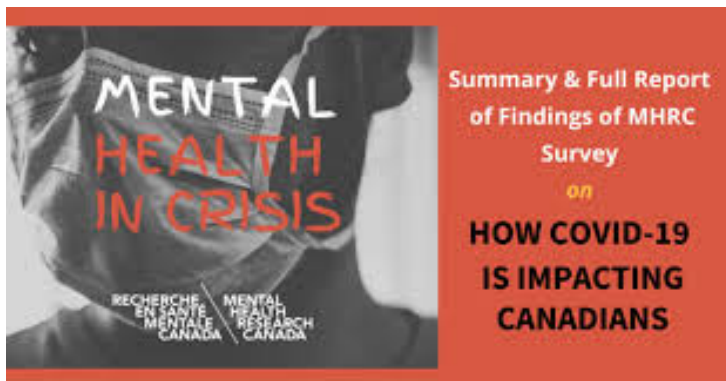


13 September 2020
Psalm 27
Faith in a time of anxiety
First Mennonite Church
We live in anxious times. Back in April, during the Covid-19 virus lockdown, Mental Health Research Canada asked 1,803 people about the state of their mental health and found that feelings of anxiety

and depression were steadily rising. Before COVID-19, 5 per cent of Canadians reported high-to-extreme levels of anxiety. Five weeks later, that number multiplied to 20 per cent.¹



According to Statistics Canada, about 1 in 10 Canadians—about 3.8 million people—have an anxiety disorder.² Anxiety disorder is a mental health disorder characterized by feelings of worry, anxiety, or fear that are strong enough to interfere with one's daily activities. Examples of anxiety

disorders include panic attacks, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and post-traumatic stress disorder. Symptoms include stress that's out of proportion to the impact of the event, inability to set aside a worry, and restlessness. Fortunately, anxiety disorder often responds quite positively to medical or counselling interventions.

But anxiety disorders are not my focus this morning. Maybe you already know you have an anxiety disorder and are managing it with medication, through counselling, or through a combination of both. If the stress of Covid-19 pandemic or something

¹ <https://www.ctvnews.ca/health/coronavirus/anxiety-and-depression-have-spiked-among-canadians-survey-1.4919741>

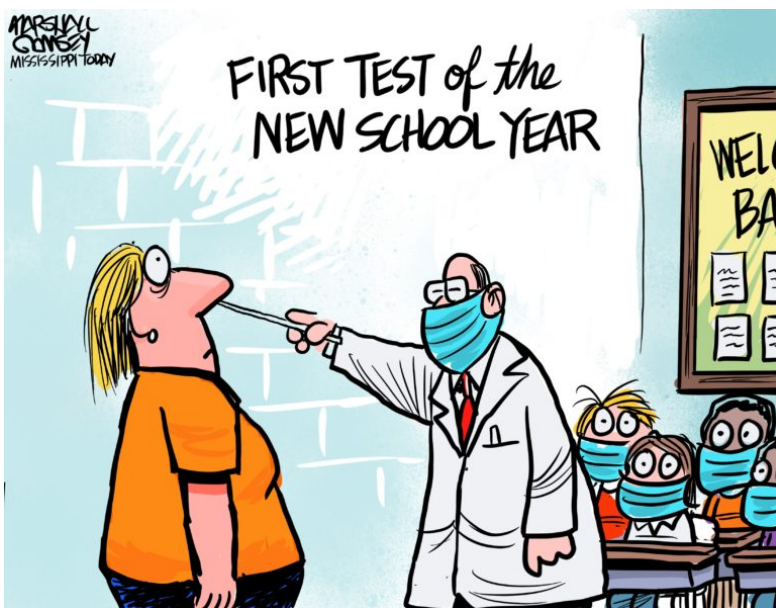
² <https://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/healthy-living/your-health/diseases/mental-health-anxiety-disorders.html>

else has led you to believe that you suffer from anxiety disorder, let's talk about it. I'd like to be helpful to you in getting you the proper treatment.

