

## Words Forming Witnesses

Psalm 32 & Psalm 27:1  
(Hymns – 633, 490, 15, 634)  
March 10, 2013

### Overcoming Fear

I have several friends who are living with cancer.

Some are facing their diagnosis with confidence and courage,  
continuing to live flourishing lives as they fight the disease.  
Others are consumed by their fear of the disease and death,  
descending into a debilitating depression.

What's the difference?  
As I listen to them, it's the Christian faith  
in those who are flourishing  
and the absence of it in those who are depressed.

Those who are flourishing are in conscious touch with God.  
In prayer, in fellowship, in worship, in learning, and in serving,  
they know that their Redeemer lives and they live with him.

Those who are depressed have lost touch with God.  
In doubt, in confusion, in isolation,  
they are consumed by fear.

Our memory verse this morning,  
the opening verse of Psalm 27,  
captures beautifully one of the great truths of the Christian faith –  
***God is with us. There is nothing to fear.***  
This Psalm is one of the great affirmations of Christian confidence  
in the Scriptures.

Notice it begins with the reality of God's presence,  
not with the experience of fear.  
Fear is disempowered  
by being set within the broader reality  
of God's dependable and accepting love.

The familiar words from Paul's letter to the Romans  
that is often read at Christian funerals  
capture the same affirmation with a bit more detail:

*For I am convinced that neither death, nor life,  
nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come,  
nor powers, nor height, nor depth,  
nor naything else in all creation,  
will be able to separate us from the love of God  
in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Rom 8:39)*

So often, in our human experience,  
fear overwhelms us  
and leads us into blindness and weakness.  
We lose contact with our true source of flourishing in Jesus Christ.  
We think we are alone and exposed,  
vulnerable and feeble.

I've used this quote before in sermons here,  
but it's still the best literary description of fear I've found.  
It comes from Canadian author Yann Martel's *Life of Pi*.  
It's the fanciful story of a young boy cast adrift in a lifeboat  
after his family and the zoo they are moving to England  
drown in a ship wreck.  
Sharing the lifeboat with him is a large bengal tiger.

Ang Lee's film adaptation of the novel  
won 4 Academy Awards this year,  
including best director for Lee.

This passage didn't make it into the movie

That is the setting for this description of fear and its impact.

*I must say a word about fear. It is life's only true opponent. Only fear can defeat life. It is a clever, treacherous adversary, how well I know. It has no decency, respects no law or convention, shows no mercy. It goes for your weakest spot, which it finds with unerring ease. It begins in your mind, always. One moment you are feeling calm, self-possessed, happy. Then fear, disguised in the garb of mild-mannered doubt, slips into your mind like a spy. Doubt meets disbelief and disbelief tries to push it out. But disbelief is a poorly armed foot soldier. Doubt does away with it with little trouble. You become anxious. Reason comes to do battle for you. You are reassured. Reason is fully equipped with the latest weapons of technology. But, to your amazement, despite superior tactics and a number of undeniable victories, reason is laid low. You feel yourself weakening, wavering. Your anxiety becomes dread.*

*Fear next turns fully to your body, which is already aware that something terribly wrong is going on. Already your lungs have flown away like a bird and your guts have slithered away like a snake. Now your tongue drops dead like an opossum, while your jaw begins to gallop on the spot. Your ears go deaf. Your muscles begin to shiver as if they had malaria and your knees to shake as though they were dancing. Your heart strains too hard, while your sphincter relaxes too much. And so with the rest of your body. Every*

*part of you, in the manner most suited to it, falls apart. Only your eyes work well. They always pay proper attention to fear.*

*Quickly you make rash decisions. You dismiss your last allies: hope and trust. There, you've defeated yourself. Fear, which is but an impression, has triumphed over you. The matter is difficult to put into words. For fear, real fear, such as shakes you to your foundation, such as you feel when you are brought face to face with your mortal end, nestles in your memory like a gangrene: it seeks to rot everything, even the words with which to speak of it. So you must fight hard to express it. You must fight hard to shine the light of words upon it. Because if you don't, if your fear becomes a wordless darkness that you avoid, perhaps even manage to forget, you open yourself to further attacks of fear because you never truly fought the opponent who defeated you.*

Yann Martel, *The Life of Pi* (178-179)

Martel pits life against fear.  
Fear drains your life and leaves you falling apart,  
fear after fear.

There are psychologists who claim that fear is the basic condition of human life.  
We live in constant chronic fear.  
At times, it becomes acute and visible.  
But most of the time, it is a silent killer eating away at our vitality.

Not only does fear eat away at our vitality,  
it also isolates us.  
When we are afraid, we often feel very much alone.  
We fear to even share our feelings of fear.

The more I reflect on this theme,  
the more I wonder if much of our alienation from God  
results from our fear of God –  
or at least fear of our own images of God.  
If we see God as a stern judge,  
angered by our failure to live up to his demands,  
then fear is an understandable result.  
If we see God as a distant power,  
ruling like a mighty king,  
imposing a heartless justice  
that condemns us for lack of conformity,  
then a draining fear of that God can easily arise.  
If we see God as judge and jury,  
focused primarily on what we have done wrong  
and on the punishment we deserve,  
then a draining fear forms the basis of our faith.  
We can't flourish with that kind of faith.

True, the Bible does talk a lot of fearing God,  
but the Hebrew and Greek words translated 'fear' refer to  
devotion, reverence , and awe.

This is a 'fear' that nourishes us to flourish,  
not one that drains us to die.

The psychologists may be right on the surface.  
Fear is rampant in our society.  
It fuels much of the violence and hard-heartedness around us.  
It crushes compassion.  
It leaves us alone, drained, and dying.

But deeper within each and every one of us is another possibility.  
When we recognize and revel in the reality of God's presence,  
when we sense, and feel, and know that God is with us,  
as our light, as our salvation, as our stronghold,  
then we can flourish in the confidence of our faith.

Bad things, things that ignite our fears, continue to happen.  
But they no longer have the final word in defining reality for us.  
God's loving and welcoming presence defines reality.  
God's loving and welcoming presence is the world in which we live.

With the Psalmist we can sing from the depths of our beings,  
"whom shall I fear?" and "of whom shall I be afraid?",  
answering those questions with Paul's ringing affirmation  
that nothing in all creation can separate us from the love of God  
in Christ Jesus our Lord.

That's how God invites us to overcome fear.

*I pray that the Holy Spirit has used words of this reflection  
to nourish your souls to flourish in the grace of Jesus Christ.*

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