

“I Do My Best Work Under Pressure”

Psalm 27: Luke 13:31-35

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Mary Taylor Memorial United Methodist Church, Milford, Connecticut

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“Lions and tigers and bears, oh my!”

I always associate this time of year with the movie “The Wizard of Oz,” which often appears on television around now and aired the night before the birth of my eldest son. The three travelers—Dorothy, the Scarecrow and the Tin Man—hope to calm their fears as they chant this saying through darkened woods on their way to finding the City of Oz and the Wizard. They run into the very thing they fear, a lion, only to find out that he is the Cowardly Lion and nothing to fear at all.

So this title, “I Do My Best Work Under Pressure,” is about the fears we all face and how we handle them. We most frequently use this phrase when we’re nearly out of time to meet a performance deadline. Maybe for a few of us it is actually true: adrenaline pumps and creative juices flow at the urgency of the ticking clock. Yet for me and, I suspect, a majority of folks, the phrase is designed to excuse procrastination or give us bravado when we feel that nauseous feeling at the likelihood that we may fail to deliver on time. What I know for certain is that I work hard under pressure but it usually isn’t my best.

Yet pressure is with us always: the pressure of expectations—our own or others—at home, work, school or church. Illness or grief is another kind of pressure, as is the pressure of unexpected circumstances, the curve balls of life thrown at us when we’d prefer a fastball in the strike zone. This pressure may elicit many responses, but certainly one is fear: of disappointment, of failure or death. In a sense, then, whenever we do our best work it is under pressure, for pressure is always here!

Today’s readings, particularly the Psalm and the Gospel, reflect this. Psalm 27 is attributed to King David, who certainly had opportunity to fight real lions and bears as a young shepherd. Jesus, in the Gospel, is warned of Herod’s threat on Jesus’ life. The human fears

that must have accompanied his journey toward Jerusalem and the cross are the unspoken background of this passage and our Lenten journey. Metaphorically speaking, we all have lions and tigers and bears to face. It is the stuff of life to deal with fears unwelcome and uninvited. While we may wish for courage to fight, our temptation may be to flee or fold.

Some of our fears are simply Cowardly Lions, ready to run away at the moment we are willing to stand up to them. Others are as real as the Cross, with consequences every bit as life-changing. How can we, as people of faith, be courageous in the face of fear? David's psalm suggests four ways not only to cope but to conquer; indeed, to "do our best work under pressure."

First, **affirm our faith**. Most of us have doubts sometime and especially in times of trouble. What can we personally affirm? Note that David does not say "*The Lord is light*" but "*The Lord is my light, my salvation.*" God's strength becomes our own. I recently spoke with someone facing significant difficulties. They said something like, "*I have my faith, and I believe God will not give me more than I can handle.*" While it would be presumptuous for me to say that for them, it was their affirmation of faith for them to say it for themselves.

Yes, we dare to affirm God's care for us even in hard times. Jesus' suffering on the cross is the final exclamation point in the affirmation that trials can be redemptive. One Bible passage that points this way is the image of the refiner of silver in Malachi 3:3: "*[the Lord] will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver.*"

The story is told of a person who wondered what this meant about character and the nature of God. They went to watch a silversmith work. The smith held a piece of silver over the fire and let it heat up. The silversmith explained that one needed to hold the silver in the middle of the fire where the flames were hottest in order to burn away all the impurities. The smith went on to say that the silver had to be watched the entire time. A moment too long and the silver would be destroyed.

Absorbing this, the person was silent, finally asking, “*How do you know when the silver is fully refined?*” Came the reply: “*That is easy—when I see my image in it.*” We dare to affirm that our life trials can be redemptive when we believe God’s yearning is to see God’s image in us.

Second, **pray for help**. The Gospel of Luke is bathed in prayer, as our current Disciple 2 students studied this past Tuesday. Prayer, communication with God, accomplishes many things. One of them is growing courage. Our prayers help us gain or maintain boldness. Anyone who has lived with or been treated for depression will appreciate this statement. Years ago someone who battles depression told me, “Without prayer I’d be dead.” Today they are very much alive and serving in leadership in their local congregation.

We may not feel so desperate, but most of us know that wrenching feeling in the gut when fear takes hold. Yet we have the greatest power, God Almighty! If you and I can ask, sincerely, “*God, help me,*” “*God, show me a way,*” “*God, be with me,*” that will do. As some of you know, one of my favorite Biblical prayers is the man who petitioned Jesus for the healing of his child (Mark 9:14-29). Jesus replied: “*Everything is possible for the one who believes*” and the man answered “*Lord, I believe, help my unbelief.*” Prayer strengthens our spiritual muscles and changes things, the thing most often changed being us.

Third, **resolve to trust**. David says in verse 3 “I will trust in the Lord.” I spoke of this at length last week so need not again, except to say that determination and resolve are a key part of growing courage. This anonymous prose, echoing the sentiment in Pastor Hal’s Lenten study, inspires my resolve:

Just for today I will look as well as I can, talk low, be courteous, criticize not one bit, and try not to improve anybody except myself.

Just for today I will have a quiet half-hour for meditation and prayer, to get a better perspective on my life.

Just for today I will be unafraid; especially to enjoy all that is beautiful; and to believe that as I give, so will I be given.

So affirm our faith, pray for help, resolve to trust and, finally, **share our encouragement.** At the end of the psalm David says “*Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the Lord!*” The Hebrew word for wait here is *qavah* (kaw-vaw’), literally, to “twist together,” “to collect” and figuratively to expect, to look, to wait on. It expresses hope, anticipating good things and God’s care of us. David not only tells himself what he needs to hear, but realizes that active waiting includes encouraging others.

In today’s Gospel, this image of encouragement is marvelously feminine. Jesus must have been dealing with his own fear at the report of Herod’s threat on his life. Yet his heart still goes out to the people of Jerusalem who suffered much under Herod’s brutality. This is the son of the same Herod that killed the innocent babies in Bethlehem because he feared for the overthrow of his throne when Christ’s birth was announced. Jesus says to the people so oppressed “*How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings...*” That Jesus would express such love toward the city who “*kills the prophets and stones that are sent to it*” is one of the marvelous testimonies of the boundless love of God. Jesus, as God incarnate, knows the pressures of life and the threat of death and offers comfort and refuge.

So the lions and tigers and bears we face need not daunt us. Faith, prayer, trust and encouragement are the gifts of the psalmist to help us grow courage in the face of fear, God’s “*best work under pressure.*” Amen.