Second Sunday in Lent (C/RCL)
Psalm 27
March 4, 2007
Holy Trinity, Manasquan

It's almost First Holy Communion time here at Holy Trinity. Our children won't actually receive the Sacrament until the third weekend of Easter, but preparation for the youth and their parents begins in just another week. On our first evening together we'll invite each family to stand at the baptismal font, with parents sharing memories of their child's baptism, and with children showing mementos, if they have one: a photo, a baptismal shell, maybe even a baptismal gown. Our time together over the next month and a half will be fun and joyful, as the children get ready to receive the incredible, edible gift of Holy Communion, union with Jesus.

Communion with God, nearness to the Holy, living in the divine presence is what the psalmist sings about in the middle of Psalm 27, the psalm-song included in this weekend's *Celebrate* insert. Here's verse 4:

> One thing I asked of the LORD,
> that will I seek after:
> 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.
> Psalm 27.4

It's a **joyful** thing to be in the Lord's house, whether it be the Temple in Jerusalem or this sanctuary in Manasquan or any other place where the faithful sing the Lord's praises, where prayers rise like incense, where the Word is proclaimed and holy mysteries are performed. And just as wonderful as the joy of worship-in-the-moment is the fact that our communion with God can accompany us out the doors into the world. It's meant to! God wants to hold our hand throughout the day as surely and securely as we hold each other's hands during the Lord's Prayer.

Sometimes God and I walk along holding hands as if we were a happy couple on the boardwalk, soaking up the sun and the beautiful sight of the sea. Sometimes God is tugging me out of the path of danger, like a parent jerking a child out of harm's way. Sometimes God is up ahead, nearly pulling my arm out of the socket, dragging me out of my safety zone and into the scary space God needs me to be, for the sake of others. And then, as if I were whistling in the dark to sound less afraid than I feel, I pray the first verse of Psalm 27:

> 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?

I have a First Communion story to tell you from another place, far away, and it involves a few people whose intense daily communion with God made them open to becoming an answer to prayer, despite great danger to themselves. These are people for whom faith chased away fear.

This story is from a book I've mentioned before: *The Righteous* (Martin Gilbert, *The Righteous: The Unsung Heroes of the Holocaust*, New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2003), which documents the names and deeds of Gentiles who saved Jews during WWII, and who are now commemorated at Yad Vashem, the Way of the Righteous, in Jerusalem, which some of you have visited.

The child's real name was Felicia Braun. She was five years old when she escaped from the Warsaw Ghetto and was taken in by a Ukrainian couple named Stroka who made her part of their family at the risk of their lives. They moved from one part of the country to another so that no one would question the sudden appearance of a five year old in their home. The Strokas were Catholic, so the Jewish child in their care prepared for First Holy Communion like all the other children in their new village. Felicia was terrified of being found out, especially because the whole ritual was foreign to her and she was afraid she'd make a mistake. She was told to smile nicely for the photographer who wanted to take her picture on that special day, and she burst into

tears instead. Her feet were like lead as she walked up the aisle to the Communion rail. Then, as she recalled later:

> "As I knelt, I heard the voice of Father Kaczmarek as he leaned toward me with the wafer. I looked up into the kindest face that had ever gazed at me, at a face whose eyes I could look into forever. They were eyes that accepted my lies and loved me despite them. What I saw was the face of my real father. I thanked God that it was him and that none of the [other] people in the church had discovered [my] lie." (p. 44)

I have to believe that it was the Strokas and Father Kaczmarek's daily communion with God, their intentional living in God's presence, their **faith**, that banished fear and gave them the courage to risk their lives for this child. We usually think of **doubt** as the opposite of faith. But Psalm 27 suggests that the **opposite** of faith is actually **fear**, and that the **fruit** of faith is **courage**.

The psalmist prays for a safe hiding place, as Felicia Braun did. The psalmist does this not by **asking** but by **affirming** that **God will act** to protect him.

> 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.
> Psalm 27.5

There **are** people in our world who are desperate to escape from people who plan to physically harm them. God acts to protect them through people of God whose faith conquers fear and whose faith bears the fruit of courage.

When I attended Union Theological Seminary in New York City and worked at The Riverside Church, I met a little Guatemalan family who lived in the church tower. They had taken sanctuary there, literally, and were safe as long as they did not leave the four walls of that church building. Faith supplanted fear in that Riverside faith community, and instilled courage to act counter to the laws of our government and to provide refuge for those young people who would have been slaughtered if they returned to their own junta-run country. Closer to home,

through the Women of the ELCA and the Social Ministry Committee, our Holy Trinity family helps to support "180: Turning Lives Around" (formerly the Women's Center of Monmouth County), which helps women and children who flee from domestic violence. We help others provide a holy haven, and so we become a human channel of heavenly grace.

Thank heaven, we are not desperate to escape from people who plan to physically harm us. At some point in our lives we're all running scared from something, though. This season and all seasons, let's stay in the closest possible Communion with the God who is faithful, who raises us above fear, who infuses us with courage so that we may lead lives of faith active in love. Amen

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham