

## **“Foxhole Faith”**

### **Psalm 27:1, 4-9**

This psalm is for anyone who’s currently stuck in a hole, has been so in the past, or fears finding themselves in one in the future.

David, the presumptive author of this psalm, clearly values safety. He doesn’t like to be afraid. In verse 1 alone, he mentions the fear factor twice! Perhaps this is why the psalm reads like a foxhole monologue. It invokes images of “evildoers,” “adversaries and foes,” armies, enemies and violence. David longs for security, cover and “shelter in the day of trouble” (v. 5). His heart faints for fear and all of his courage has vanished. He remembers better days when he would visit the “house of the LORD,” and be full of faith.

But now he’s in a foxhole, his enemies attacking from all sides. And as we know, there are no atheists in foxholes. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that David is calling for air support — the Lord of the air, whom he calls his “light” and “salvation” (v. 1).

So, this psalm is for all who feel they’re in a foxhole now, or felt so in the past, or might find themselves in some kind of hole in the future.

There are foxholes and there are foxholes. Troubles and sorrows differ from day to day or person to person. When we’re seeking shelter, any bunker, bomb shelter, safe harbor — or foxhole — will do. Some seek shelter in drugs or a bottle. Not all foxholes are created equal.

Literal foxholes, where real foxes with bushy tails live, are small. A human could never fit into a real foxhole. Typically, they’re only 4 inches or so in diameter. You might find them near the base of a tree or along the footings of a wall. Nearby, the area might be littered with feathers or bones of their prey.

The den of a fox ranges from 3- to 8-feet deep and might have multiple entrances. The tunnel could be up to 50 feet long. Foxes rarely sleep in their foxholes. Rather, they store food there, raise their young, or duck into their hole to escape or avoid a predator. For foxes, the hole is comfortable.

But David doesn't feel comfortable in his foxhole. He feels hemmed in. He's in a tight place, has very little wiggle room, and is uncertain about the future.

Like us, sometimes.

Very generally, we have a lot to fear. No sane person will walk alone at night in some cities. We fear mass shootings, climate change, identity theft, pancreatic cancer, threats to our children, having enough money to retire, going to the dentist and the price of gas.

Richard Perloff, a professor of communication and psychology at Cleveland State wrote an article about why mass shootings have increased in recent years. He asks the question, "Why?"

Why? After the unabated horrors of mass shootings --- Buffalo, Uvalde, Highland Park – the mind gropes for answers.

Why do young men keep murdering children and adults in schools, grocery stores, churches, synagogues and July 4 parades? The question gnaws, all the more because we have asked it for years, futilely, repetitively, always hoping an answer could provide insight to stop the carnage.

The simple answer is guns, and, yes, stricter gun laws probably would reduce some mass shootings. But they would only make a dent in the problem because the root causes are deeper. If we are to have any chance of curbing this violence, we need to understand the psychological and cultural underpinnings of what ails us.

Let's begin with psychology. Rampage shooters, who have murderously victimized others, are, in one small sense, victims themselves – of ostracism, bullying, rejection, and, more generally, of social exclusion. Research from 2003 found that 13 of 15 school shooters had been ostracized.

Kipling D. Williams, a psychology professor at Purdue University who has conducted a multitude of studies of ostracism, finds that the pain of ostracism can be deep and abiding, akin to a social death. More generally, finding oneself rejected socially excluded thwarts a human need to belong, causing the mind to become distracted, impairing the ability to regulate one's actions.

Among the factors that cause a small, but deeply disturbing, number of young men to turn the pain of rejection into rampage shooting are a preoccupation with Satanism or death; considerable family turmoil, as in the case of T. J Lane, who shot six students, killing three of them, at Chardon High School in 2012; and growing up with domestic violence, as did the Highland Park, Illinois, suspect, Robert Crimo III.

