

A Psalm for the End of the World

Psalm 27

*Living God, let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of all our hearts, be acceptable in your sight,
O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.*

Psalm 27 is a prayer that is appropriate for the end of the world. It's a prayer that can be offered after facing a life-altering moment, where you know nothing will be the same again. It's a prayer that is brutally honest about the pain of the world, about how sometimes life just doesn't feel fair. It doesn't pull any punches. But it's a prayer for that moment with a deep breath—a pause, a respite, a quiet chance to regroup—in the midst of despair, before facing whatever comes next. Perhaps it would be more apt to say that this is a prayer offered in the eye of a hurricane, from one who tried so long to save themselves from the storm, but is committed to not making the same mistakes again when the storm returns. It's a prayer offered from that moment of clarity, like Lin-Manuel Miranda described in his Broadway masterpiece *Hamilton*, saying, "*In the eye of a hurricane / There is quiet / For just a moment / A yellow sky*". This is the deep breath after struggling to save yourself, and coming to the life changing realization that the world is new and you're not God... More struggle will come, but everything will be different. It's a prayer appropriate for the end of the world.

Perhaps it would be helpful to clarify what I mean when I say, "the end of the world." I think that can mean a lot of things. I remember when I was very little, I was helping with something in the kitchen when I bumped my elbow against the toaster oven. It had just been heating up our breakfast, so it was very hot, and burned me pretty good! I had never been burned like that, and suddenly my world was over. The world where nothing hurt me like that had ended, and I was left to face a new reality where things burned me and hurt me and I had to be responsible for the things I touched because my mom and dad couldn't keep me from touching everything all the time.

My world where I could run down a hill recklessly ended the day I tripped, fell, and sprained my wrist for the first time. I had to be mindful of my speed, because if I wasn't it would hurt. My world where I could bike as fast as I wanted ended the day I went flying over the handlebars and crashed into a tree. I was scared to ever go that speed again, and the carefree world I knew before was gone.

When I was in high school, I was in love once. Until the day I got dumped. I didn't know it was possible to feel that kind of pain. Burns, sprained wrists, and bruises were one thing, but I didn't know the heart and soul could hurt like that too. My world without heartbreak ended. My world ended in a similar way when I lost my grandfather, and I faced the reality of a loved one's death for the first time. My world ended when my dad had quadruple bypass surgery and waiting in fear I realized that just because someone is your hero, it doesn't mean they're invincible.

As we learn new things, meet new people, confront old biases, reconcile old differences, face new threats, weather seasons of loss, mourn loved ones who have died and futures that will never be, as we fear what comes next... in a very real way, the world ends. It would be easy to look back at these stories and write them off as insignificant, but just because we have perspective, or a different experience,

doesn't mean these world-ending stories are any less real, any less significant, or any less a part of our lives.

The world is full of big feelings. If I've had these moments, I know you have too. Our God is big enough to bear these big feelings, and meet us there. Our psalms are bold enough to speak honestly about the wide range of transcendent, joyful, sorrowful, mournful, devastated, and resilient feelings we feel.

Our Summer of Psalms preaching series has introduced us to two different types of psalms so far: Psalms of orientation for when life is stable and the world seems trustworthy, like we heard in Psalms 1 and 113; and Psalms of disorientation for when the bottom drops out and the tradition feels like a lie, like we heard last week with Psalm 69. There's a third type of Psalm as well, which we can call a psalm of reorientation for when faith in a trustworthy God and creation are found again. Psalm 27 serves for us today as a bridge between a psalm of disorientation and a reorientation. Psalm 27 has a foothold in both. This is a song of profound lament, one that expresses the pain of world ending abandonment. *"Do not give me up to the will of my adversaries, for false witnesses have risen against me, and they are breathing out violence,"* the psalmist says. A world without the betrayal of friends, without the slander of enemies, is ending. And so the psalmist prays to God. It marks the end of the psalmist's life of trying to save themselves and be the greatest power of their life. This psalm shows both surrender and freedom. As I said before, this psalm is the deep breath after struggling to save yourself, and coming to the life changing realization that the world is new and you're not God... but recalling that God is for you. *"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?"*

This prayer becomes deeply personal. That's the bold claim, and perhaps necessary claim of a psalm of reorientation: That God is **for me**. Yes, God is for us all. God is faithful and good and just and merciful and steadfast and infinite and powerful and humble and above all things. But it does us no good to simply wax poetically about God's goodness, without proclaiming that God's goodness is ours. God's love is for us, God's salvation is for us, God is with us in the storm and God is with us in the eye of the hurricane where there is quiet for just a moment. God will be with us when the storms come again. But this time, we face those storms with a new hope.

"I believe that I shall see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living." The promises of God are not far off. They don't belong in some distant day. They are here and now, and we will see them here and now. We cannot save ourselves, and as we surrender to this knowledge, we find freedom in the God who has always been with us and is already setting us free.

The psalm concludes, *"Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the Lord!"* This way of facing the future is not naïve about the realities of our world. This psalm is perfectly clear just how dangerous and deadly life can be. In countless ways, for countless people, the world ends every day. And yet, the promise remains true: *"I shall see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living."* We stake our lives on this hope.

With each of those stories before about the ways my world has ended, I realize now that I was never alone. What was comforting to me in those times were the ones who met me there to tend my burns, brace my wrist, clean my cuts and bruises, bear the tears of a broken heart, hold my grief in loss, and shelter my fear in the arms of understanding. Faithful people were there not to dismiss and diminish my world ending moments, but say, "Yes, this hurts. Yes, this is painful. Yes, I've been there before. Your grief is valid, your sadness true. But I'm here with you now, as someone was with me before. I won't leave you here."

Like the helping hand of a loved one there to tend our hurts or bear our broken hearts, this psalm is a gift to us when our world ends again and again. It's a promise, that no matter what, God will meet us where we are, and God won't leave us there. *"Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the Lord!"* That final proclamation of the psalm is not a promise of no more pain, but a deep trust in the God who will be with us along the way. That God is for us. That God is with us. That God is always working goodness and mercy, and calling us to join in that work of redemption. In this way, we will see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living.

For all of us, in this season of COVID-19, as new cases soar in our country and we face a climate of fear and worry, our world in many ways has ended. We have the opportunity now to stand in the eye of the hurricane, to take a deep breath, the let go of our vain efforts to save ourselves by minimizing what is happening, and to trust. We trust that God is with us. From this trust, we can turn to the other things God has given. God has given us community and neighbors to care for. God has given us gifted and skilled medical professionals. God has given us the call to humble ourselves in service of others. Our old world is ending, but this is not cause for outright despair. God will be with us as we make a new world. A world rooted in compassion and care and community and hope and unity and justice and the dignity of all God's children. Let us trust in the lord, take heart in the Lord, be of good courage, and face what is to come.

Our psalmist says, *"Now my head is lifted up above my enemies all around me, and I will offer in his tent sacrifices with shouts of joy; I will sing and make melody to the Lord."* Even when there is danger, fear, and uncertainty all around, still we raise our song of praise, still we worship, still we hope... because God is with us. God is for us. That's a promise that can bear the end of the world, and reorient our lives to build a new one. *"Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the Lord!"*

Amen.