



LESSONS IN LIVING

In Times of Fear

A St. Andrew's Sermon
Delivered by Dr. Jim Rigby
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Scripture Reading: Psalm: 23 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

Well, the 23rd Psalm is pretty easy to like. A lot of the Psalms are not so easy, and you go there and they're really bitter or angry or vengeful. I used to hate the Psalms, a long time ago (laughter) and I think it was because I first heard them in funerals, in bad funerals, and there is nothing quite like a bad funeral to make you question religion as a whole enterprise. I remember the "God will not let your foot slip" and the "God who takes care of you doesn't slumber", and that is fine if someone dies at 99 years old, but if somebody's just been eaten by bear; the foot slipping and God taking care of everything like a shepherd is a little harder to buy. And I was always sort of like the kid who was asked if likes Psalms and he said "not particularly" and this very pious mother said "well, you know I have a child younger than you and he loves Psalms so much if I offered him candy or a Psalm, he says 'Mommy, mommy give me the Psalms' (laughter) 'You know the angels sing Psalms in heaven and I want to be an angel here on earth.' "So I give him two pieces of candy." (laughter) smart kid, smart kid.

So it is a huge surprise when I started visiting hospitals, visiting people in times of duress, to realize how powerful the Psalms can be. When you are bitter, for example, and there is a Psalm written in bitterness, that worldview speaks to you in a way that pious poetry doesn't. And when you are afraid, something like the 23rd Psalm reaches through the fears. It doesn't work around them--it goes into the fear more deeply, and we find a peace beneath that level of the storm.

In a way, Psalms are written in a very childlike imagery, and we can be put off by the childishness. But there are other times when that's exactly the level we're at and we might not show that raw fear or bitterness to anyone else, but the Psalms are like having a counselor there in a very profound way. It's like having somebody outside of you that leads you deeper into your own heart, and sometimes that is not easy to do. Have you ever tried to tickle yourself? (laughter) You are a kid and see other people tickling and laughing and you try to tickle yourself and it doesn't work. If you've ever had the hiccups and try to scare yourself so you wouldn't (laughter); it doesn't work. Having somebody outside of you walk you through those places and into, not way from, but into those places in the heart that sometimes we are embarrassed about

can be incredibly helpful. And as we said in the introduction of the scripture that word that's written down can awaken the word that's written in us. The wisdom on that page can bring to the surface level the wisdom in our own heart which can be precisely what we need.

The three things I want to look at, particularly in the face of fear, is that call to us to turn towards our fear--that the Psalm stops us in our running and turns us toward the thing that we are afraid of. It dissolves us into the reality; it immerses us into the reality of that situation and helps us to kind of ride the wave through that crisis, and we'll walk through each one of those.

First, turning towards what we fear. Aristotle said, "Fear is the anticipation of an evil". When you think pain is just around the corner those images can be overwhelming in a way that life never is quite that scary. Do you remember when you were taught that horrible, horrible prayer--*Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray God my soul to keep, if I should die before I wake*- Horrible, right? You weren't even *thinking* of death before somebody said this will help you relax. (laughter). This will help you just drift off to sleep. I always talk about writing the rest of it, you know— *and if a bear comes into my room, chase him off with a broom; and if a skeleton dances on the*—that kind of thing.

There's a difference between fear and horror. The philosopher, Sartre, has a wonderful scene in the book on emotions, where it talks about the difference between fear, which is very healthy, and horror, which is almost metaphysical in its depth. He said it's when you are walking by a window and out of the corner of your eye, you see somebody pressing their face against the window kind of grinning at you, your heart leaps in terror. He said fear is the belief that they might break the window and actually hurt you; horror is the belief that they're affecting you magically through the glass. I used to be a very evil person (laughter), --this was before the ministry thing. (laughter) As late as Seminary, I would always enjoy scaring people (and I put that in the past tense). My brothers, my younger siblings, were fair game, fodder for that kind of thing. But even in Seminary, I would hide mannequins in people's rooms (laughter), and the secret, I'm talking scientifically here, the secret of really scaring the bejeebers out of somebody is making sure they see it out of the corner of their eye. Because if you look directly at anything it's not as scary, but when you see it out of the corner of your eye it can be absolutely horrifying. And what the Psalmist realizes is life is like that. Even if you are walking through the valley of the shadow of death, (he's not bringing that up to scare you—he's not doing the "if I lay me down to sleep" kind of thing) the assumption is you're already afraid. It's saying even if you are in that situation where you are walking through the valley of the shadow of death, there is something you can trust. It's the difference sometimes when you turn toward your situation and look at it between fear and horror. Fear, we can live with, horror unravels us. So we turn towards what it is that we think we fear and it's never quite the monster we thought. There's nothing less scary than a direct shot of a monster. When you were a kid and you see a scary movie and you'd buy books of those monsters, and you look at it and you say, oh my God I was scared of that? Remember the Creature From the Black Lagoon and The Mummy? All those things look really silly when you look at them flat. Well the things we are terrified of in life are flat as well.

