

**“Light, Salvation, Stronghold”**

**Psalm 27**

**The Rev. Hal Chorpenning, Plymouth Cong’l UCC, 4 March 2007**

Have you ever been in the position of needing God’s protection – shelter – needing God to be your “mighty fortress” because you have felt so weak? *Maybe not.* You might not have had experiences that put you into such an incredible feeling of vulnerability. But, someday you will. You might not be a *campesino* facing a death squad. And you might not be a martyr like Dietrich Bonhoeffer. But someday you will face a challenge so great that only God will be able to sustain you. And having the psalms in your spiritual toolkit will be an amazing gift.

The more time I spend with the psalms, the more of a wonder they are to me. Sometimes I think their richness becomes more apparent as one ages and gets to experience more of the joys and sorrows that life offers us. I think I’ve taken them for granted over the years.

Sure, we know the comforting images of the 23rd Psalm. But the emotional vocabulary of the Psalms is incredible in its breadth and depth. “O God, why have you forsaken me?” the psalm that was on Jesus’ lips according to Matthew’s and Mark’s version of the crucifixion seems to form a great contrast to the confidence expressed by “The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?”

The Psalms were Jesus’ hymnbook – the songs of praise and lament, comfort and protest, and anger and faith that he himself grew up learning and knowing by heart. That is reason enough for us to spend time with them.



Unless you were listening with extreme care, you may not have noticed that Psalm 27 shifts after six verses. It starts with a statement of faith in the form of a doxology...maybe a little similar to the one we opened worship with this morning. “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?”

Who is the psalmist talking to...referring to God in the third person...juxtaposing faith and fear? This section of the psalm exudes confidence – faith – in God: light, salvation, stronghold. It’s a statement of belief and of trust.

The second part of the psalm shifts. No longer are the psalmist’s words **about** God, they are requests made directly **to** God. “Hear, O Lord, when I cry aloud. Be gracious to me and answer me!”

The Taizé Community in France has developed a unique contemplative worship style over the last 60 years, as you know if you’ve joined our Taizé worship on the third Sunday evening each month. There is a particularly beautiful, short chant of the first verse of Psalm 27, and it’s written for in two-part harmony. I’m going to ask Bruce Hansen to join me as we all sing this chant together. Bruce will lead you all on the east side of the sanctuary in the first part, and I will lead you on the west side of the sanctuary in the second part. We’ll try each one separately, and then we’ll sing them simultaneously and hear the harmony.

But, before we begin singing, I want you to envision a situation in your own life when you need God’s light, help, and strength. It could be taking a test at school, facing layoffs at work, or confronting an illness or even your own or someone else’s mortality. Just allow yourself to think for a moment...and keep that situation in mind while we sing the chant.

Bruce, will you and the east side of the sanctuary sing through the first part through two times?

And now, it's our turn on the west side: we'll sing through the second part two times.

Great. Now, I'd invite you to think of your situation, and let's sing the chant together five or six times.

### *East Side of Sanctuary:*



The Lord is my light, my light and salvation: in God I trust, in God I trust. The

### *West Side of Sanctuary:*



The Lord is my light, my light and salvation: in God I trust, in God I trust. The

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I hope you will keep that little chant with you. It can be something you use when you need to center your thoughts and emotions, a phrase you sing to yourself while driving, a meditation you use when you encounter a rocky situation.



That first verse of the psalm has three very potent images of God: light, salvation, stronghold. None of them is an anthropomorphic image of God. There is no father or mother, no son or shepherd.

One of my favorite contemporary images of God is “The Force” from Star Wars, essentially seeing God as the positive energy in the universe. That sounds pretty “woo-woo” until you read the first image of God in Psalm 27: light, which is perhaps the most obvious form of energy around us.

The second image is salvation – help or aid – which occurs in five different places in the Psalms. “Salvation” is one of those loaded theological words, because some Christians divide the world into the saved and the damned. Interestingly, the Jewish Publication Society translation says, “The Lord is my light and my help.”

The third image is the mighty fortress – the stronghold that will keep the enemy away. So, God is your protection.

The very idea that a single verse in a Psalm can have three distinct images of God validates the idea that an ancient community could hold three aspects of God together in relationship: light, salvation, stronghold or creator, redeemer, and sustainer.



Ring Lake Ranch, the ecumenical study center in Wyoming where Sharon, I (and Julie this summer) have studied has morning prayer each day using a litany developed by the Northumbria Community in the north of England near the Holy Isle of Lindisfarne. And the litany, based on Psalm 27, includes this canticle from the Celtic tradition, which uses the image of light:

Christ, as a light,  
illumine and guide me.  
Christ, as a shield, overshadow me.  
Christ under me;  
Christ over me;  
Christ beside me  
on my left and my right.  
This day be within and without me,  
lowly and meek, yet all-powerful.  
Be in the heart of each to whom I speak;  
in the mouth of each who speaks unto me..  
This day be within and without me,  
lowly and meek, yet all-powerful.  
Christ as a light;  
Christ as a shield;  
Christ beside me  
on my left and my right.<sup>1</sup>  
Amen.

*Benediction (same source)*

May the peace of the Lord Christ go with you,  
wherever He may send you.  
May He guide you through the wilderness,  
protect you through the storm.  
May He bring you home rejoicing  
at the wonders He has shown you.  
May He bring you home rejoicing  
once again into our doors.  
Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> The Northumbria Community, *Celtic Daily Prayer*. (SF: HarperSanFrancisco, 2002), pp. 18-19.