

## No Place Else I'd Rather Be Psalm 27

It is no secret that worship attendance has been on the decline in recent decades, and there has been no shortage of articles either brooding or offering hopeful commentary on that trend in our religious publications. One of the more interesting ones I've read was in an essay by John Buchanan, who is the senior pastor of the enormous Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago. It was an essay addressed to ministers, and it offered this advice: skip church some Sunday- do it regularly, in fact- and get out in your community and see what people are doing when they are not sitting in the pews of your sanctuary. See what the other options are out there. When he did this one spring day he found families out having a leisurely breakfast, the only one of the week, probably, there were young adults riding bikes and playing volleyball on the lakefront, children building digging holes and building castles in the sand. They were having fun. He quoted another essayist who reminds that "Our competition is not other churches. Our competition is Disney." (Christian Century, January 26, 2010)

They are right, of course. Frankly, there are a lot more fun things to do Sunday mornings than go to church. But fun isn't the only reason people are staying home Sunday mornings. There are others, like fear. Doubt. Shame.

- A marriage falls apart, and they are both ashamed and worried about what people will think.
- A couple's teenage daughter has dropped out of school and they can't bear to be around other people who just love to talk about how amazing and successful their kids are.
- A woman suffers from depression, and only feels worse when she's around 'happy' people whose lives she imagines are going so much better than hers.

Sometimes people don't go to church because Sunday is the only day they have left themselves any downtime in their overscheduled weeks, but sometimes our pews are empty because the church feels like a place for people who have their lives together, not a place for people who are hurt and afraid and beaten down.

Psalm 27 suggests that just the opposite is true, that church is exactly where we should be when things are going badly. "One thing I asked of the Lord," writes the Psalmist, who seems to be knee-deep in enemies and scoundrels and people bad-mouthing him: "to live in the house of the Lord all the days of my life."

Now, he uses the word, "tent," but what he's talking about is a sanctuary in the truest sense of the word in all its definitions; a place of worship, and a place of refuge and protection, where you are safe from your enemies. A place to sing and pray and bring offerings, and a safe haven from everything that threatens you.

Now to you and me those sound like two very different things; different functions, different purposes. Worship and protection. It reminds me of an establishment we used to pass back in the early 70's when we drove to my grandmother's in Texas: Wayne's

Gun and Barbershop. While they don't outrightly conflict with each other, it seems a stretch to call them a natural partnership.

But David (or whoever this particular psalmist was) seems to think that worship and shelter go together as well as chocolate and peanut butter. That somehow, divine worship and immunity from enemies can not only coexist peaceably under the same roof, but that they are intimately related, that somehow, it is in the very act of being in God's house and worshipping there that we find protection from all that threatens us.

The psalm never explicitly says it, but from experience we have to assume that partly it is being in community. It is simply in the act of being together that we are sheltered and protected. We aren't alone. The world looks and feels a whole lot less scary when we know that the elder who stood up with us when we were confirmed still prays for us; the old lady who smells like your grandma loves you fiercely, and near as you can tell, for no good reason. You feel safe, just being with them, surrounded by them.

I've talked numerous times in here about Anne Lamott, one of my very favorite authors. She writes about stumbling into a tiny, poor-as-dirt Presbyterian Church one day when she was hung over, strung out on drugs, and recovering from an abortion. The singing is what drew her in, the Spirit, and the people are what kept her there, and today she is an elder in that same congregation. She has a funny and touching chapter in *Traveling Mercies* called, Why I Make My Son Go to Church. After first saying that she makes him because she can, because she outweighs him by 75 pounds, she then tenderly goes on to say that she wants him to find what she has there: a light and a haven. She writes, "When I was at the end of my rope, the people at St. Andrew tied a knot in it for me and helped me hold on." And later, when she got pregnant again, they kept her afloat in casseroles and tens, slipped into her purse, and a whole lot of generous and unconditional love. No judgment, no whispered conversations about her. She was never made to feel like she was their mission project. She was family. And she wanted her son, Sam, to know that same feeling of safety and belonging that they extended on behalf of God. No matter what hurdles they faced in life, and they were many, the community in their tiny church provided a safe haven for them.

What the psalmist does specifically talk about, though, is the liturgy, all of the prayers and music and responses that make up a worship service; being a part of the formal, institutional service of worship. And the fact that he does so is rather remarkable, actually. This is not a psalm of praise. It's actually closer to a psalm of lament. There are evildoers out to get him, adversaries, foes, false witnesses spreading lies about him. But what really gets him going is the thought of going to worship -joyfully and exuberantly, singing, shouting for joy, bringing gifts to God, and even crying out to God in anguish in the prayers. It's as if that absolute trust he has in God comes to him from the liturgy. It's the singing itself and the shouts of praise for God's faithfulness that bolster him and reassure him. It's the unison and silent prayers prayed next to someone else that carry his petitions to God. They aren't rote or boring or lifeless. They aren't words said automatically, read off the page without thinking, without engaging. They are the very thing that keep him going, that strengthen him and assure him of God's care.

Another one of my favorite authors, Lauren Winner, converted to Christianity from Judaism, and is now a devout Episcopalian, mostly because of the liturgy. Instead of finding the prayers old fashioned and dry and repetitious, what she has found that they have made their way into her heart and mind, and they come back to her mid-week to encourage her, and speak to her, and pray for her when she cannot find the right words to pray on her own. She doesn't go to worship because she has to, because she is supposed to. She goes because something happens in worship that helps her get through life. She meets God there, and is assured of God's faithfulness.

I know that I am about at the end of my usual 12-15 minute time frame, and that you are probably looking at your watches and thinking about lunch, but I think I would be remiss if I drew a nice conclusion and ended it right here. Yes, I hope that this Psalm speaks to anyone who lives with fear or shame that keeps them away from their church, their community of faith: this is where you belong. This is where you will find your strength and where you will be assured of God's protection. This is your sanctuary.

But I think this psalm also has something important to say to the rest of us. We already think of ourselves as a community, but it calls us to be a certain kind of community. It calls the church to be a place of transparency, a place of utter honesty where someone feels safe in sharing the deep hurts and fears in their life, in naming their enemies, their failures, and asking us to join them praying to God for help and protection.

The honest truth of the matter is that that's all of us. All of us come with fears and pain and shame. We all come with struggles and adversaries and foes, inner demons and outer. We all need a safe place to come and unburden ourselves; where we can take turns praying with and for each other, shouldering each other's troubles, assuring each other that God is mighty and loving and will protect us. If we keep all that inside us, if all we let people see is a brave and successful face, this will never be a sanctuary, not in the truest sense of the word. It will never be a safe place for a young couple who are struggling in their marriage, or a teenager who is about to become a father. And we will never be more than a room full of individuals privately reading words off a page. To be a true community, to be a true sanctuary, we have to be willing to take risks and be real and vulnerable with each other.

And now for that conclusion. This is an unusual psalm. It reads like a psalm of lament, but there is none of the usual, 'where are you God? why won't you answer me and rescue me?' language that laments usually have. This one was written by someone who knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that God is good and faithful and would somehow protect him. He didn't need to be afraid. How did he know? The life and worship of his community of faith bore witness to it in everything they did.