

Of Whom Shall I Be Afraid?

Psalm 27:1

November 17, 2024 – Center Harbor Congregational Church, United Church of Christ

Rev. Dr. Cathryn Turrentine

How are you feeling these days? I have heard from a lot of you recently, and I know that for many of you, this is a season of deep anxiety, of fear for the future. It is a difficult place to sit, isn't it? Unsure of what comes next, but pretty sure that it won't feel like safe harbor.

On the day after the election, I wrote that some of us may feel like we are in exile, and we are likely to be here for a long time, so we have to find a way to live in this new world. Build houses here, as Jeremiah said. Plant gardens and eat what they produce. Marry and have children. Pray for the welfare of the nation, because in its welfare we will find our own. That is a tough prescription, but it is nevertheless God's word to those living in exile.

Today, we hear a different word, from Psalm 27: The Lord is my light and my salvation; of whom shall I be afraid? This passage brought to mind the time in my life when I was most afraid, and also surest of God's protecting hand. I don't think I have ever shared this story publicly, because it is very difficult to tell, but I trust all of you to receive it with care, and so I am going to share it today.

There was a time in my life when I was stalked by someone who had attacked me physically, someone who knew where I lived, where I worked, and where I went to church. The police were involved, and they told me to go to a hotel and hide for a few days. So, I threw some clothes in a bag, took some personal days off of work, and sat in a hotel room with the curtains closed, watching TV. The longer I hid, the more anxious I became.

Then Sunday came, and I knew I couldn't hide any longer. I got dressed, checked out of the hotel, and went to church. A friend who knew what was going on asked me why I was out in public, and I remember feeling fierce. I remember feeling a growing strength in my arms and a light glowing from my chest. I remember the way I clenched my fist when I said, "I will NOT be afraid to go to church. I claim the protection of the Living God. I WILL be here. I WILL be here."

The Lord is my light and my salvation, of whom could I possibly be afraid?

Knowing that God was with me gave me the strength to return to my own life, my own values – in fact, God's presence in that moment required me to live out my values. Get dressed. Go to church. Show my face in the world. Stand up for myself. God's presence in that moment forbade me to hide, forbade me to be less than I am. God called me back to my full self. It was a turning point for me in many ways. A point of great clarity, even though my life was just swirling around me. In that moment, I had a sure center point, a guiding star, and I knew I would be okay.

When our world has been rocked, we all need a few days to sit behind closed curtains, pulling ourselves together. But there comes a time when we have to be fierce. In the days to come, this church will be needed all the more in our community and in our world. We will need to be clear what our call is –

welcoming strangers, speaking up for the oppressed, feeding hungry people, visiting those who are lost and alone, working for justice. We may be called upon to act outside our comfort zone, to offer God's love in ways we have never needed to before, to stand up for all of God's children.

This week, Dave and I saw the new movie Conclave. It is about a conclave of cardinals, choosing a new pope. At one point there is a huge argument between cardinals who want to defend the traditions of the church – returning to the Latin mass, for example, and rejecting any connection with other faiths – and other cardinals who want the church to continue reaching outward in new ways. At the height of the argument, one cardinal rises and says, “The Church is not tradition. The Church is not the past. The Church is whatever we do next.”

The Lord is our light and our salvation, of whom shall we be afraid?

Whether we feel like we are in exile or we feel right at home, let us take the time we each need and be gentle with everyone who is hurting. And then let us begin to feel fierce. Let us feel our growing strength and the light of God glowing within us. We will show up for a world that needs us, that needs the light of God. And we will claim the call of the Living God that we are to be the Body of Christ in this broken world.

Especially in worrisome times, God calls us to our full selves. We cannot hide. We will not abandon our values. We will not hide our light under a bushel. We will not be less than God's own people, even if we are living in exile.

This church is not merely its traditions. This church is more than what we have been in the past. This church is whatever we do next. Let us be fierce.

Amen