**Psalm 37:1-9** February 17, 2019

Pastor P. Martin **Faith Lutheran Church, Radcliff, KY** Epiphany 6

*Psalm 37:1Do not fret because of evil men or be envious of those who do wrong; 2for like the grass they will soon wither, like green plants they will soon die away.*

*3Trust in the Lord and do good; dwell in the land and enjoy safe pasture. 4Delight yourself in the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart.*

*5Commit your way to the Lord; trust in him and he will do this: 6He will make your righteousness shine like the dawn, the justice of your cause like the noonday sun.*

*7Be still before the Lord and wait patiently for him; do not fret when men succeed in their ways, when they carry out their wicked schemes.*

*8Refrain from anger and turn from wrath; do not fret—it leads only to evil. 9For evil men will be cut off, but those who hope in the Lord will inherit the land.*

Dear Friends in Christ,

**“Do Not Fret because of Evil Men”**

**Reasons to Fret!**

On Tuesday of this week, the most notorious drug lord of our time was convicted of crimes which ensure that he will spend the rest of his life in prison. He bears responsibility for perhaps more suffering, misery and death in America and Mexico than any other person in the world. We can thank God that we live in a nation where such people can be locked up for the rest of their lives, and we protected from them for the rest of our lives. In how many nations would such a monster be a above the law and still terrorize society! Thank God for what we have! Yet the sad fact is that when a drug lord gets put away for life, there are more waiting to take his place.

Two days ago we heard about a shocking mass murder outside Chicago. And this week also held the one year remembrance of the Parkland high school tragedy. Are these the sorts of people God had in mind when he said to us in Psalm 37, ***“Do not fret because of evil men or be envious of those who do wrong”***? Is God addressing our worries about wicked monsters like these? Maybe. Maybe. But who is it really that causes us to fret and be envious? I think for most of us it is much closer to home.

At least partly due to how our news media reports news, the newsworthy tragedies that we talk about today will be forgotten a month from now. On March 17th, if I were to bring up the Aurora, Illinois shooting, I am doubting that you would be able to remember it. When El Chapo’s June 9th sentencing date comes around, you will likely think, “Him? I thought he was already locked away. I kind of forgot about him.”

Go back to verse one of our reading, ***“Do not fret because of evil men or be envious of those who do wrong.”*** Who is it that really gets you to fret, to be angry over the injustice, to be jealous of their ill-gotten gain. If you are like me, it isn’t the criminal master mind a thousand miles away, it is the small-timer just down the street, the co-worker just down the hall, the classmate sitting two rows behind you. These people you regularly bump into, these are the people who probably cause us more fretting and jealousy and anger. These people you know, who at work claim other people’s ideas as their own, who brag to you about their fraudulent insurance claims, who manipulate less clever friends, whom you suspect abuse less powerful family members—these are the people who set us on edge, who make us angry and envious. This psalm, I believe, addresses tensions that don’t make the national news, but which we feel very close to home.

**We Fret for a Reason, but It Is Wrong!**

But here is the catch. This psalm doesn’t talk about those evildoers as the problem. It says that *I* am the problem. This psalm doesn’t tell the evil doers to cut it out, it tells me to cut it out! Really? It said, ***“[You!] Do not fret because of evil men or be envious of those who do wrong… Refrain from anger.”*** It’s talking to us. Isn’t that blaming the victim? I am the one who was wronged and then God condemns me for being upset about being wronged! Isn’t that unjust? Don’t I have a right to be upset?

This is one of God’s teachings that challenges Christians, that shows us that living like Christians isn’t just about being nicer than average. It is about conquering the selfish sinful nature that is in us, that urges us to do wrong, that declares a right to respond to being wronged with more wrong. In Psalm 37, God condemns that and calls us to something higher.

God grants that there are evil people who get away with evil, and even get successful and rich off their evil—at least for a time. But he tells me that when I get angry about them, when I worry, when I get jealous, I have sinned.

Have you ever experienced road rage your life? To my shame I remember one time when I was not just upset but in road rage mode. I felt myself in that moment of extreme anger, and I felt like it was a justified anger because the other person had clearly done something underhanded. After the fact, that anger was frightening. If you have ever felt anger boil into rage, you know what I am talking about. I was on the edge and could very very easily have done something I would regret forever. Or maybe I am the only person who has ever been there.

We can thank God for the times he pulled us from the edge of doing something really bad. But that’s not what this word of God is talking about. He’s not talking about doing something evil. He is talking about feeling something evil. This is where we have a problem. For while we realize shooting up a place is bad, we often feel like we have a right to that rage as long as we don’t act on it. God says, “No you don’t.”

And when we see people cheat and they do get ahead—we would never cheat like that—but we feel a little jealous about how they get ahead, and maybe we even—though as I said we would never do this, right?—we maybe even think about how if *we* were to cheat, how we would be more clever, and would use those ill-gotten gains much more wisely.

