**Sermon Lent 5C**

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**Text:** *I will not be afraid of many thousands of people who have set themselves against me all around. (Ps 3:4-6)*

Fear and fright are a potent governing force. In general terms we, living in twenty-first century North America, have less reason to fear than people did in previous centuries or in other parts of our world today. Thanks largely to outbreaks of plague and pestilence, but also to war and the ravage that always came with it, Medieval paintings depicted the skeletal Grim Reaper riding a horse through unsuspecting villages of souls ready for the picking. Such like concerns originated prayers that are preserved in our Lutheran litanies: “From sudden and evil death, good Lord, deliver us.” Thankfully, natural threats such as mass outbreak, fire, storms, and flooding have been largely mitigated by modern science and public safety infrastructures – not to mention long distance communication by way of radio and television, forecasting unavoidable disaster and allowing us to prepare accordingly, which pre-modern people lacked the benefit of.

Yet many people are still living in fear and seized by anxiety. Why is this the case? I could cite debatable statistics and dubious conclusions in answer to the question; but confining our treatment to the Word of God, I believe it is in large part that we have become accustomed to the idea that we control our destinies. We fear the wrong decision may result, not only in missed opportunities, but ultimately death. Pr. Bryan Wolfmueller writes soberly in his book *A Martyr’s Faith in a Faithless World* that, “In some ways, the fear of death is helpful. It helps keep us alive; it keeps us from recklessness and foolishness … But the devil comes along and pushes an awareness of death to the point of fear. He uses our dying against us. The devil uses fear of death to bind us, to keep us, according to Hebrews 2, in ‘lifelong slavery.’ We see how this works. When we fear death, we are open to manipulation. ‘If you do that good thing, you will die…’”

Death implies finality to those who maintain a materialistic worldview. (I say “materialistic” in both the philosophical sense, believing the material world is all that exists and denying any spiritual reality; and in the modern sense, of hoarding material goods and satisfactions that do not outlast this earthly life.) But to those who have been baptized into Christ Jesus, who overcame death and the grave and opened the kingdom of heaven to all believers, death assumes a resurrection.

Thus our Introit for today: “I cried aloud to the Lord, and he answered me from his holy hill. I lay down and slept; I woke again, for the Lord sustained me. I will not be afraid of many thousands of people who have set themselves against me all around.” (Ps 3:4-6) These are a rich set of couplets. King David, when he wrote this Psalm, was fleeing from his rebellious son Absalom, who staged a public relations coup against the rightful king and set up an armed guard around the palace and tabernacle of Jerusalem. Does David despair of God’s help, even when his life is under threat? Does he forget who is in ultimate control, who is in charge, and where he is to be found? No.

The first verse of our Introit anchors us in an immovable sense of safety. “I cried aloud to the Lord,” which is to properly hallow God’s name. The Second Commandment enjoins us to “call upon” God’s name “in every trouble, pray, praise, and give thanks.” Bl. Dr. Martin Luther applies this principle further in the Large Catechism:

For this purpose it also helps us to form the habit of commending ourselves each day to God – our soul and body, wife, children, servants, and all that we have – for his protection against every conceivable need. Thus has originated and continued among us the custom of saying grace and returning thanks at meals and saying other prayers for both morning and evening. From the same source came the custom of children who cross themselves when they see or hear anything monstrous or fearful and exclaim, “Lord God, save us!” “Help, dear Lord Christ!” etc. Thus, too, if anyone meets with unexpected good fortune, however trivial, he may say, “God be praised and thanked!” “This God has bestowed upon me!” (LC I 72-74)

Dr. Luther also, with his famous hymn “A Mighty Fortress,” calls to mind the Forty-Sixth Psalm: “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear though the earth gives way, though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea,” etc. (Ps 46:1-2)

But what David has in view is not just any place of refuge, not just any *feste berg*, but Mount Zion. The One Hundred Eighteenth Psalm opens this way: “I lift up my eyes to the hills. From where does my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.” (Ps 118:1-2) Living in the Cypress valley with its rolling hills (what some might call the “everlasting hills” as an image of paradise in many an American folk hymn), this Psalm of Ascents seems relatable. As it is, this Psalm may have been chanted by pilgrims on their way up the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. That was the place where God was worshipped, and the place from which David in his flight from Absalom was precluded from entering. That did not stop David from seeking an answer “from his holy hill” (Ps 3:4). God hears us in whatever our surroundings or circumstances.

Heaven is God’s throne, and the earth his footstool. Moreover, Jesus Christ, our crucified and risen Lord, has all his enemies under his feet (Ps 110:1). Sin, death, and the devil – hell personified – bend under the yoke of Jesus, a man who in the Incarnation was made like ourselves in every way except without sin. Before him, as St. Paul writes in Philippians, “every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” (Phil 2:10-11) I remember one fellow-student at Trinity Western University bursting out in ecstasy during one evening devotion, “Jesus freaking beat death!”

David puts the matter much more gently, but not less confidently: “I lay down and slept; I woke again, for the Lord sustained me.” (Ps 3:5) We might assume that this refers to natural sleep from which we hope to rise each morning. Perhaps the Holy Spirit, whom we received in Holy Baptism, is reminding us that though we die, we will awaken to new life on the day of resurrection. And I may add this. The bedside prayer, “Now I lay me down to sleep / I pray the Lord my soul to keep / And if I die before I wake / I pray the Lord my soul to take,” fosters a Platonic concept of salvation in which our ultimate good is to end up disembodied souls with harps and halos at the pearly gates. By way of contrast, the version I grew up with closed the verse, instead, in this way: “And see me safely through the night / And wake me with the morning light.” Here the implicitly Pietistic fears of dying a “sudden and evil death” are hushed – as though we weren’t baptized believers in our sleep, but only in our conscious waking hours! But beyond this, “wake me with the morning light,” I by some providence even as a child took to mean the “yet more glorious day” when “the saints triumphant rise in bright array / The King of glory passes on His way.” And – well, one may as well push the envelope to its fullest by saying in this Lenten season: “Alleluia, alleluia!”

Make of all this what you will. The fact remains that, even when danger feels imminent and God far away, he is truly and personally with us in all trial, fear, and need. O Lord, have mercy!