

In Psalm 27 the psalmist assumes as a given the reality of hardship and struggle, but also the active presence of God so that no enemy can destroy them. “Though an army encamp against me, my heart shall not fear.” It’s the voice of experience; they’ve been through rough times before, and come out the other end, so although they expect more rough times, they’re confident also that God will sustain them.

Jesus also implies the constant existence of threat by telling people not to worry about their daily needs. Now, *obviously*, daily needs do not get met without some forethought. Also *obviously* there are emergencies and drastic atrocious situations in which daily needs won’t get met without a lot of intervention. Let’s just stipulate those things. What Jesus is saying is not some kind of blanket statement without exceptions; he’s re-setting the norms for daily life. We can easily disregard the pervasive grace of God, which is not noisy, and come to think that our efforts and our needs are what make the world go around. Jesus is talking to mostly peasants in an agrarian society. These are people who seriously do have to work non-stop to make sure there’s enough to eat and adequate covering for their bodies, far closer to subsistence than you and I are. And Jesus took bodies seriously; he wasn’t on some spiritual kick where you abuse or disregard physical bodies in order to reach a higher spiritual plane. So I have to think that he was talking about an attitude toward one’s daily life that needed to be re-set. Prioritizing getting needs met, as if it were the direst emergency, just distorts or skews your life as a child of God. It’s sort of what I think about my libertarian brother-in-law, who claims that he wants to move out of California but wouldn’t move to another state with a high income tax.

Really? The state parks and water quality and proximity of your delightful sister-in-law wouldn't be as important as the income tax rate, because you resent paying for the common good? I don't actually believe him. I just think other factors *have* to be weightier than he admits.

So the psalmist and Jesus both acknowledge the reality of threats against us, but each one declares that God can be trusted to care for us anyway. And especially in Jesus' case, he says so in order that we would live more fully. These are life-giving words.

I have an example; it's kind of silly but I find it helpful. I've been listening to a true crime comedy podcast called "My Favorite Murder," in which two women, Georgia Hardstark and Karen Kilgariff, take turns telling each other the story of a murder or a catastrophe. Yep, there is every kind of podcast in the world now. But listen to how it came about. Each of these women suffers from anxiety and insomnia. They both have histories of drug abuse and traumatic life experiences. They both have trouble leaving their houses. They've each been in therapy for quite a while. They met at a party. Kilgariff was telling some other partygoers a morbid story of an accident she'd witnessed. "I immediately ran across the room and was like, "Tell me everything,"" Hardstark says. "As she was running forward, everyone else was running away," Kilgariff says. "It was an important moment for both of us." It turns out that they're both afraid of being murdered. They tell each other these stories, I think, initially as a way to both face their fears and diminish them—sort of like what Martin Luther said you should do if the devil threatened you. [Fart in the devil's face.]

It's a comedy podcast because they're both very funny, but they don't make light of the murders. It's more that the one listening plays the part of Greek chorus for the narrator, pointing out ridiculous aspects of human behavior. So for instance, a jilted boyfriend in one story decided to crash his plane into his pregnant ex-girlfriend's house, and the Greek chorus said, "Oh, yes, guaranteed to get her to say, 'I do want to raise my child with this man!'" The one listening will gasp in horror and just react all the way through, and when the story is over, they both marvel at how crazy it was. It's both funny and cathartic. In one episode, the women go through the story of a woman who found out a murderer had been lurking in the woods near her house. The solution, as suggested by Georgia in a deadpan: "Chop down all the woods. Am I wrong?"

When I discovered this podcast, I texted my daughters, and it turns out they know all about it and have already bought each other merchandise from the podcast store. Furthermore, the podcast goes on the road several times a year, and was in Des Moines not long ago, telling the story of the Villisca axe murder. So it's a big deal; I want you to understand this is not evidence of me going off the rails in some way. The comedy podcast about murder has hit a popular nerve, especially with women.

