

“A Balm in Gilead”

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Please pray with me: Holy God, may the words of my mouth and meditations of all of our hearts be faithful and pleasing unto you, for you are our rock and our salvation. Amen.

Two weeks ago, I was on a walk in the middle of the day and I received a text from my daughter:

Mom, have you checked your email today?

No, why?

There was a long wait before she answered, then finally:

Because we're in lock down. It's not a drill and I want to know what's going on.

I don't have a smart phone, so I couldn't check my messages quickly and I was about a quarter mile from home. So, I stopped in the middle of the sidewalk and tried to figure out what prayer to text to her. What should I say? I started to type, "everything will be okay," but had to stop myself. I didn't know what was going on. It was possible that everything wasn't going to be okay. It probably was, but it seemed unhelpful and disingenuous to send that message; kids have great BS detectors. This moment reminded me of a similar dilemma I had had with one of my classes a few years ago.

As many of you know, I am a professor of literature and ethics at Kettering University. That term has been very difficult for my students because two students in the university had died at the beginning of the term. One committed suicide during the Easter vacation and one died in a terrible car accident. Shortly after that, this was in 2013, the bombing attack had occurred in Boston. So, I was talking with my class about the attack and one of my students, we'll call him Alex, said that it was particularly terrifying because it seemed like part of a larger stream of horrible events, which he then proceeded to list. At the end of this recitation, my student looked at me, pleading, "How can I know that I am safe"? How can any of us know that we are safe, living in a world of violence, illness and even accidental death?

I know that both of my daughters currently have these same questions because they have asked me the same thing. The list of mass shootings has only increased since I spoke with Alex's class, immigrant children are still being separated from their parents, and our country's discourse has just gotten mean... and our children are frightened. They cry out:

My joy is gone, grief is upon me, my heart is sick...

The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved.

For the hurt of my poor people I am hurt,

I mourn, and dismay has taken hold of me.

Is there no balm in Gilead?

Is there no physician there?

I want to answer them by offering them the comfort of scripture. Psalm 23, in particular, speaks to humanity's deep seeded need for safety. We are afraid of death, afraid of the power of our enemies, afraid that we are alone in all of this. Psalm 23 answers Alex's and my daughters' plea, just as Marcia Kent shared with us last Sunday during her Light Reflection. It assures us that God offers us a kind of safety—a safety that is the comfort of God's eternal presence.

So, in response to my daughter's text, I prayed that they all would be safe and that they would find peace and comfort through God's presence.

Her reaction is notable in that it helps us understand why something that can seem obvious to us—to me—isn't obvious to everyone who reads or hears scripture. "The Lord is my Shephard," she said, "so what? What good is God's presence when we still might be attacked or hurt?" She clearly felt no particular safety or support in this prayer.

Sometimes even the most devout Christians might ask this question. What good is God's presence when we still might be attacked? We find the answer to this question both in Psalm 23 and in our Gospel reading. In John, we find that Martha and Mary have both lost their beloved brother, Lazarus. One after the other, they confront Jesus with this, insisting that if he had just been there, their brother wouldn't have died. And how often do we all do this, when we have lost a loved one or suffered a terrible illness? One very normal response is to yell at God and say, "if you had just been here, he wouldn't have died, or you could have healed her!"

Jesus reaction here and the words of Psalm 23 are telling. The Psalm does not deny that we have enemies, nor does it deny that we will, at some point, have to face death. Friends and family will die eventually—it is the human condition—, people will get sick, and lost, angry people will explode bombs. But what Jesus' reaction in this story and the words of the Psalm tell us is that we never, NEVER, have to go through any of this alone. Jesus shows us that God will listen patiently when we scream and blame God. He shows us that God will weep with us when we mourn. As Marcia explained last week, this is a kind of safety—it is a feeling of safety, and a form of comfort that can give us hope, courage, and even the equilibrium we need to live non-anxious lives.

Think about those times when you have sat in the hospital, waiting to hear news of a loved one in surgery and someone else showed up to sit with you. They take your hand and some of that anxiety just...slips away. Think of the times when you were struck by grief over the loss of a loved one, or the pain and frustration of an illness, and a friend comes to be with you and just...sits with you or just holds your hand. Or think of a time when you were a child and you had nightmares and you crawled into bed with mom and dad, or when we your parents or grandparents came running to you. The nightmare was still very real in the mind of the child, but the parent's presence, JUST the presence, brought a sense of comfort and peace that restores our internal balance. And God, through the constant presence of the Holy Spirit, is ALWAYS with us.

And let us not forget the end of this Gospel message: In the end, after having walked through ager, grief, and accusations from Martha and Mary, Jesus brings Lazarus back from the dead. In so doing, he offers us a symbol of hope regarding the ends of our lives, reminding us that neither life nor death, nor powers nor principalities, nor anything in this world or in the next can keep us from the love of God.

How do we know that we are safe? Because there is a balm in Gilead that can make the wounds of our hearts, minds, and bodies whole. No matter what happens during this life, God shepherds our souls, filling us with the peace and comfort of God's presence and reminding us that for now and all eternity, we dwell in the house of the Lord. Amen