My focus today is rather that into every life anxiety and fear must come. We are frail and vulnerable human beings who aren't immune from all the things going on in our world, including how Covid-19 has completely turned everything—including the economy, our traditions, our relationships with family, friends, those outside of our social bubbles, and the way we worship—upside down. While we live in this wonderful and beautiful world, it is can be at times a hostile, challenging environment.

I'll admit that the growing conflict between the US and China, the border conflict between China and India, our fragile economy, high unemployment, how the pandemic is increasing the gap between the rich and poor, the out of control fires on the US west coast—these and other things cause anxiety within me.

Of course, there are the ongoing anxieties around the Covid-19 pandemic. A couple of months ago, I had a doctor's appointment over the phone as a way to minimize personal contact. To avoid infection many have moved to online grocery shopping or are going to the grocery early in the day and less often. When we go, we must navigate one-way isles. Some experience anxiety when encountering those coming the other way because they didn't see the arrows on the floor or chose to ignore them. There were—and still are—lots of anxieties and fears among students, parents, teachers, and school staff over the start of the school year.



This comic tried to instill some humour into this anxious time!

Health officials worry about how the number of Covid cases could go up as the weather gets colder and people start living more of their lives indoors.

Despite our anxieties and fears, we who are here in person this morning weighed our own personal appetite for risk and decided to come, perhaps out

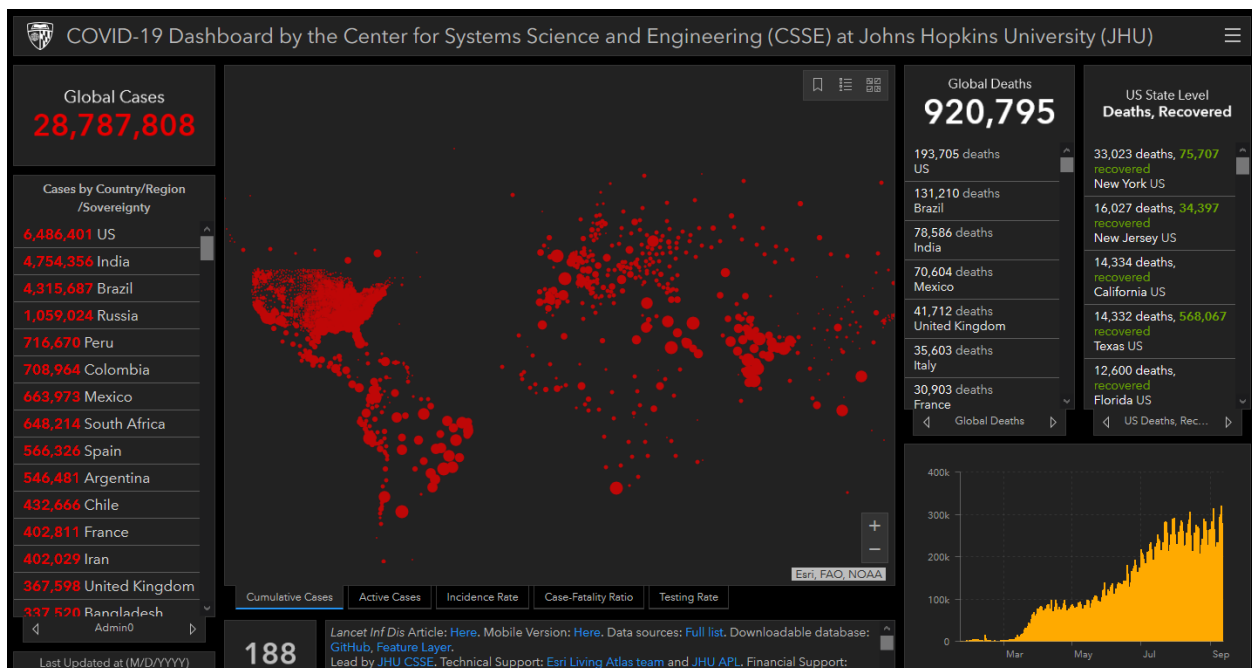
of the hope that some of our anxieties and fears will be ministered to. It's for this

