

## **He Tried to Tell Them**

Psalm 27  
Luke 13:31-35

The great Old Testament scholar Mitchell Dahood calls Psalm 27, “a poem of triumphant confidence in the face of treacherous enemies.” I think we could all use a shot of confidence just about now. The Russian attack on Ukraine has put the world on the brink of war. When a regime is willing to bomb maternity hospitals, to threaten the integrity of decommissioned nuclear reactors, and to prevent women, children and elderly refugees from fleeing to safety, you wonder whether any limits exist any longer. And how should our political leadership respond? No clear right answer presents itself. Seeming too weak may lead to World War III. Seeming too aggressive may lead to World War III.

King David wrote Psalm 27. It alternates between exultant proclamation and prayer, between bold statements and petitions to God. Proclamation and prayer are two powerful tools for spiritual growth. But reading the psalm more holistically may offer better insight into how we can gain spiritual confidence in the face of treacherous enemies. In Mitchell Dahood's wonderful translation David opens with a proclamation: “Yahweh is my light and my salvation, whom need I fear?” When evil ones attack “they...are the ones who stumble and fall.” He wants only one thing, “to enjoy the sweetness of Yahweh, and to consult him in his Temple.” He concludes, “This I believe: I shall see the goodness of Yahweh in the land of the living.” The author is a

man who enjoys the security of having a relationship with God. David believes in God, in God's goodness, in God's power. And David knows God intimately enough to draw strength from this faith.

David intersperses these proclamations with prayers. He petitions God for shelter “in times of trouble”. He asks that God pity him, answer him, show his face to him. He wants God to “teach me your way, lead me in the path of integrity.” Above all he repeatedly asks that Yahweh not abandon him. Looking at Psalm 27 as a whole we find the writing of a man with a range of needs to be satisfied, from physical safety to spiritual security. And this man has a living relationship with the God to whom he prays. The lesson for us should be clear: stay close enough to God to ask God for whatever you need. Use your living relationship with God to make your petitions known. This is far from being manipulative or selfish; God **wants** us to do this.

No record exists that Abraham Lincoln ever joined a church. When, however, he lived in Springfield, Illinois he rarely missed worship at the First Presbyterian Church. In Washington D.C. he often walked two blocks from the White House to attend the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church. His personal secretary John Nicolay, writing in his memoirs, recalled Lincoln telling him he appreciated the Presbyterians' ability to combine head and heart, intellect and faith. May that ever remain the case! Not a Lincoln expert, I nevertheless have read a great deal about him. I know he observed regular spiritual disciplines of prayer and journaling. During the grueling ordeal of his Civil War presidency Lincoln made frequent biblical allusions in his speeches. He

grasped Christian teaching on the deepest of levels and drew strength from whatever his relationship with God may have been. Indeed, does it not encourage us to think that even a man who kept organized religion at a bit of distance could still, through God, gain the power to press on through the hardest of ordeals?

Abraham Lincoln's second inaugural address, delivered just forty-one days before his assassination, is a miracle of brevity and profundity. If only our presidents could still express themselves so clearly and quickly. Of course he wrote every word of its four paragraphs. His great peroration concludes: "With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right—as God gives us to see the right—let us strive on to finish the work we are in to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations."

What does Lincoln petition God for in the conclusion to his second inaugural address? That a nation at war might exhibit charity and righteousness. That God would send healing. That those widowed and orphaned by the fight be taken care of, and that peace might prevail. In his longest paragraph, the third, he expresses clearly that in his mind the battle has been about maintaining the Union while at the same time eliminating slavery. I do not easily engage in hagiography, in the habit we have of seeing our heroes as holy or even perfect. At sixty-two years of age, after thirty-seven years of ministry, I have become too convinced of our sinful natures to worship any man or woman. But I will admit that Abraham Lincoln comes nearer to the hero mark

than most other human beings.

