a big congregation—it's like the cathedral of the AME church, with 1600 members. But on June 17, 2015, it was a small group who gathered for mid-week Bible study with their pastor, Clementa Pinckney. These are the people who just can't stay away from church—the people who resonate with these words from Psalm 27, “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.”

And the house of the Lord is where they died.

I learned a lot from the movie—horrible details about the brutal violence of that night—about the white supremacy that drew Dylan Roof in—about the importance of Mother Emanuel. But what I learned the most about was who these people were who were martyred. And I use the word martyred because they were witnesses—and they died witnessing to their faith. I say that because they witnessed to the vulnerable, all accepting love of God that we know in Jesus. When I saw the security camera footage of Dylan Roof, my honest-to-God first thought was “Why did they let him in?” He fits the profile of a shooter. He was a stranger.

In fact, a few weeks ago, a man came into our sanctuary at the end of worship and all sorts of warnings went off in my head. He walked in with such a confidence, to look at the sanctuary and didn't talk to anyone. I immediately broke away from my conversation and went up to engage him. I talked to him for a while and, thankfully, I was wrong about him.

But all of that is to say that I think their welcome of him is one of the remarkable parts of this story.

The pastor, Rev. Pinckney was the famous person in the group—he was a state senator and revered for his work in the community on behalf of the poor. But every one of the people the 9 people who were killed—and the 3 who survived—is a beloved family member with a story. In the film, we heard from these family members and from the survivors—and the beauty of their lives shown through. And just how big their loss did, too.

This was a community who was devastated—which is what made what happened next so hard to fathom.

The police arrested Dylan Roof and, 48 hours after their loved ones were killed, there was a bond hearing. In a very unusual move, the judge asked the family members if they wanted to address him. The first person who spoke, Nadine Collier, daughter of Ethel Lance said: “I forgive you. You took something very precious away from me. I will never get to talk to her ever again. I will never be able to hold her again, but I forgive you, and have mercy on your soul. ... You hurt me. You hurt a lot of people. If God forgives you, I forgive you.” Several other family members had similar words of forgiveness.

Much has been made of their forgiveness. It has been celebrated and it has been criticized. In the film, what was so striking was *how* it happened. By their own testimony, none of them went to the hearing planning to offer words of forgiveness. Nadine Collier said something came over her and those words came out. Others said the same.

*I have no other way to account for it than to say it was the work of the Holy Spirit.*

I can’t imagine myself being able to utter those words of forgiveness 48 hours afterwards—maybe even ever. But I do believe that, in Christ, through the power of the Holy Spirit, it is possible.

All of this has made me wonder about and understand in a new way, what it means to say, “The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?”—what it means to say that the Lord is the stronghold of my life—what it means to say that God will protect me—will conceal me under the cover of his tent—will set me high on a rock.

God is a god of freedom. A god who frees us from fear and hate. Living in the house of the Lord is about living in love. Having the internal freedom of knowing just how beloved and precious you are in God’s eyes—not having your life—your sense of peace and well-being—determined by anyone other than God.

So, even though there is an army of haters out there—people who hate blacks—people who hate immigrants—people who hate Muslims—we can be confident. We can live in the house of the Lord—in the house of love—we can resist being defined by others who hate—who seek to make us into haters in return—because the power of Love is with us and within us—not just here in this sanctuary where we get steeped in it—but everywhere we go. Thanks be to God. Amen.