reason, I decided to focus on this Psalm 27. This Psalm, like many of the psalms, is concerned with fear. The psalmist seems to have recently been through a most fearful time as sprinkled throughout the poem are phrases like, evil doers assail me to devour my flesh, my adversaries and foes, an army encamped against me, threat of war, false witnesses, just to name a few.



We were living in China in December 2004 when an enormous earthquake and tsunami struck the Indian Ocean. More than 230,000 people were killed. People of all faiths could do little but cry out their God. So they did—to whatever deity they could name. People of all faiths asked: Why us? Why here? Why now?

Fast forward to today, when over 900,000 people around the world have died because of Covid-19.³ The global response today is not unlike the response in 2004 or the Psalmist: we cry out to God: Why us? Why here? Why now?



³ <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html>

Yet, while the Psalmist speaks of his many fears and anxieties, the writer reminds of the difference that God has made in his life:

*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? (27:1)*

“The Lord is my light and my salvation.” Have you noticed that we often say, “I’ve just been through a dark time in my life” when we are going through an anxious and fearsome time? That’s often how trouble feels. We feel we’re in the dark. We stumble, and we can’t figure out which way to go. We’re unsure of our goal and which step to take next.

The psalmist says that’s what he’s going through. And in that dark, difficult time the psalmist discovers not only that God is powerful, loving, and compassionate, but in that evocative phrase, “God is light.” Not just a light, but my light AND also my “salvation.”

The psalmist has moved from saying that God is a light shining in our darkness to affirming that God is “my salvation.”

We have many hymns and songs which speak of God as loving, but the psalmist is saying more than that. The psalmist is saying that God is love in action, that God not only loves but moves, shows up, actively intervenes. God doesn’t just shine into our darkness, God protects, fortifies, saves.

Then the psalmist asks a rhetorical question, loud enough for all of us to hear: “Should I be frightened of anything?”

The psalmist says that’s why he is in worship in the temple because God “will shelter me in God’s own dwelling during troubling times; God will hide me in a secret place in his own tent; God will set me up high, safe on a rock” (27:5).

When I’ve talked with people over the last 6 months about what they miss about not coming to church to worship God, I’ve heard some similar themes emerge. One person said she missed seeing other peoples’ faces, the hugs she gave and received from others, talking with people, and the congregational singing. Another person said, we’re not created to be alone. God created us as social beings, so we are

hardwired to want to be around other people, be with other people. We need others. We need community, especially when we are going through a difficult time.

The psalmist says it differently, but there is some overlap. “I’ve been going through a fearful time”, says the Psalmist. “But, there in the temple worshipping with others who were going through the same thing, we experienced God as our light and our salvation. Whom shall I fear?”

We need to be clear. The psalmist is NOT saying that God always comes and totally removes the threat from us. In Psalm 23 it says, *Even though I walk **through** the darkest valley...* did you notice the verb? It doesn’t say avoid, fly over, or walk around the darkest valley, but **walk through**. We are in the valley of the virus pandemic and we must walk through it.

God is God, and God is free to come or not, free to intervene in dramatic ways or not. The psalmist says that God is “my light and my salvation” and because that’s who God is it makes all the difference during our fearful times.

*Now my head is lifted up
above my enemies all around me,
and I will offer in his tent
sacrifices with shouts of joy;
I will sing and make melody to the Lord. (27:6)*

We all have anxieties. We all have fears. Sometimes they are worse than other times; sometimes they are non-existent. But we all have them. Fear is a protective mechanism that God has placed within us to alert us when there’s a threat so that we can act and protect ourselves from that threat. Sometimes our fear is way out of proportion to the actual threat and we let our fears get the best of us. Yet at other times our fears are perfectly justified.