Ah...but one human being has existed who actually deserves hagiography. His name is Jesus of Nazareth. Son of God and son of man, our confessions tell us Jesus was God **and** human. As a human being he could die. Our passage from Luke tells us he fully intended to do so. Let us start our examination of this passage with the odd note in its first verse. Jesus' life is in peril, Luke tells us, and who warns him to escape? Some Pharisees. Hearing that Herod wants to kill him, they urge him to flee. Hang on a moment. Were not the Pharisees Jesus' implacable enemies? Some of them were. Some of them may not have been. As sincerely religious men and serious scholars of the Pentateuch, the Pharisees looked for the appearance of the Messiah foreseen by the prophets. For various reasons the expectation that Messiah would appear at any moment had reached a fever pitch in Jesus' day. Many believed he was the one. Many others did not.

Regardless, virtually nobody in those days understood that the Messiah had to die. But Jesus did. He knew the Messiah had to pay for the sins of the people. The Messiah would not lead the children of God to temporal, this-world victory, but to the kind of eternal victory David begged for in Psalm 27. The Messiah would die—and live. The Messiah would atone—and triumph. The Messiah would fulfill God's plan by allowing sinful human authorities to appear to prevail, all the while accomplishing the purposes of God.

Last week I had the frustrating privilege of driving three of our Afghan guests to medical appointments. My medical experience has mostly consisted of making appointments with doctors and clinics at my convenience, then receiving their services more or less on schedule. In sum, I have felt—rightly or wrongly—that I retain a certain amount of control over my care. Not so for men recently arrived in Terre Haute from Afghanistan. As we drove back and forth across this city, trying to keep their paperwork in order, using apps and online services to translate, I found myself growing angry. Why did it have to be so hard to get a polio vaccination? Why did it have to take so much of my precious time to get an x-ray? Then Mr. A met Ms. A.

Mr. A is one of our Afghan guests. Ms. A works at Union Hospital. A local doctor ordered an x-ray for Mr. A. I presented him at the appointed time and Ms. A conducted the intake interview. She was fascinated by his appearance and accent. (Mr. A. is one of the more fluent English speakers among our guests.) They had a bit of a conversation. Her sympathy gained his trust. He showed her The Video. It starts moments after his house in Mazari Sharif, Afghanistan was hit by mortars or shells last August. His children and wife scream and run outside. Rubble falls from the ceiling. Mr. A collaborated with our soldiers. He has no doubt this strike was aimed at him. He knows that his wife and children are still alive. But they are in Afghanistan and only God knows how long they will stay alive.

Ms. A, a thirty-something Caucasian resident of our area, was deeply moved by The Video. Tears ran down her cheeks. Then she walked out of her booth, out of our

sight, only to appear behind us a few seconds later. She held out her arms. Mr. A, a Muslim, did not know how to react. She went all in. She gave him a full body hug. After a couple of awkward moments he put his hands on her shoulder blades and hugged her back. Tears ran down his cheeks, as well. After they parted she walked us to radiology. When she left us he spoke into the phone app we use to translate our more complicated sentences. "I have hugged only two other women in my life," he said, "My mother and my wife."

Jesus had to die. He had to pay a physical price for the sins of others. All others. He paid for the sins of both Ms. and Mr. A, whether either of them acknowledges it. He tried to tell anyone who would listen but they could not all hear him. Can we hear him now? Have we yet learned that we are complicit in his death? Have we yet learned that he knew—from before time began—it would happen? Have we yet learned that we create dividing lines between human beings that he does not recognize, lines between Russians and Ukrainians, between Christians and Muslims?

Jesus tried to tell people what he had to do and why. Judging from current events it would seem obvious that not enough people understand. Strive to get close enough to him to perceive his protection. We all need an embrace from time to time. David prayed for it. Pray not triumphantly, but humbly that you might come to a greater understanding—and have greater gratitude—for Jesus' loving sacrifice. He offers us a full embrace. Put your arms up and hug him back.