



# The New England Church Pulpit

New England Congregational Church UCC  
Aurora Illinois

OF FEAR AND FAITH

April 3, 2016

Christianity/Judaism

Psalm 27

*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?*

*When evil advances against me to devour me,  
when my enemies and my foes attack me, they will stumble and fall.*

*Though an army besiege me,  
my heart will not fear;*

*though war break out against me,  
even then will I be confident.*

*One thing I ask of the Lord,  
this is what I seek:*

*that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life,  
to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord and to seek him in his temple.*

*for in the day of trouble he will keep me safe in his dwelling;  
he will hide me in the shelter of his tabernacle and set me high upon a rock.*

*I will sing and make music to the Lord.*

*I am confident of this:*

*I will see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living.*

*Wait for the Lord;*

*be strong and take heart and wait for the Lord.*

Islam

Qur'an 2.112

*Whoever submits his will to God, while doing good deeds, his wage is with the Lord, and  
no fear shall be upon them, neither shall they sorrow.*

Fear. **F**alse **E**vidence **A**ppearing **R**eal. There is no passion as contagious as fear. Politicians and religionists the world over are keenly aware of that and so trade in fear. They know that fears keeps people in their control. Fear garners votes; fear stifles creativity and thinking; fears keeps people in line, under the thumb; fear establishes abusive power. “Fear,” reminds Bertrand Russell, “is the main source of superstition and one of the main sources of cruelty. To conquer fear is the beginning of wisdom.” And thus is the wisdom of the Psalmist, to remind us that the antidote to fear is to wait upon God, to trust in the still, small voice of truth, to make music and trade in hope.

Fear has the potential to destroy us or to save us. Fear can overwhelm us to the point of paralyzing our ability to function or it can serve as an alarm to arouse our awareness of danger, putting us on high alert, making us ready to react. Peter Steinke reminds us that neuroscience links fear to the amygdala in the brain. This small structure scouts for trouble and, in detecting it, sounds an alarm, pulling multiple neural cords. As it reacts quickly to the threat, it ignores fine distinctions and uses generalizations. Its strength is rapid processing and its weakness is lack of precision.

With extreme fear, we can hardly shift attention elsewhere. Tunnel vision occurs. Fear takes over, overwhelming our imaginative capacities and advanced reasoning. We become locked into the present and lose the ability to envision something other than what is now threatening. Reality is pruned to the paralyzing moment. (Fear Factor, *Christian Century*, February 20, 2007).

It doesn't take much to create fear today. Our news is filled with fear-inducing activity; things we thought sacred and safe are now potential targets for terrorists; bigoted people with weapons put us on high alert; scared people who are frightened of imaginary entities give cause for alarm. It is difficult to take serious stock in “the Lord is my light and salvation; of whom shall I fear?” It seems so nebulous compared to fear's seeming reality.

But when we are of a fearful heart, we forget the plot of our story as people of faith, says Steinke. God is not only the author of all things; the God of Genesis; the Mother of all creation; the beginning Source; but also the God of promise; of the things that will be; of new creation; of the future; of tomorrow. God is the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end.

The story by which we nourish our faith journey is a story that responds to fear and terror with hope and peace. The trajectory of Jesus's life had its share of terror and fear as trumped-up charges by the powers that be, both religious and secular, resulted in an excruciatingly painful and humiliating execution on a cross. His human existence was filled with the same fear that threatens to paralyze us. Like him, we swing as a pendulum between fear and hope, with one foot in the world of anxiety and the other foot in the world of God's peace, shifting our weight back and forth between fear and faith.

The reality is that no evil has ever held sway for all time. No abusive government, no oppressive system, no fearmongering dictatorship, religious or political, has dominated life for all time. It seemed like it to those who had to endure oppression for hundreds and hundreds of years, but in looking back over the larger picture, we see the presence of God overarching like the rainbow in a snowy spring sky. People of faith live into the belief that there is a ‘rest of the story,’ as Paul Harvey so reminds us.

There are times when we have no choice but to fear. The reptilian brain deep in the core of our being, maintained for good purpose from our evolutionary past, forces an automatic fear in response to danger. We need it to survive. But as our human brains have evolved, we realize, as did the Psalmist, that we often have a choice. We can choose to be motivated by hope rather than by fear.

Viktor Frankl reminded us that we become who we are by making decisions. Faith is an act, a personal commitment to an unverifiable truth. Faith is a daily affirmation that life affords meaning as well as happiness; it is known in this confidence to choose. Will we choose to live by fear or by faith? Jesus was afraid, but it did not stop him from going forward, even toward death; and now we, too, know something of Easter hope on the other side of a Bad Friday that is called Good.

We do not know how things will turn out. There are no guarantees that life will be as we want it to be. There is no divine promise that we will escape pain or tragedy. However, living with courage, being strong in faith, and trusting the love of God are within our reach. Sometimes it is our own inner resources where we find strength to live into hope; sometimes we can only believe because others become our strength and our hope.

Sometimes the lamps of our lives are burning with borrowed oil. Sometimes the flashlights that are turned on during the power outage of our souls are operating on the last ounce of energy from batteries long since expired. Nonetheless, there is light, be it ever so faint. This is the journey of faith, that there is hope enough to take us through the valley of the shadow of death and enough music to get us through another hour, another day, another year.

Life is sometimes like a long drive on a dark highway with headlights that illuminate the road only a short distance ahead of us. We can't see beyond the beams of those lights; we know not what lies beyond the limits of our sight. But the light always precedes us, a fraction of a mile at a time, and we can drive all the way through the night that way.

We come to communion once again to remind ourselves of the steady rhythm of God's presence throughout the events of our lives. Here once again we can align ourselves with that which is beyond ourselves, with that which is sometimes seen and that which is never seen. Whatever fear, whatever perception, whatever political rhetoric, whatever religious oppression, whatever evil may trigger our reptilian response of fear, there is faith to hold on to the light and salvation of God. Amen.

—Gary L. McCann

## PASTORAL PRAYER

Holy of holies, Peace that passes human understanding, grant us sanctuary in this place today that we might know an inner quiet, a supreme serenity, and the still, small voice that can be known most wonderfully in your presence. We have come from a restless and busy world, noisy and troubled, all too often defined by hatred and fear. We have come from a world that is unsettled and violent, whether by our own doing or by the forces of nature. And so we come today to be mindful of our foundation, to take stock in our joys and blessings, to plumb the depths of grace and power that are deep within our spirits where you reside.

We come here not to escape; we come not to hide or find excuses for running away from the noisy, hate-filled world, but to find strength to live faithfully in it. Here we find communion with you, Holy God, as well as with those gathered in this room. And in that strength, we are renewed and grounded in a love that calls us to be the body of Christ where we live. Give us what we need to stand against the powers of evil so we will not cave in or give up or succumb to apathy. Grant us the wisdom to know how best to respond when confronted by that which undermines truth. Give us the courage we need to do what is right regardless of the consequences.

In our current political turmoil, nationally and internationally, grant wisdom and calmer spirits to leaders who are too ready to do battle and too reluctant to find peaceful solutions to differences. For larger concerns of global warming, ecology of our earth, equitable and humane treatment of people and animals alike be at the forefront of our international considerations.

For those remembered today who are grieving, and those who are ill or homebound, or who are in pain, those who are afraid, grant them strength of spirit and joy of heart.

May this day of communion be one of strength to face our temptations, bear our grief, overcome our fears and to live under the banner of peace and justice with integrity and hope. In the name of the Christ, Amen.