

“The Beauty of Confidence”

Ps. 27

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For our family, a day trip into New York City is still quite a rare and rather wondrous thing. Sunday sure is a good day to go, and so that's where we all were last week! It was actually a first for our girls. We had tickets for a matinee at the New Amsterdam Theater where we completely enjoyed a performance of “Mary Poppins.” If you are considering taking your kids or grandkids to their first ever Broadway show, I enthusiastically endorse this one.

The music, of course, was just infectious and amazing. The cast was stellar and the stagecraft exceeded our expectations. What I loved most, though, were the many truly magical moments. Chief among such moments, I'd have to say, is when Bert, the chim-chimney-chim-chimney-chim-chim-cherie friend of Mary Poppins, taps and sings his way up the side of the stage and across the top. At one point, he's tapping and singing on center stage – fully suspended upside down! One of the musical's overall themes is that anything can happen. But this was really a sight beyond expectation!

All week this particular part of the show has been replaying in my mind. What strong confidence Bert, played practically perfectly by Britain's Gavin Lee, must have in his own abilities and in the stage crew responsible for his harness. Not to mention also in the producer for spending enough money on quality equipment!

Having confidence in yourself and in others is a big key to a contented life. Do you consider yourself a confident person? Do you consider yourself someone whose general outlook on life is full of *intimate trust and reliance* on particular truths about yourself and about at least one or two other people in your life?

Even more to the point this morning ... are you confident about God's care for you?

This magnificent Psalm, rock solid #27, is a help and a reminder for all of us to be completely confident in the caring, saving grace of our God. Its fourteen verses can be broken out to help us understand more fully what this means.

First notice the shift between verses six and seven. The words found in verses 1-6 make up one of the strongest, most remarkable professions of faith in all of Scripture. It is, in fact, the only place in the entire Old Testament where someone refers to God as “my light.” There are plenty of more general references to God as a great light, but none

this personal. Isaiah 9:2 may come to mind, where it reads “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light.” In the first part of this Psalm, the sacred spotlight falls precisely on one person standing center stage, instead of on an entire nation. The confidence in God breaks through most brightly as a choice the Psalmist has made – it is the choice to live in faith rather than in fear.

I’ve long been very personally drawn to verse three – “though an army encamp against me, my heart shall not fear; though war rise up against me, yet I will be confident.” Stated in the more fun, contemporary language of biblical interpreter Eugene Peterson, it reads “When I am besieged, I’m calm as a baby; when all hell breaks loose, I’m collected and cool.” Many folks that I know and care greatly for here and elsewhere have been, like King David, physically in a war zone with real life enemies encamped around, at the ready to fulfill a deadly duty. I can only imagine how powerful recalling these holy words may have been at such a time. And while I have not seen such horrific warfare, the family environment I grew up in – like, perhaps, some of you – was very much an emotionally abusive enemy embankment. Peterson’s word “besieged” is a very apt description. Although I did not read the Bible in those early days, I did have an intuitive sense of God as “my light.”

I remember, especially, how I had various sun-catchers hanging on my bedroom windows through the years. They were splendid -- except for when that little suction thingy let loose, sending the catcher crashing down in the middle of the night. And then there was the clear crystal-like teardrop a friend gave me while I was in high school. I used to stare at great length at this, at the way the sunlight would strike it and disperse itself into tiny fragments of hope across my room. It covered me with confidence in myself to emotionally survive, and in something greater and beyond myself to deliver me.

Whereas verses 1-6 are a bold, more general profession of faith, verses 7-12 shift to a precise plea-filled prayer for deliverance. The language shifts from speaking to us, as in “One thing I asked of the Lord” to speaking directly to God -- “Hear, O Lord, when I cry aloud ... do not hide your face from me ... do not cast me off ... do not forsake me ... teach me your way, O Lord, and lead me on a level path.” This is intense, salvation language. It is prayer rather than profession because it is aimed directly at God’s eternally big ears and heavenly, merciful heart. It is language that reflects an intense, interior confidence that God *will* protect and deliver.

Can you recall a time when you cried out a similar sort of prayer? Made a faithful demand of the Almighty to be delivered from some stressful or truly threatening

situation? How was that prayer answered? How were you led to a level path?

When we reach verses 13 and 14, we are moved back to a more general profession of faith. This time, though, it's got a more of a preachy feel to it. It is personal witness ("I believe I shall see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living") and full-on exhortation (Wait for the Lord; be strong, let your heart take courage; wait for the Lord!).

That this powerful passage of Scripture leaves us with the command to wait on the Lord is not something to gloss over quickly. It's an invitation to closely examine your faith, your most intimate trust and confidence. If you are *waiting on* the Lord, you are *believing in* the Lord as your light and salvation. To this you may well easily say to yourself, "Well, of course, I wait on the Lord who is my light and salvation." But I have different angle I invite you to also consider ... *where* do you wait on the Lord? Where do you go to be showered in sacred light, to have your confidence in God's care for you refueled?

As many of you know, I'm presently enrolled in a training program focusing on spiritual formation. Many of my teachers and my fellow students draw great inspiration from Celtic Christian spirituality. My predecessor in this pulpit, Bill Davis, also did, as attested to by the large stone Celtic cross tribute to his ministry with FPC that is located right outside the sanctuary. Celtic Christianity, in general, celebrates very personal, less institutionalized expressions of faith. In a word, it's more "folksy." And it very strongly exhibits a love for divine revelation in nature, while at the same time guarding sacred mysteries.

I mention this in the context of my question about where you wait on the Lord as your light and salvation because I find the Celts have a helpful concept. The tradition speaks of "thin places." A "thin" place is both geographical and metaphysical, earthbound as well as otherworldly. It is a place where people go because they believe God is nearer there than anywhere else. The past, present and future are perceived as being very thinly divided in such places. As the tradition grew from the fifth and sixth centuries and out beyond actual locations around the Irish Sea, the phrase "thin place" came to encompass any "moments when the holy became visible to the eyes of the human spirit ... where a person is somehow able to encounter a more ancient and eternal reality within the present time." (Rev. Dr. Agnes Norfleet, www.day1.net).

Do you have thin places in your life? I certainly hope this sanctuary is one such place! But I also hope you have thin places in your homes and elsewhere. You all probably know well how much Camp Johnsonburg's four hundred acres are a thin place

for me. Especially the outdoor prayer labyrinth located there in the middle of the woods. And every week, this pulpit is a very thin place – it is where I pray you all will see through the veil of the preacher and into the blessed assurances and the intimate mysteries of God.

I also pray that rooms holding church committee meetings might be thin places. Imagine church “business” meetings being places that truly feel holy! Centers of spiritual confidence! The same perspective applies to your workplaces and social outlets. Designating any place as a “thin place” helps sustain your intimate trust and reliance on God being near to you. And this sort of faithful confidence is truly beautiful because it can illuminate all sorts of spaces and situations, transforming them from dens of despair and frustration into harbors of hope and salvation.

I wonder if hanging upside down, center stage, while singing and tap dancing is a thin place for Gavin Lee. It certainly would be for me! I’d have the utmost confidence in God to keep me safely suspended through the good gifts of everyone involved in the entire production. Say, this is quite a good metaphor for all of us involved in church life, in the divine production that is our Lord’s ministry of light and salvation! May the Lord first and foremost be the true confidence of all our lives, and of Fairmount Presbyterian Church. What a beautiful reality this can be ... Amen.