

Though I Walk...

April 21, 2013

Psalm 23

“When I was a boy, and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me ‘Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.’” –Fred Rogers. This quote is originally from “The World According to Mr. Rogers,” and has this past week been seen splashed all over internet memes and websites in light of how to talk about the bombings that occurred at the Boston Marathon. This bombings and manhunt in Boston are just the latest in so many unthinkable acts for those whose lives are directly affected. Then too there are the rest of us living in a constant state of trepidation about what is next...what unspeakable violence is next...who is to suffer for some senseless reason next? These are just some of the questions that have been going through my mind as this week has unfolded. A week that has unfolded to include an explosion in a Texas factory, floods in Chicago, teens missing while on a hike in Oregon, earthquakes in China and a lot of other things that have filled our news feeds.

All of the violence, the disasters everything seems to be so constant due to our accessibility. We get the news from newspapers, radios, television, laptops, iPads, phones, etc..etc...etc... We also get this information instantaneously. We literally know things almost the instant anything newsworthy happens. It has made me feel a little like those undownable kid toys. You know the one I mean the boppy thing filled with air and weighted at the bottom that you hit and it continually bounces up again. I feel like we, as the general public, are that boppy thing; barely having time to right ourselves before we are knocked down again by something else. Yet we are also resilient, able to bounce up again with hope for tomorrow.

It is in the aftermath of such events that I personally turn to the Psalms. The Psalms are the poetic expressions of our relationships with God. The Psalms reveal the experiences of the people as they understood who God was in their lives. Biblical scholars safely assume they were used for public worship as they had been collected and used over the centuries and are now in our Bibles. The words of the Psalms resonate with us all. They express our thanksgivings, our joy, our praise, our anger, our questions, our lament, and even our sorrow amongst the countless other emotions to be found in the passages.

I had already decided on Psalm 23 as this week’s scripture and have found great comfort as I have continued to read it and study it throughout this week. So I share it with you now.

Psalm 23 (NIV)

A psalm of David.

¹The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing.

² He makes me lie down in green pastures,
he leads me beside quiet waters,

³ he refreshes my soul.

He guides me along the right paths
for his name’s sake.

⁴Even though I walk

through the darkest valley,^[a]
I will fear no evil,
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff,
they comfort me.

⁵You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies.
You anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.

⁶Surely your goodness and love will follow me
all the days of my life,
and I will dwell in the house of the Lord
forever.

Familiar and lovely isn't it? A Psalm many of us have committed to memory although typically the more well known and poetic King James Version. This is a Psalm we have heard time and time again as a source of comfort in times of trial. A psalm often read at funerals particularly for the line "Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil for you are with me."

Sheep and Shepherding are reoccurring biblical themes. From Genesis to Revelation we can find continued reference to sheep and or shepherding as both a true occupation or as a metaphor for how to live. The ease of which is it a metaphor is because that is what the Ancients did for a living. We see those references in how Abraham was to sacrifice Isaac but instead God provided a ram. How Moses herded sheep for his father-in-law Hobab, the Midian. David was a shepherd before he was a King. Jesus' birth was first announced to the Shepherds. Jesus himself calls us if we love him to feed his sheep.

Psalm 23, although we often hear it in times of trial, is a Psalm of thanksgiving. A Psalm that offers our thanks to the provisions we are afforded because of God's love. Now do not misunderstand me when I say God's provisions. I do not mean we "pray" for that close open parking spot as we pull into the grocery in a pouring down rain and it is there because God made it so. God is a God of justice, equality, and most especially the God we know through Jesus as the God of love but I can safely say God is not the God of providing instant parking. I mean the provisions of God in that we are living; we generally have the basics of food, clothing, and shelter. We are able and capable of learning, of growing, and changing, and seeing God in all ways all around us.

In seeing God it helps to utilize what is familiar to center ourselves in our lives. It helps us find God better in the world around us. For the ancients it was shepherding. For us today shepherding is not such a familiar occupation. Yet, the Psalm still resonates within us and evokes powerful feelings. The providing nature of God is still evident. The restoring power of God is still seen. The security found in God's love is still felt. The love of God is still heard. The hope of God's promise is still comforting.

A headline on the Associated Press article by Jesse Washington yesterday read “Across America, a week of chaos, horror—and hope.” Hope means different things to different people. Biblically it means different things depending on which testament you are reading. In the First Testament where the Psalms are found hope is defined and understood that it connects you to your future and that future is in God’s hands. In the New Testament Hope is understood as fulfilled through Jesus Christ. Whatever is to happen will be okay because God’s love gave us Jesus and we are able to look for that love to come again and because the promise of God was fulfilled before we can believe it will be fulfilled again.

The promise of that fulfillment is what we live for as Christians. We live in hope. We live in hope that tomorrow will be better. That the world will be better. That people will be better. As Mr. Rogers quoted the words of his mother “look for the helpers, you will always find people helping.” We help one another out of that hope. We live in and through that hope. We go to church each Sunday to be reminded of that hope. We become better and more faithful through that hope. We are truly thankful for that hope.

I end today asking you to reflect on a slight re-writing of Psalm 23. Entitled Psalm 23-and-a-half by Erin Wathen it pulls Psalm 23 into today’s language and understanding.

The Lord is my shepherd,
whether I like it or not.
I shall not want.
Except for a bigger house, a nicer car, a slimmer waistline;
a newer device, a little more power;
and to always, always, every day, be right about everything.
He makes me lie down in green pastures
as the world grays with concrete
and browns with toxic fumes
and bleeds with violence and rage.
He leads me beside still waters
even though I pull away, and make a run for the choppy sea
of my own thoughts, complaints, and addictions.
He restores my soul.
from its own self-inflicted wounds
He leads me in right paths for his name’s sake...
For his name’s sake,
even as I celebrate with my own signature.
Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil;
even as I log on, tune in, and worship at
the altar of fearful story
that we call news.
For you are with me;
even as the world spins into chaos, crippled by the hatred of other,
Your rod and your staff—they comfort me

They tell me a better story,
And call me back to your side.
You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies
And ask only that I sit and dine with them.
You anoint my head with oil;
And call me to live a life worthy of this benediction.
My cup overflows
With sorrow, with remorse,
With gratitude.
Because for all my selfish, wandering, fearful and faithless ways,
I know that
goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life,
Even now. Even on the worst day, the worst week, the worst moment
Of the created, human world.
And I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long,
Singing a new song,
and telling the Shepherd's story
into the darkness.