God says that all that anger and jealousy is wrong. It is wrong because jealousy is discontent with the blessings God has given us. Anger is wrong because it is usurping God’s authority, taking some of God’s authority and saying, “His authority is now mine to take care of this issue!”

It is so easy to feel that way when you see all the unfairness, all the abuse, all the lying and cheating and laziness and selfishness out there. But it is sin.

As I say that, I want to make one thing clear. We are not to stand by while evil is done. We are to oppose evil, to fight evil where that is our place to do so. A police officer has a duty to use violence to end a situation. A judge has a duty to sentence a criminal to a prison term. A citizen has a duty to report wrongdoing to higher authorities and even step in if life is at stake. And every Christian has a duty to take all these concerns to the Lord in prayer. Addressing evil is not what this psalm is about. It is about what is going on inside of us. Emotional responses to wrong, responses that display a lack of faith—whether worry, jealousy or anger—have no place in a Christian’s response to evil. In fact, they are sin for which we need forgiveness.

How wonderful that our heavenly Father is that Father of the prodigal son. You remember the story, right? How the son insisted he had a right to do things his way and so he did. After bringing himself to ruin through his choices of sin, he finally realized the error of his way. He went back home in humble sorrow, and there was his father with his open forgiving arms.

For all who return to God’s ways in that humble sorrowful repentance, there is restoration.

**More God-Pleasing and Constructive than Fretting**

Psalm 37, does not just smack us down when we fall into sinful reactions to a sinful world. Better, Psalm 37 instructs God’s people how to constructively deal with these situations. This is what God tells us in verses 3 and 4: ***“Trust in the Lord and do good; dwell in the land and enjoy safe pasture. Delight yourself in the Lord.”***

First thing: Trust in the Lord. Stop looking at selfish people getting away with who-knows-what and look at your loving God. We get so obsessed with what others are getting away with that we stop looking at God. We intently watch them, looking for faults, insults and unfairness. They become the topic of conversation at home, the matter of worry in the middle of the night, the subject of gossip with other people. God first says, “Stop it! Trust the Lord!”

And why shouldn’t we? We know that we can trust God because he has done so much good for us. Jesus Christ proved that he can be trusted by dying for the sins of the world, the sins of believers and unbelievers. God rescued us from the filth of sin we were born into. He claimed many of us through baptism even while we were tiny babies and others of us even we had lived many years in opposition to him. When the almighty God has done so much for us, and when we stop and think about that, we have to, ***“Trust in the Lord.”*** We remember that we can trust him to sort things out. We just trust him.

When we have learned to trust God, then the rest of verse follows naturally. ***“Trust in the Lord and do good; dwell in the land and enjoy safe pasture.”*** Trust in God keeps our eyes on God. That frees us up to do good with a joyful heart. Trust in God frees us to ***“dwell in the land,”*** that is, to settle down in the blessings that God has given us.

When we do verse 3, when we keep our eyes off the wicked and instead on God, then we stop being angry and jealous of the way the world is going and we become joyful Christians. Verse 4 becomes a reality: ***“Delight yourself in the Lord.”*** Over the years there is something I have noticed in the most joyful Christians. The most joyful Christians are not Christians with lots or Christians with little or even Christians with something in between. The most joyful Christians have this ability to keep drawing their eyes back to God, no matter what tragedies this evil world works on them. They really do what verse three says, they trust the Lord.

**Reasons We Can Do Better than Fretting**

If this doesn’t come naturally, Psalm 37 lists several encouragements for adopting a God-centered mindset, even when we have experienced wrong:

We are promised, ***“Delight yourself in the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart.”*** That’s what he says. When you do delight in the Lord, he delights your heart. The Lord will give you the desires of your heart. He blesses. And sometimes he changes your desires, so that you realize that some of what you wanted wasn’t good for you, or what you wanted was actually rather selfish. Delighting in the Lord has a way of making you count your blessings rather than what you lack.

Here is one more thing: ***“He will make your righteousness shine like the dawn, the justice of your cause like the noonday sun.”*** When you do God’s will, God will make sure other people know you have done God’s will. They will know you for the truthfulness of your speech, for the way you live a contented life, your desire for what is right, and most of all for God’s truth. God promises to make that obvious to others. And it will be that many, even as they rush after the shiny trinkets this world offers, many will know the truth and respect you even while the wicked and selfish succeed in their ways. Now this doesn’t mean that everyone will appreciate your godly attitude in tough times. But even they will know, if not now, then one day they will when Christ comes again to judge the earth. Which is why Jesus could say, “Blessed are you even when people insult and reject you.”

This confidence led a hymn-writer to, rather than fret at evil doers, to write the hymn we just sang,

Why should cross and trial grieve me?

Christ is near With his cheer;

Never will he leave me.

Who can rob me of the heaven

That’s God’s Son for me won

When his life was given? Amen.