

Naming our fears (Psalm 27)

Need words of confidence? Start with Psalm 27.

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It can be a risky endeavor to ask a question like, “What are you afraid of?” Risky because it’s a question that prompts some vulnerability.

Of course, in some crowds you’ll get answers like spiders, basements, heights. In others you’ll hear responses such as math class, not getting into a good college or finding a job, not making the team. Other environments, like small groups where the participants have built a community of trust and openness, could elicit responses that are more tenuous or fragile.

Truthfully, we’re all afraid of many things, whether we admit it publicly or not: we’re afraid of not having enough (fill in the blank: money, time, antibodies), of losing something or someone, of dying, of failing, and yes, sometimes of insects or storms. Fear is one of those universals, even if the details differ between us. It can be a valuable question to ask, even as a point of personal reflection. What do you fear?

People often ask me, a pastor, for a recommendation about where to start when reading the Bible, or where in the Bible to find passages that will bring them comfort or assurance during times of struggle. It’s my general practice to point people to the psalms. It’s not that I don’t think there is value in the Gospels or the epistles; the prophets contain wonderful words. But in the psalms you’re most likely to find verses that speak to the depth and range of emotions that we experience: fear, despair, joy, worship, adoration. And, I will remind folks, most of them are pretty short: if it’s not what you’re looking for, try the next one.

And if you are looking to read words of confidence in the lengths God will go to protect you, God's faithful one, I would probably tell you to start with Psalm 27, which begins: "The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The LORD is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?" Evildoers will stumble; a whole army might encamp against me, but I won't be afraid. Did the psalmist's voice tremble, voicing these words? Did their voice grow stronger with each line, trusting their own proclamation and confession?

If you're exploring questions about fear, in a group or on your own, I invite you to use Psalm 27 as part of a responsive prayer.

God, I'm afraid: hide me in your shelter; the Lord is the stronghold of my life, of whom shall I be afraid?

When we name our fears before God, they don't go away. There is still uncertainty in our lives; there are still shadows in the basement; there will still be diagnoses we would rather not hear or receive. Instead we hear again the promises of God, our light and our salvation, the stronghold of our lives.