You might not think that taking a public stand against murder is a radically courageous act. Who isn't against murder? But as they tell their stories, they cheer on and give props to women who pushed back against abuse, or women who made good decisions. They exclaim mournfully about teenage girls who let their hopes and romantic dreams make them vulnerable to exploiters. You should have heard

the podcast they did after the Brett Kavanaugh hearing.

These women speak for a great, worldwide Greek chorus of women who have been through various hells, lived to tell the stories, and are here to make sure it doesn't happen to someone else. One of the show's quotes that resonated most with listeners was "F--k politeness." In other words, you do not have to do something that makes you uncomfortable just to appease another person. Don't open your door for a stranger. Don't stop to give directions. Don't offer someone a ride. Trust your instincts. And listeners have been writing in to the show, sharing stories of how they may have narrowly escaped a shady situation thanks to just such advice.

Last year Kilgariff and Hardstark hosted a fundraiser for PEN, the worldwide association of writers, that promotes freedom of expression and, in this case especially, the paramount importance of protecting journalists. Journalists around the world have been being killed in recent years at higher rates than ever before. There *is* a political dimension to this comedy.

All this is to say that in making fun of murderers and making fun of their own fear, Georgia Hardstark and Karen Kilgariff are inviting others (mostly women) to face their own fears, using "tales of rape, murder and serial killers" as a way to process the dark persistence of misogynistic violence in society at large. (NYTimes) They've generated a fan base that supports journalists, that reaches out to women in danger, that de-stigmatizes mental health issues. They're doing good. Kilgariff says, "We meet people . . . and they tell us that they've changed their major to forensic science, or criminal justice, or they've become a victim's advocate. There are all kinds of people telling us that there's been a journey for them of either going back to

therapy or going after the thing they secretly always wanted but were afraid they couldn't do. Some of them are giving us credit for that, which we know isn't accurate, but we're taking it 100 percent in."

Like many people, the hosts of the podcasts haven't found organized religion to be healthy or helpful. So they wouldn't say with the psalmist, "The LORD is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?" But I think this is one of those times when bidden or unbidden, God is present. What they are doing is reorienting their attention, as the psalmist does, to what is life-filled and strengthening. When the two women met, they were both reading Brene Brown's *Daring Greatly*. Brene Brown, if you recall, has drawn attention to the importance of vulnerability, of facing fear. Kilgariff says, "I think of Brené Brown [as] a scientist. So, while she's saying, "This is my research and this is what I've discovered through quantifiable science," what we're doing is going, "Our research is ... how we've lived our lives. And this is how we've f---d our lives up. And this is how we've tricked ourselves into thinking that that behavior — drugs, whatever — was going to fill that hole, and how it doesn't work that way." It's the thinnest expertise, but it's basically just like, "This is how we were blind." We got a glimpse of truth. That sounds super weird, but we basically just tried, "Don't do this if you don't want to feel that way." The shift they're making is exactly the shift Jesus is talking about. "Strive *first* for the kingdom of God", e.g., make your top priority kindness and generosity and courage. "And all these things will be given to you as well," e.g., and the obstacles to fullness of life will be diminished. I see the hand of God in their story, and if they don't, fine, but I'm telling you, this is what it looks like to strive first for the kingdom of God, and let

one's fears fall into a subordinate place. Validating the autonomy of other women, speaking openly about mental illness, advocating for the protection of journalists—none of these things could happen if Georgia Hardstark and Karen Kilgariff hadn't decided to face their demons and laugh in their faces. That's what turns the world back right-side up.

Today's scriptures acknowledge the realities of danger. We are right to think ahead and make prudent plans. But the scriptures also tell us that there is a way of living that puts fear in its place, and that is to face what scares us and ridicule it. Put it in its place, which is off to the side somewhere, because right here at the center is God who has been there and done that and given us lots of resources for really abundant life and growth.

God of love, turn our fears into laughter. Give us courage to be vulnerable, to trust you to bring good out of hardship. Open us all to your endless love, that it might drive out fear and we might turn right-side up again. Amen.