So we turn directly towards them, and the other is we dissolve into the reality of that situation--where it talks about "lying beside still waters", just the elemental things. Whenever you are

terrified, if you feel your feet and your hands, it will change the situation. Because its being lost in our imagination that makes fear unbearable. It's imagination that we can't deal with. I used to be; well I still am, afraid of heights. When I was very young, one of the older kids told me let go of the swing set up high and they would catch me when I fell, (laughter) which they didn't (laughter) so since then, falling has always been terrifying to me. And whenever I went skiing (you have to go through mountains, (laughter) crazy thing), I would just want to be on the floor board—just terrified, and this person I was going skiing with says “what is the problem here?” And I say “I just don't want to fall.” He said, “Are you crazy, the trees will kill you.” (laughter) If you go over the side, the trees will poke through the car--they'll kill you. And I was fine after that. (laughter) I was fine, because I wasn't afraid of death; I was afraid of my image of death, sitting going like this (gesture) for ten minutes as I am falling through the air. (laughter) that's what I was afraid of, not the actual death.

Sacraments help us go into our experience more deeply. In a few moments, we are going to have a sacrament, and the sacrament was given to people in a really scary time. And the sacraments, around the world, they're made of dirt or fire, or water or bread, wine—simple things, elements that are part of our life and when we come back to them, the fear does not become horror.

The last thing is riding the wave, and that's this promise of *I'll live in God's house forever*. Now that's been really cheapened by traditional teachings to just be a big mansion some place, and isn't it amazing that it doesn't get rid of your fear because you know that everything changes. You know at some level you are that change and so that the images of permanence are in many ways very scary. It's that viewer outside of your life that looks at your life, that imaginary viewpoint where you are standing outside of your situation watching it all; that's where the terror comes from, because the ultimate fear is not of death, it's of abandonment. For human beings, if you ever go deeply enough into your fear, what you will discover is you're not afraid of death; you're afraid of abandonment. And so the promise of scripture is not a vain promise--asking you to believe something hypothetical that's outside of your experience. It is leading you deeper into your experience until your tissues remember; I am nature; I am life; I am the universe. I can't fall out of it. So even if this container breaks, the energies that are expressed through it do not break. If you were to remember you were a wave of something, and I'm not pretending to know what that is, but you're wave of something else, then even pain is not permanent, because you're not permanent. And sometimes that's all it takes to live through it. Depression is not permanent, because everything changes. No storm lasts forever, and that means hell is impossible as a permanent place because you can't put a wave in prison. It also means heaven would not be permanent. What it's calling to is your home within life itself; your most fundamental being which is that change which is that expression of something--who knows what.

When you hear thunder, it can be really scary until you realize what's going on there. Lightning hits and then thunder sounds. If you hear the thunder that means the lightning missed you. (laughter) Thunder should be the happiest sound of all (laughter). So what these callings do is take us deeply enough into our experience—we go Oh yeah! Thunder is scary, but it means I'm still watching it all. What is being said here when it talks about living in God's house forever is when your body dies; one thing you know is you will not be there to see it. Your horror is of that imaginary of watching yourself die or being in a box underneath the ground for all eternity with dirt in your face. That's not where you are going to be. You are life; you're the expression of a

fundamental life, not life like biology, but life like electricity. And that electricity is not random- it carries an intelligence into it; it seeks out certain patterns and avoids other patterns. That may not sound real personal but you can build a personal on that.

To say God is our shepherd is a very childlike image and sometimes that's exactly what we need. But the truth that is revealed in that image is very mature and it is a foundation on which you can build your life. I've seen these Psalms work in people's lives not to get them to avoid their pain, but to go into their pain and find hope there in the real situation. The Psalms lead us into places in the heart that sometimes we least want to be. But then the Psalm, the wisdom on the page of the Psalm, awakens the wisdom in our own heart and in our hands and in our being. And we do what the Psalms always call us to do; we turn towards that thing that we fear and until it's no longer horrifying. We dissolve into the reality around us, we come back to our bodies, we come back to the reality of the day, and finally and most blissfully, we ride the wave.

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