

TEXT: Psalm 27
THEME: The Lord is my light and my salvation
SUBJECT: Courage
TITLE: Be Strong

Third Sunday after Epiphany
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Messiah Moravian
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St. Athanasius, 4th century Bishop of Alexandria, believed the psalms were a mirror of the soul. The psalms reflect the movements of the soul, with all its changes, its ups and downs, its failures and recoveries. The psalms illuminate the human condition.

Psalm 27 depicts a soul living in anxious times. Whichever side of the political divide you are on, anxiety is what we have in common. The Psalmist sees two possible responses to anxiety: faith or fear. Fear, not doubt, is cast as the alternative to faith.

The Psalmist is convinced that no matter how dark the present moment is or may become, God is light that dispels darkness; no matter how divisive the present moment is or may become, God brings wholeness (salvation) to life; no matter how threatening the present moment is or may become, God is a stronghold, a refuge and defense. Thus, the psalmist chooses to respond to his anxiety with faith, not fear.

This faith is not a shot in the dark, a leap off a cliff, a free fall into a bottomless abyss. This faith is a response to a reality far greater than any anxious moment, a trust in the divine embrace we have known from time to time.

James Finley believes we all have moments in life when we become aware, in a deep visceral way, that this moment is holy, this moment is real, and that this is the way every moment deep down really is. These are moments that disclose to us the inherent holiness of life itself. As the Celts would say, "Every life is braided with luminous moments."

The most ordinary occurrence can trigger this awareness. Thomas Merton describes God at play in the garden of creation, and if we could let go of our own obsession with what we think is the meaning of it all, we might be able to hear His call and follow Him in His mysterious, cosmic dance.

We do not have to go far to catch echoes of the dancing. When we are alone on a starlit night; when by chance we see the migrating birds in autumn descending on a grove of junipers to rest and eat; when we see children in a moment when they are really children; when we know love in our hearts; such times of awakening provide a glimpse of the cosmic dance.

The cosmic dance is always there. Indeed, we are in the midst of it, and it is in the midst of us, for it beats in our very blood, whether we want it to or not. Glimpses of the cosmic dance invite us to have faith that our heart in its most childlike hour did not deceive us. You simply have to have faith that these moments are real or you go crazy, that you know that this is real, and it is beyond doubting because it stands invincibly true.

While these moments of awareness catch us by surprise, we can also put ourselves in a position to be surprised. The psalmist shows us a way to cultivate such awareness. "One thing I ask of

the Lord; one thing I seek; that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life; to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord and to seek God in the temple.”

Cabot Plains Road intersects Bayley Hazen Road along a mountain ridge in Cabot, Vermont. If you are a cheese lover, you will recognize Bayley Hazen from Jasper Hill Farms’ Bayley Hazen Blue. Sherri discovered this ridge road by taking a wrong turn. We have returned to this ridge often, in the summer, to gaze at the setting sun, to gaze at the shades of light and color, to be immersed in beauty.

On one occasion we saw a middle aged man in a sweat suit running up the road, his back to the setting sun, head down, grimacing in pain, bent over, oblivious to the beauty that longed to bathe him in its light. He struck me as the image of the way we too often go through life, immersed in our tasks, oblivious to the light that is our salvation. We don’t, we think, have time to stop and gaze.

Donald Nicholl was diagnosed with terminal cancer. He told his friend, “I’ve been thinking. I think that thinking is part of the punishment for the Fall, so I have given up thinking and spend my days in gazing. Gazing is the most profitable occupation. Gazing deepens our awareness and raises questions of fundamental importance for our well-being, questions we are normally too busy or too afraid to consider.

Why are we here, asked Anaxagoras the sage? To behold. No excuses called for. Contemplation. Seeing. Fierce and intense. To attest the gift of the day. To saunter and gaze.

Walk into a cathedral, sit and gaze for an hour and notice what happens to you. Sit still and gaze at a tree, a flower for an hour and see what happens to you. Gaze into the eyes of another person for an hour and you will fall in love. Gazing is essential to the well being of the soul, to our salvation. Theology begins only in the love of beauty, in gazing upon the face of God manifest everywhere, in everyone.

For too long faith has been presented as a weak form of knowledge. Faith is a primal attraction, the deepest resonance of the self drawn to the elegance of the divine. Something in us senses and knows how perfectly the contours of the soul fit the divine embrace. The infinity of the beauty which is God is a feast for the soul. Inside every human heart are secret sources of courage awakened by divine beauty.

In the most anxious of times, in the most trying of circumstances, the subtle touches of beauty empower most people to survive. Despite all our disaffection with what can seem a harsh and cynical world, there is an eternal beckoning at the heart of beauty that calls us to trust.

Trust the moments when your childlike heart disclosed to you the holiness of life, no matter how degraded our political discourse becomes. Gaze, keep your eyes fixed upon the manifestations of divine beauty everywhere, in everyone, no matter how ugly our social intercourse becomes.

For this trust, this gaze, will guard your heart against fear, will awaken the deep well of courage in your soul, will empower you to be strong no matter how anxious the present moment becomes.