

Too Close to Home

January 25, 2026

After the power and outward-facing nature of our worship last week, it had been my intention that today's service would be more pastoral, something to soothe the weary soul. But you've heard it said, "If you want to make God laugh, tell them your plans."

Psalm 27 begins "The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?" If we're honest, on this, our 190th Annual Meeting Sunday, that line feels aspirational today.

Because we are afraid. We are grieving. We are angry. We are exhausted.

Yesterday, in Minneapolis, Preble grad Alex Pretti—an ICU nurse, a healer, someone who trained his whole life to move toward suffering rather than away from it—was killed by Customs and Border Protection. He went into nursing AFTER COVID. When so many were throwing in the towel, he stepped in.

Yesterday, he moved to help someone who had been knocked down. He reached out his hand. And for that instinct—that holy reflex—he was pepper-sprayed, taken to the ground, and shot at point-blank range.

And before his family could even reach his body, the machinery of justification roared to life. This healer was named a threat. This witness was labeled a terrorist. Grief was not allowed to breathe.

So, when the psalmist says, "The Lord is my light," we hear it today not as a denial of fear, but as a defiant refusal to let fear have the final word. Psalm 27 is not written by someone insulated from danger. It is written by someone surrounded by it.

"When evildoers assail me...when an army encamps against me...when war rises up against me..."

This is not naïve faith. This is hard-won trust spoken out loud in the presence of real threat. And then the psalmist says something quieter, more revealing:

"One thing I ask of the Lord...to live in the house of the Lord all the days of my life."

Not escape. Not safety. Presence. To dwell with God long enough for our conscience to be shaped. To stay close enough to one another that we can discern what love requires—together.

Our tradition leans heavily on the importance and power of a well-formed human conscience—that we discern the will of God and what is right and holy and just through study and prayer—as well as on the importance of community—that in addition to that well-formed human conscience, what is good and moral and Godly reveals itself through our common life.

That matters today, because conscience alone—no matter how well-formed—is not enough. And community without conscience can become dangerous. Our tradition insists on both: the well-formed human conscience and the wisdom that emerges from common life. That is the real genius of our version of church.

Which brings us to Matthew's gospel. Today's reading opens with a detail we're tempted to rush past: "When Jesus heard that John had been arrested..."

John has been proclaiming the nearness of God's reign. He has been naming truth plainly, speaking truth to power and calling out the Roman occupation. And the result was his incarceration. Matthew is not subtle here. Faithfulness has consequences.

And then Jesus does something striking: He picks up the exact same proclamation. "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." In other words: This message gets you arrested. But I'm compelled to say it anyway.

From there, Jesus calls Peter and Andrew. James and John. We often sentimentalize this moment—nets dropped, lives transformed, gentle invitation. But Matthew, by placing it after John's arrest, is offering a frame: This is not a career change. This is a warning. And in that, the question Matthew places before us is not, "Would you like to follow Jesus?" But rather, "Knowing what this costs—will you?"

Which brings us to Zebedee. Poor Zebedee. Eternally remembered as the guy left in the boat. We usually treat him as a footnote. As if the story ends for him when the sons walk away. But that's not how families work. Zebedee doesn't disappear. He stays. He supports. He absorbs the loss, the fear, the risk, the long waiting.

His call is different—but it is not lesser. John the Baptist spoke truth to power and paid with his life. Zebedee stayed in the boat and made it possible for others to go.

And that matters today. Because not everyone is called to Minneapolis. Not everyone can show up publicly without putting themselves—or those they love—at risk.

A friend told me yesterday that he won't be at the protest on the City Deck this afternoon. He works with vulnerable populations. He fears that drawing attention to himself could have consequences for his clients later. He has brown young adult children and is terrified for their safety. And he feels guilty.

And I reminded him—and I remind us—that the scriptures are clear on this point: there are different gifts, but the same Spirit.

Some are called to march. Some are called to mutual aid.
Some are called to preach. Some are called to protect.
Some are called to stay in the boat and make sure the ministry doesn't collapse.

But hear this clearly: complacency is never a calling. Silence born of fear is not the same as discernment. Distance is not neutrality. And history is not fooled by our intentions.

Which brings us—uncomfortably—to our anniversary. Union Congregational Church is 190 years old. And we love to tell the story of being part of the Underground Railroad. It is a beautiful story. And the way we usually tell it is an incomplete one. We make it sound like there was a committee, a congregational vote, and a welcome mat proclaiming, "Formerly enslaved people welcome here!" But the reality is it was the pastor, his wife, and a few courageous members who were willing to risk reputation and incarceration and more because they believed so profoundly in the inherent human dignity of everyone, especially the other.

Most of the congregation didn't know. Many likely would have opposed it.

“Don't make waves.” “Get here legally.” “Think of the consequences.”

Sound familiar?

So here is the question before us today, as real as it gets: When some church historian decades from now writes this chapter of Union's life—Who do we want to be in the story? The ones who risked reputation, comfort, and safety to protect their neighbors? Or the ones who sat back and told themselves they were being prudent?

Psalm 27 does not promise safety. Matthew does not promise comfort. Jesus does not promise that following him will align you with the powers that be. What is promised is presence. What is promised is mutual liberation. What is promised is that God dwells with those who refuse to look away.

Alex Pretti moved toward the wounded. That instinct got him killed. And that should terrify us. And it should clarify us. Because the question is not whether this moment is dangerous. It is. The question is not whether following Jesus is dangerous. It is. The question is whether we will let fear numb our conscience—or sharpen it.

So maybe today's prayer is not, “Make us brave.” Maybe it is, “Make us honest.” Honest about our fear. Honest about our limits. Honest about our gifts. And then—honest enough to act.

Some of us will go to the protest this afternoon. Some of us will send money. Some of us will cook meals. Some of us will show up quietly and harbor neighbors whose names we cannot even pronounce but whose very beings are the image and likeness of God to places no one sees, no one writes down. Some of us will stay in the boat and make it possible for others to go.

But none of us are called to look away. Because the kingdom of heaven has come near. And while that nearness is costly, it is our only hope.

May we be the kind of church that future historians recognize—not for our building or size, but for our courage. Let it be said of us that when the kingdom of heaven came near and the cost became clear, Union Congregational United Church of Christ answered with our lives.

May it be so. Alleluia and Amen.

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Psalm 27:1, 4-9; Matthew 4:12-23
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