

Davidson College Presbyterian Church
Davidson, North Carolina
Lib McGregor Simmons
Psalm 27
“Looking Up”
2nd Sunday of Advent – Year C
December 6, 2015

Psalm 27 is often categorized as a psalm of trust. As such, it is reminiscent of another psalm of trust, Psalm 23. Both originate in a situation where the writer is in the midst of enemies. Both begin by making an affirmation of faith in the Lord in the midst of these enemies. (1)

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At last Sunday’s officer training session, as a part of our session on personal spiritual disciplines, I shared with the group a portion of the daily devotion which Union Presbyterian Seminary offered for the First Sunday of Advent. Written by Agnes Norfleet, it focused on Psalm 24 which we sang as our opening hymn this morning, “Lift up your heads, ye mighty gates.”

In both Psalm 24 and 27, the temple and its worship are central to the psalm. Both psalms invite us to imagine people going up to the Temple.

In Psalm 27, a great deal of the imagery directs worshipers to look *up*.

In verse 1, we read “the Lord is my light.” And what was light for the ancients who knew nothing of LED Christmas lights? It was the moon and the stars which the divine jeweler’s hand had strewn like so many diamonds cast upon the black velvet night sky.

In verse 4, we read of “behold[ing] the beauty of the Lord...in his temple.” And we can see in our mind’s eye, necks of believers craning upward toward the divine presence in the Holy of Holies.

In verse 6, we hear the Psalmist say, “Now my head is lifted up above my enemies all around me,” the lifting of the head an indication of victory, celebrated with temple sacrifices. (2)

In verse 8, we hear the Psalmist pray, “Your face, Lord, do I seek. Do not hide your face from me.” It brings to mind the words in Exodus 33 that no one is permitted to see the face of the Lord and live, and yet that is precisely the posture that the Psalmist takes, looking up to see the face of the Lord, a testimony to the Psalmist’s intimate relationship with God. (3)

Psalm 27 directs our gaze up, up, up toward the light that is God.

It is a wonder then, as Agnes Norfleet points out, that we can become so burdened at this season of the year by things that wrench our gazes downward instead of up. We look down at our lists of things to do. We look down at our calendars as the days between now and Christmas zip by at warp speed. We look down at our credit cards as we tap our online purchases onto our phones, our tablets, and our computers on Cyber Monday.

Last Sunday we lit the Advent candle of hope, and Advent is meant to be a serene, joyful, hopeful time when we prepare him room as heaven and nature sing. But somehow there is always the tension in the neck between looking down at our daily preoccupations or to look up for God in our midst. (4)

And, of course, it is not only our daily preoccupations which draw us into a downward looking posture. It is also what is happening in the world around us.

I will confess that it has been hard for me to cook up a sermon about looking up into God’s light and to serve it up to you this week.

At our Gathering Around the Word discussion this past Wednesday, a participant shared how she had been at the French bakery Amelie’s where she and her 9-year-old granddaughter were looking at the map of Paris. The grandmother said, “I hope that you’ll get to visit Paris one of these days.” And the

granddaughter responded, "Oh, I don't want to go to Paris." Paris, the City of Light, now a place that evokes fear in a nine-year-old.

And San Bernardino, a city named for a churchman who was canonized for his ability as an arbiter and conciliator, the patron saints of mountaineers, those who look up and go up to those places which in Scripture symbolize drawing close to God, now known as a place of death.

Anger has me looking down. Sadness and lament have me looking down. Most of all, for me at least, a sense of helplessness that no matter how many letters I write to legislators and how much praying you and I do, it hasn't been enough to bring about the stumbling and falling of the adversaries and foes that are gun violence and radical religiosity and the fear and anxiety that have risen up like an army inside, over, around, and among us, so that we might lift our heads above the evil that assails us...this has me looking down.

And so, I'm grabbing hold to Psalm 27 today like a drowning person clinging to a life preserver, scanning the horizon for signs of hope as the Psalmist sings across the centuries, "Wait for the Lord. Be strong. Take heart."

And as I clutch the Psalm, I remember that when the Psalmist exhorts us to wait, it is not like waiting at the DMV for your number to be called. It's not idly checking Facebook and Instagram while you're at a store on Black Friday and the person in front of you has decided that today is the day to exchange the three sweaters that she bought way back before Thanksgiving.

When the Psalmist tells people to look up and wait, he is calling you and me, he is calling worshiping communities across the nation and the world over to active waiting.

It's more like what pro athletes do as they wait for the game to start. You have seen them. Maybe you've even done it yourself....stuck the earbuds in your ears or clapped the earphones on and listened to Katy Perry or Kanye West or Lady Gaga or Blake Shelton whose music pumps you up for the game that is just about to start.

So maybe that is what the Psalm is meant to be for us. Music from the worshiping community for the worshiping community. Music from the worshiping community of Joseph, Moses, Ruth, David, Jeremiah, the exiles, Nehemiah, and beyond the Old Testament, Jesus, the early church, Paul, the martyrs, all of them reminders to us that the life of faith always involves looking up and scanning the horizon for signs of hope in the midst of the enemies which are fear, anxiety, and death, leaning into that we are promised in Revelation, the day when there will be no more wars, no more mourning, no more crying, no more pain, for these are simply things of the past and they have all passed away.

We wait actively.

When we pray, we are actively waiting. When we sing our Christmas carols about peace on earth, we are actively waiting. When we write letters to legislators, we are actively waiting. When we come to worship, we are actively waiting.

And when we share our stories of where we have scanned the horizon and glimpse a sign of hope, we are actively waiting.

And so I close with one little story from this, our own community of faith.

On the day before Thanksgiving, Anne Cooper was in CVS. She was printing some pictures that were going to be used at the reception for her mother's memorial service the following Tuesday. Anne's mother Audrey had died only days before, and surely anybody who has experienced her mother's death so recently should be given a pass to look down into one's own concerns rather than looking up.

But Anne's ears were open. She heard the associate at the cash register ask the Davidson College student if he was headed home for Thanksgiving. He replied, "No. I live in Florida, and I can't afford to go home for Thanksgiving. This is my Thanksgiving dinner since the Commons is closed for Thanksgiving." He pointed to the cereal, milk, and frozen dinner that he was purchasing.

Anne went over to him and she said, "You are not celebrating Thanksgiving alone. You're coming to my house."

She appended, "I'm really not an ax murderer. I promise."

Wow. If this is not an expression of what it means to look up into the light, I don't know what is.

And the good news is that the student accepted Anne's invitation and he showed up and he enjoyed the meal that he shared with Anne and Michael and their dogs Lilly and Black Jack and the other friends that they had not picked up in the CVS, but had invited earlier.

As I said earlier, I started out having a hard time figuring out how to preach this sermon. I started out feeling mad and sad and helpless. But this morning when I got up, I literally could not wait to get to church to read and sing Psalm 27 with you and to tell you this story about Anne who looked up from her own sadness and became a light-giver. I couldn't wait to get to church and echo the Psalmist as he preached to his congregation so long ago: Wait for the Lord. Be strong. Take heart.

1. James Limburg, *Psalms* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000), 88.
2. Walter Brueggemann and William H. Bellinger, Jr., *Psalms* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 140.
3. *Ibid.*
4. Agnes Norfleet, Union Presbyterian Seminary Seasonal Devotions, First Sunday of Advent, November 29, 2015.