You get back a bad report from your annual physical: is this condition treatable? There is much talk about the second wave of Covid-19: will there be another lockdown and more self-isolation and financial stress? You’re in a store and later you hear about a person who was there had Covid: will I get it? In such moments you can feel the fear begin to rise within you and gradually take hold of your life. The fear eats at you every waking moment. The storm clouds gather, there is a rumbling of thunder, and things get dark.

And what then? How does God help us in our fear? Sometimes we pray and pray—we bang on God’s door with everything we’ve got. We ask our friends at church to pray for us and for our deliverance. **And sometimes**, wonder of wonders, God responds with healing or a miraculous deliverance as a gift to us.

At other times we don’t get miraculous salvation from our troubles but rather we get a sense of God’s nearness, of God walking with us in the darkness, of God beside us on the path when we stumble, of God supporting us and encouraging us forward. Our light showing us the way, God is with us in a tough time.

Then there are those fearful and anxious times when it helps simply to know that God is God, that the bad things that are happening to us are not the final word, that God has ways of finally, ultimately redeeming our situation. Sometimes, the unjust, terrible calamities that we fear **actually happen** and come down crashing upon us. And what then? It can be helpful to know that God cares, that God may be as outraged by this injustice as are we, and that God is not only loving but also righteous, that God will get God’s way with the world in the end.

And sometimes, when we are filled with anxieties and fear, we simply sing. One of the horrible ironies of this virus pandemic is, while singing inspires and fills our souls with faith and hope, it is considered to be a high-risk activity. Singing with others can cause anxiety. Who would have imagined that singing could ever be considered a high-risk activity!

Even though it’s a high-risk activity, I want to use it as my final example as singing is so near and dear to our hearts.

The kind of singing I’m talking about is more than singing a happy tune like I did when I was a child. I remember lying in my bed in a dark room fearful of the unknown creature that I imagined was under my bed. So, I sang a happy tune that would give me some confidence. I’m not talking about that kind of tune. No. I’m talking about the kind of song that empowers us in dark times, the kind of song that inspires hope deep within our souls even as the storms of life are raging outside, the kind of song that defiantly expresses confidence in God’s divine ability to turn even the most horrible situations into something good, the kind of song that is rooted in a faith which affirms that despite all evidence to the contrary, God is still in control of history and will somehow bring about a new heaven and a new earth.

Maybe this song of yours is **Gott is die Liebe/For God so love us**. Maybe singing this song reminds you that even in the middle of a dark time, you are convinced as the apostle Paul was convinced,

that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:38-39)

Maybe this song is **O Power of love** because whenever you sing it you are reminded of that one time long ago when it was sung. And it sends chills up and down your spine as you remember the faces of loved ones. If God was faithful to them, then surely, God is faithful to me today and tomorrow.

Or maybe it's the song, **My Life Flows On**, that we will sing right after I'm done speaking. I read a story about a church pianist, Ms. Thomas, who was going through an incredibly hard time in her life.⁴ One Sunday when she was playing the piano, the worship leader chose this song for the congregation to sing. As she played and the congregation sang, she felt her soul being touched and strengthened. The song, she said, "was healing her soul."

In singing that hymn nothing outward in Ms. Thomas' life had changed and yet everything had changed. She had changed. Her fears were conquered. Whatever happened in the future, she felt God was there.

And that's how it is with these favourite songs of ours. When we sing them, we knew down deep, with emotion too deep for words, that God is with us. In singing a hymn to God we were singing to ourselves. Our fears flee. We can sing with the psalmist:

*Now my head is higher than the enemies surrounding me,
and I will offer sacrifices in God's tent—
sacrifices with shouts of joy!
I will sing and praise the Lord. (27:6)*

⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Li2hddmy63U> comments