If we are to make in-roads into the problem, we have to directly confront the fact that many of the rampage shooters are young men, whose go to response to problems can be revenge and who lack the emotional resources to deal effectively with social rejection. It is imperative that school psychology programs focus explicitly on boys, teaching them to deal more effectively with the pain of social rejection and helping them appreciate that talking to other about it is not a sign of weakness.

But deeper problems are also at work. American society has become a colder, less-connected place, devoid of the social solidarity that, as Cleveland State University sociologist

James J. Chriss has observed, gave people a sense of rootedness, helping keep criminal deviance at bay. It is noteworthy that mass shootings occur far more frequently in the United State than in any country in the world.

The signs are everywhere. Many neighborhoods are cold places where people rarely know their neighbors. Church attendance has plummeted, particularly among the working class. Family ties that constrained adolescent aggression have bent and buckled.

The absence of supportive social bonds that buffered boys with emotional problems has a particularly deleterious impact on troubled, aggressive young men, deeply, irrationally pained by social rejection, primed to hurt others who symbolically hurt them.

If we are to solve the cultural problems that are at the root of this violence, we must confront them structurally – for example, by working to make neighborhoods friendlier, expanding the relevance of religion to the young, and requiring national service to give young people broader connections that provide an abiding sense of purpose.

As a society, we can't continue like this. We need a national conversation to address these issues . We need to find ways to restore social bonds between strangers. We need social bridges that give young men a sense of connection, and make them feel wanted and part of a caring, loving community.

Professor Perloff is right. When young men are ostracized and isolated, they retreat to their foxholes. They feel hemmed in as David feels hemmed in, in this psalm.

David says that the one thing he would “seek after” is “to live in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the LORD and to inquire in his temple” (v. 4). In

other words, David was most happy *in the presence of God*, and most unhappy when away from that same presence.

God's absences were usually a product of David's disobedience. David had enough life experience to know that it was in his best interest to be close to God, and to keep God at hand as his closest advisor and protector.

So why would the faithful dive into a foxhole with bullets flying past our ears? Because the faithful aren't stupid. Praise the Lord and pass the ammunition. Even David sought a cave or a cleft in the mountains for safety. Why? "For he will hide me in his shelter in the day of trouble; he will conceal me under the cover of his tent; he will set me high on a rock" (v. 5). The main thing is to sense the presence of the Lord and thereby to feel safe and at peace again. When that happens — if it happens — the psalmist says he will "sing and make music" (v. 6, NIV) and he will make "shouts of joy" (v. 6, NIV). When rescued and safely in the "house of the LORD" (v. 4), he will do nothing but "gaze upon the beauty of the LORD and ... seek him in his temple" (v. 4, NIV).

When you purchase a home, unless you made a cash offer, you are required to have homeowner's insurance. These policies offer coverage for damage caused by fires, lightning strikes, windstorms and hail. Usually, damage caused by earthquakes and floods are not covered by homeowners' insurance unless you specifically request it.

The psalmist may not like the trouble he's in, but it's his trouble, his foxhole, and he wants full coverage. He does not want to be afraid (v. 1). In verse 5, for example, he uses three metaphors to describe the full range of the coverage the Lord offers: shelter "in the day of trouble," concealment "under the cover of his tent" and a refuge high atop a mountain. These

images suggest safety from a powerful rainstorm, protection from a sandstorm and safety above the raging waters of a river or flood. David wants to be surrounded by God. Don't we all?

The observant student of this psalm may have noticed that it is not about David; it's all about God. The Lord is cited 17 times (including pronouns) in 14 verses. The contrast is between the weakness, fear, pleadings and prayers of a faltering human being and a powerful deity who can extract one from certain destruction; between a person who wants more than anything to shed all the troubles he has seen and a God who can give him the safety of his divine presence; between the darkest night of the soul and one's "light and salvation."

The psalm comes to the conclusion we've known all along: It is all about God — who God is, what God has done, does and will do.

May the peace of God . . .

#705 – God of Grace and God of Glory