

## Week 5: Freedom or Fear?

**SHARE:** Share some of your every day fears or your deepest fears?

**KNOW:** Fear so often controls us, but the true love of God sets us free.

**GROW:** Have a volunteer read the following and a second volunteer read Psalm 23:5

I have listened to hundreds of stories of people who have fled their country in fear of their life. Frequently, when the chaos involves guerrilla or rebel groups countless people find themselves facing persecution from both sides. They face threats, torture, and persecution from the guerrilla groups because the person just wants to live in peace and does not want to join the cause. But then they find themselves facing arrest, torture, and persecution from the government which treats everyone not actively working for them in an area as a guerrilla sympathizer. These people then find it impossible to know where to turn or whom they can trust. And so they flee, often making their way to America and asking for asylum.

Read Psalm 23:5

We too find ourselves in situations where we do not know who are our friends. We find ourselves in places that everyone seems against us. Some people in our lives want us to take their side against someone else in our life, and we find ourselves feeling trapped. Then when we do not take their side and wage war with them, suddenly we find ourselves under attack.

At other times we are afraid to speak up. This happens on things such as the immigration and refugee issues. We find ourselves reluctant to say what we really know is right because we fear that we will find that people we think should be friends and allies turn out to be enemies and will attack us.

And yet, David reminds us that God prepares a feast for us in the presence of these enemies. What an image that gives. In the midst of our fear and uncertainty, in the midst of us feeling surrounded by those ready to attack and tear us down, God says he is putting together a party with a banquet. God says that we are actually completely secure and can rejoice in his blessings, even though the circumstances look like the opposite. In fact, God honors us and blesses us when we are with him. We can have courage to stand for what is right, we can act and react with grace and mercy and love because God has our back. And even more, God richly blesses us because we are with him and he has promised a feast even when the enemies are all around us.

- Have you backed down from standing for what is right out of fear of others?

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- When you disagree with someone, do you attack them as an enemy, or do you offer grace and love to them?

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- How can you offer a feast to those who feel under attack?

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Have volunteers read the following and Psalm 23:4

In the 1980's El Salvador was in the darkest days of its civil war. One young college student had a father who ran an electronics repair shop. One day someone came in with a walkie talkie and asked that it be fixed. The father did so. A few weeks later, in the middle of the night, the security forces broke into the home, arrested his father, and accused him of also being a guerrilla and arrested him.

They were taken to a detention center and for a month he was tortured. Sometimes they would torture his father in front of him, sometimes him in front of his father, sometimes separately. Eventually they separated the two. For weeks he did not know about his father. Then, one night, he was dragged out of his cell and forced into a car. His father was already in the car. For several hours the car drove around, and he and his father knew they were going to be executed.

Finally the car came to a stop. They told him and his father to get out and kneel on the ground. He heard the pistol cock at his head. Then he heard the officer say, "Stop, let's play the game." He and his father were ordered to stand and then they were told to run. They did so. He heard shots all around him and as he was running he ran into a tree and knocked himself out. The next morning he awoke. He looked around, and saw his father dead. He knew it was no longer possible to stay in El Salvador and fled to the United States and asked for asylum.

We do not know the exact circumstances, but we do know that Psalm 23 was written by David after having experienced a harrowing experience, one in which it is likely that death was a real possibility, maybe even a probability. He says:

Read Psalm 23:4

The valley of darkness takes many forms. For some it is in health, for others finances, for others the crash of dreams and hopes, for others relationships gone horribly wrong, for others the lack of relationships, and so much more. The ultimate valley of darkness is death, often first of loved ones, and finally for ourselves. But the central promise, the very heart and essence of this Psalm is that the Lord is close beside me. No matter what hardship we endure, no matter how eminently disaster looms, He is with us.

The life of faith for the Christian does not mean we do not face valleys of darkness. Indeed, one of the primary reasons Christians have observed Lent is to remind themselves of Christ's suffering and death and to identify themselves with that suffering and death. We as Christians are called to suffer. We are called to give away our life in service to others. We are called to put to death our own selfish desires and ways of living. Jesus said it this way, when you spend your life trying to save your life,

you will lose it, but when you spend your life giving it away, you will gain life.

A life of faith then is not one with no cares or concerns. Rather, it is a life that promises valleys and hardship and suffering. This seems backwards to us. But the promise of Christ is that when we face the darkness, we do so in the confidence and the comfort that he is with us and that the darkness and despair does not triumph. Just as the death on the cross was not the end of the story but rather was followed by an Easter resurrection. So too, as we face the pain and suffering, as we are confronted by the valleys of darkness, we too know that our Shepherd will guide us home safely.

- What valleys of darkness do you fear to enter?

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- How do you identify with the pain and suffering of Christ? Do you think Jesus had fears?

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- What does trying to save your life and giving your life away look like in your life? How does giving your life away give you freedom?

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### **Optional Bible Reading: Benedictine Lectio Divina**

Read a scripture of your choice or one of the following using the Benedictine practice of reading scripture.

Psalm 31:9-16

Lectio Divina literally means “reading of God”.

Lectio Divina is the search for God in his written Word.

This form of lectio divina works best in a group of between 4-8 people.

A group leader co-ordinates the process and facilitates sharing.

Golden Rules:

- (i) members of the group always speak in the first person singular;
- (ii) others listen; discussion or comment is not useful for this format of prayer & meditation;
- (iii) anyone may “pass” at any time, and prefer to pray silently rather than share.

Three readings of the same text from the Scriptures are read aloud by different people, each time followed by a period of silence and an opportunity for each member of the group to share the fruit of his or her lectio.

#### **PREPARATION**

The group settles comfortably and prepares for prayer in whatever way works best - focus on breathing/a candle/prayer setting/listening to music/singing.

The leader, or the group together, invokes the Holy Spirit to open everyone’s heart to God’s Word.

**FIRST READING (actually twice)**

An unhurried reading, the second time more slowly, to allow people to listen for the word or phrase that beckons, stirs or unnerves, touches the heart. Gently repeat and ponder the word or phrase silently to yourself in the silence (1-2 minutes) that follows.

Each person in turn speaks the word/phrase that has touched him or her.

#### SECOND READING

In the silence that follows (2-3 mins) each person ponders the word/phrase, attending to the feelings or images that arise, noting how they are seeing or hearing Christ reach out to them through the text.

Each person in turn briefly states what he or she has “heard” or “seen”.

#### THIRD READING

In the silence that follows (2-3 minutes) each person reflects on where and how God is connecting to him or her; what God is calling them to be or to do. It may be through memories, or events of their lives that God is now present. Allow your response to be in whatever way is most natural and spontaneous.

Each person in turn shares the results of his or her reflection.

**GO:** faith takes action steps.

- Offer Christ’s hope to someone you know that is living in fear.
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**Close in Prayer**