

Suttons Bay Congregational Church  
Psalm 27:1, 4-9 *Now the Sermon*

January 26, 2019  
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The image on this morning's bulletin cover illustrates the principle of negative space. It is the logo of a zoo in Pittsburgh. At first glance I see a tree with a couple of birds flying above it. But, if I consider the negative space on either side of the tree I see a gorilla on the left and some kind of a big cat on the right and there, at the very bottom, are a few fish. With this image, the negative space communicates just as much, if not more than, the positive space.



Negative, not negative as in not desirable but rather negative as in not there, negative space is described as *“the empty or open space around an object that defines it. In layman’s terms, it is the breathing room around the subject that determines how appealing it looks.”*<sup>1</sup>

Visual art isn’t the only medium that utilizes negative space. There is a similar concept in music. Rests in a song add definition, nuance, and sometimes even a sense of anticipation to a piece of music. A rest provides a negative space that allows silence, or other voices or instruments, to take center stage. As Mozart wrote, “The music is not in the notes, but the silence in between.”

There is also negative space in counseling. During pastoral care classes we were taught to take careful note, not just of what people were saying, but also of what they were not saying. The negative spaces created by silence during conversation can be just as fruitful and meaningful as those during which someone is talking. One professor’s mantra was to listen for the “unasked question,” the question that someone isn’t asking, and yet the question they are likely really wanting to ask and yet aren’t sure how. It’s been over twenty years since I heard that professor lecture and I still listen for the unasked question.

Negative space—what’s not there—shapes images, music, interactions, even how we perceive our place in the world—after all, if there wasn’t negative space, we wouldn’t be able to see the stars. (My handsome husband came up with that example . . . he’s so dreamy.) Indeed, negative space can significantly shape our understanding of scripture as well. Granted, it is hard to grasp all that is in scripture, let alone what is not there. But, it was what was not there, what was not part of our scripture reading from the Psalms this morning, that most captured my attention.

Jacque read just what she was asked to read this morning, Psalm 27: 1, 4-9. Indeed, she read what was suggested by the Revised Common Lectionary, a schedule of liturgical readings, meaning readings to be used for worship. Many denominations and preachers around the world rely on the Revised Common Lectionary for a three-year revolving schedule of readings that include an Old Testament, Psalm, Gospel, and Epistle reading for every Sunday of the year. Often the Psalm in the lectionary has negative space . . . meaning there are a significant number of verses that appear in actual scripture that are not part of the recommended reading in the lectionary. In some instances I imagine this has to do with length limitations, some psalms have dozens of verses and would simply be too long to be read in their entirety during most worship services. However, that

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.sitepoint.com/a-solid-understanding-of-negative-space/>

does not appear to be the case for this morning's Psalm because the entire Psalm only has fourteen verses. Rather, what's not included in this morning's selections from the Psalm seems to have more to do with content than length.

To illustrate, Jacquie will read once again the portions of the Psalm from the lectionary while I interject the negative space verses—the verses that were not there, the verses that got left out.

Jacquie: *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?*

Robin: *When the wicked advance against me to devour me, it is my enemies and my foes who will stumble and fall. Though an army besiege me, my heart will not fear; though war break out against me, even then I will be confident.*

Jacquie: *One thing I ask from the LORD, this only do I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze on the beauty of the LORD and to seek him in his temple.<sup>5</sup> For in the day of trouble he will keep me safe in his dwelling; he will hide me in the shelter of his sacred tent and set me high upon a rock.<sup>6</sup> Then my head will be exalted above the enemies who surround me; at his sacred tent I will sacrifice with shouts of joy; I will sing and make music to the LORD.<sup>7</sup> Hear my voice when I call, LORD; be merciful to me and answer me.<sup>8</sup> My heart says of you, "Seek his face!" Your face, LORD, I will seek.<sup>9</sup> Do not hide your face from me, do not turn your servant away in anger; you have been my helper. Do not reject me or forsake me, God my Savior.*

Robin: *Though my father and mother forsake me, the LORD will receive me. Teach me your way, LORD; lead me in a straight path because of my oppressors. Do not turn me over to the desire of my foes, for false witnesses rise up against me, spouting malicious accusations. I remain confident of this: I will see the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living. Wait for the LORD; be strong and take heart and wait for the LORD.*

Did you notice anything about what was kept in and what was left out? For the most part, what was left in for the lectionary were the praise-based parts of the Psalm, the author's expressions of faith in God. The Psalmist expresses confidence in God's providence—"For God will hide me in his shelter in my day of trouble . . ." But, the parts that are left out are the very parts I think we really need to hear, the parts that reveal that the life of the Psalmist isn't just all sunshine and lollipops, but rather, the Psalmist knows our pain and our struggle, our heartbreak and our confusion. Here are the left out parts again, this time as they appear in *The Message*.

*When vandal hordes ride down ready to eat me alive, those bullies and toughs fall flat on their faces. When besieged, I'm calm as a baby. When all hell breaks loose, I'm collected and cool. Don't throw me out, don't abandon me; you've always kept the door open. My father and mother walked out and left me, but GOD took me in. Don't throw me to the dogs, those liars who are out to get me, filling the air with their threats. I'm sure now I'll see God's goodness in the exuberant earth. Stay with GOD! Take heart. Don't quit. I'll say it again: Stay with GOD.*

The negative spaces in this Psalm as it appears in the lectionary, the verses that were left out, are what make the parts that are left in so powerful—it's like negative space in art, or a rest in music, or moments of silence in conversation. It's one thing to place your trust in the Lord when life is all happy go lucky, like if you're living the verses of Psalm 27:1, 4-9 all the time. But, to display the faith of the Psalmist even through the hazards of verses 2 and 3 and 10 through 14, that's a different thing all together. Indeed, it is in the negative spaces of this Psalm as it appeared in the lectionary that we find the true beauty and strength of the Psalmist's faith.

Even though the Psalmist has vandal hordes bearing down on him—he keeps the faith. Even though he was abandoned by his parents and his enemies are waiting for him in the shadows—he keeps the faith. Even though he’s plagued by folks trying to destroy his reputation by telling lies about him—he keeps the faith. All of this and he is still committed to staying with God. Well, sign me up! I wanna have the faith of the Psalmist!

But I don’t want to have the faith of the author of Psalm 27 just verses 1 and 4 through 10, that’s a faith that serves you in the good times but abandons you in the bad. I want to have the faith of the Psalmist when he’s in the verses left out of the lectionary. I want to have faith that even when it feels like the world is full of hate, God is love. I want to have faith that even though I am the target of injustice and gross unfairness, final judgment of me is in the hands of God. I want to have faith that even when the people I love feel distant and removed, God is still right by my side. I want to have faith that even when my reputation gets tarnished by lies and innuendo, God knows the truth. I want to have faith that even if the lies and innuendo were true, God forgives me and I get to start again. I want the faith that comes from knowing that even though I don’t have the faith to move mountains, God’s mercy and goodness will bring me to the mountaintop . . . maybe not today and maybe not tomorrow but someday and that’s why I’m gonna stay with the Lord! And, I hope you will, too.

The Good News of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is that God is present in the negative spaces—the places where we thought there was nothing, God is. We often talk about God being within each of us, but God is also *the open space around us that defines us*. God’s presence within and around us offers us definition, beauty, perspective, hope, and a sense of sweet anticipation for what is yet to come. Thanks be to God for being in all of the spaces of our lives. Thanks be to God, indeed.