

January 22, Epiphany 3A (*Psalm 27:1, 4-9; Matthew 4:12-23*)

If God is our salvation and stronghold, why are we just as vulnerable as anyone else?

by [Alma Tinoco Ruiz](#) in the [January 2023](#) issue

In June 2020, I was invited to give a virtual conference to youth from the United Methodist Church of Peru. At that time, the COVID pandemic was at its worst, and many people were dying worldwide. Like most of us, those who attended the conference were anxious, sad, afraid, and discouraged. Many of them had lost family members and members of their church community to the virus.

“¿Cómo Podemos evangelizar ahora?” one of the attendees asked me. How can we evangelize now? She went on: “We used to invite people to church, assuring them that if they would come to God and accept God as their savior, God would protect them. However, now no one is protected. We can all die at any time from this virus.”

She was right. This is how many of us learned to share the Good News of Jesus Christ with others. Many evangelists present the gospel as an amulet of protection. When that amulet does not work, we are lost. Our faith and trust in God are shaken.

This young person named what we all witnessed: the pandemic taught us that we all are vulnerable to suffering and sickness. Some people are more vulnerable because of their age, health, or social status, but we all are vulnerable.

So then, what do we do with biblical passages like Psalm 27:1? How can we proclaim that God is our salvation and the stronghold of our lives if we are as vulnerable as those who do not profess faith in this God?

I believe verses 4-9 help us understand this dilemma better. It is not that if we believe and surrender our lives to God, if we dwell in the house of the Lord, then we will not suffer. God does not promise us that we will not experience sickness and suffering in this world. God promises us that God will be with us. God promises us that God's presence will sustain us. Thus, even when facing adversity, believers can have confidence that God will not hide God's face from them.

Knowing God is with us, we can experience God's healing power even amid sickness and suffering. The Gospels report many instances of Jesus curing people, including this week's passage. But we also know that not all the people who believed in Jesus were cured. Yet today some Christian leaders wrongly teach that if someone is not cured of their sickness, it's because their faith is weak. This teaching has been a cause of oppression of those who suffer from sickness. It makes them feel unworthy of God's love and mercy.

Native and Mexican American psychologist Eduardo Duran reminds us that there is a difference between being healed and being cured. "Healing has to do with harmony and balance of spirit," he writes. "You could have the worst illness imaginable and still be healed. . . . On the other hand, curing has to do with the removal of symptoms or disease." Human beings cannot cure the inevitable. Everyone will experience disease and sickness and eventually die. The only difference is that they may die without healing or out of balance. In Native medical thinking, writes Duran, "it is perfectly okay to die. But is not okay to die out of balance with the force that creates life and death." For Christians who believe in the promise of resurrection, dying should likewise not be our worst fear. Living separated from God and without harmony should be.

I imagine the disciples and followers of John the Baptist feeling like the young woman from Peru when John was arrested and eventually executed. Why would they believe in the promise of the Messiah, the liberator, if their prophet was not liberated from imprisonment and death? Why would Peter, Andrew, James, and John leave everything and follow Jesus if the other man who also proclaimed, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near" was vulnerable and unprotected from attacks by his enemies? Why would we believe in a crucified God?

The disciples followed Jesus and believed in him for the same reasons we do it. Because he does not hide his face from us, we can experience his love, mercy, and grace even amid suffering.