

Psalm 23 (King James Version)

*The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.
 He maketh me to lie down in green pastures:
 he leadeth me beside the still waters.
 He restoreth my soul:
 he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness
 for his name's sake.
 Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
 I will fear no evil:
 for thou art with me;
 thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.
 Thou preparest a table before me
 in the presence of mine enemies:
 thou anointest my head with oil;
 my cup runneth over.
 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
 all the days of my life:
 and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.*

John 10: 22-30

What Will We Tell the Children?What if we lived as if we really believed the 23rd Psalm?

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Every one of us has been affected in profound ways by the powerful blasts that rocked our world on Marathon Monday this week.

Some of us were near the site of the bomb blast on Monday, or we knew others who were. All of us could envision ourselves on Boylston Street. The “what-if’s” have played through our minds on a repeating loop – they’ve played through mine -- reminding us of the fragility of life, of our lives and those we love.

Some of us knew someone killed or injured, and we are mourning, incredulous at the suddenness of these losses. We’re angry or numb with the senseless terror inflicted on innocent lives. It’s horrifying. It’s unfair.

Some of us have seen Humvees stationed on the Boston Common; found police with AK47s in the lobby of our office buildings; or were ordered inside our homes all day Friday. We felt under siege, exhausted by our heightened vigilance. We jumped, startled, when something dropped near us with a loud thud.

Through the endless TV coverage the eyes of the nation and the world turned to our little corner of the globe, within just a few miles of this sanctuary, and it still seems

surreal. We've handled stress by exercising or eating, by baking or shouting, by retreating into ourselves or compulsively watching the news, as if then we could control the events. We carry tension in our shoulders or the small of our backs, in a churning stomach or hidden within us where don't notice it, not yet.

And now that the ordeal seems over, wise ones are bracing for what our member Nell Borgeson calls the next shoes to drop – the unfolding of the additional connections each of us will find to this tragedy, bringing it home again, just when we thought we'd successfully created a safe distance between it and us. Old sorrows that we thought we'd gotten past may pop to the surface again.

So in the wake of all of this, we're starting to craft narratives of what occurred, so that we can get our hands around it. We want to find some meaning in the ordeal, so that we can begin to understand. This is what we humans do to heal, to learn, to grow: we tell the story of what happened and why. We try to find meaning within it.

What narrative of this past week will you tell? What could it be?

I discussed this with our Sunday School teachers, as we prepared for this morning's early service with children and their families. What would we say, when and how? What should we tell the children?

Our staff members Shannon Lee and Kat Milligan named narratives that they saw emerging in the media. One narrative is about "Boston strong." President Obama and Mayor Menino have praised the spirit of Boston – that the strong people here will *not* succumb to terrorists, that we will *not* be cowed, that the Boston Marathon *will* be back next year. At the Red Sox game yesterday, posters and flags made us proud, emblazoned with the phrase "Boston Strong."

Another narrative is American pride, that our nation has pulled together and triumphed again over foreign interests that might seek to harm us. Late Friday night, when thousands of people erupted from their dorms and apartments and homes, letting off steam after a frightening day locked inside, we often waved American flags, and those who gathered on the Boston Common kept shouting "USA, USA!" We are proud of this land in which we live. I am.

A third narrative praises the brave work of law enforcement officers who selflessly put themselves in harm's way to protect us, coming to Boston from many small police departments around eastern Massachusetts – I saw cruisers here from Lynn and Revere, from towns far and near. We had State Trooper barracks gathered from across the Commonwealth, and agents from dozens of federal agencies nationwide. I have been so glad to see day-to-day line officers applauded and acknowledged. I used to work with law enforcement, and their daily unheralded efforts on our behalf should be praised much more often.

What I've found most compelling within all of these lines of narrative is the strand that says we became a community – that ordinary folks came together and cared for one another; that people did not simply do what was best for themselves but were willing to generously help others. That Boston's Marathon volunteers, medical staff and security personnel so quickly ran toward the bomb sites to rescue the hurt, even after a second bomb had gone off, and rumors of unexploded additional bombs seemed likely. That law enforcement groups, notoriously suspicious of one another collaborated toward a common goal, literally racing into harm's way, no one worrying about who got the credit. This narrative of community – of strangers becoming friends – explains area homes opened for those needing shelter, marathoners donating blood at hospitals the very day they'd just run, and the Yankees singing Sweet Caroline during their third inning break.

This powerful narrative is that we united *for* one another.

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But there is a troubling subtext that can also be seen in some of these narratives, that sets up an "us" against "them," that focuses less on our uniting *for* one another, and emphasizes more our unity *against* someone else. Perhaps it's our penchant to prefer stories of *competition* over those of *community*, our yearning --when we feel insecure-- to tell a tale of triumph. Whatever the cause, these strains in the narratives are also emerging: that "we" have triumphed over "them" – that Boston beat the terrorists' intentions to frighten us; that the US won over foreign influences; that all our uniformed "good guys" with guns beat the "bad guys" with bombs.

I find myself wondering, what will become the dominant narrative of the next few weeks and months become? That we came together, in the face of tragedy, in order to support one another, or as a reflex against someone else?

For us here at church, these differences are not minor nuances, but distinctions about how we see ourselves and others. Because as Christians, we follow a man who said "Love your enemies," not rally in solidarity against them. We're asked to pray for all nations, not only our own. In *this* place we name the two young men from Cambridge who murdered four, maimed many, and wanted to kill even more, "our brothers," "our sons," "children of God," as much as we are. And if this were not enough, we're asked to forgive them.

How in the world can we do this?

Not easily. No, not easily. It is not easy for me, either.

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Almost everything these days seems set up based on divisions. Our public debates center on Republicans vs. Democrats. Those who care for the poor vs. those who are fiscally prudent. Those who value tradition vs. those willing to change. Even our comedy is often predicated on mocking the other side with which we disagree.

In the memoir Father Joe, written by Tony Hendra, this former writer for the National Lampoon tries to explain to the kindly, gentle Benedictine Fr. Joe how a joke is set up by creating an us vs. them scenario. In a dumb blonde joke, for example, *we're* all smart but *she's* so dumb....It works for scathing, witty political satire, too, says Hendra. But the old monk didn't get the jokes, didn't even understand the notion that the whole world is divided between us and them. "Hmmm," he said, after some thinking. "Well, dear, maybe you're right. I guess there are two groups of people. Those of us who think there are two groups of people and those of us who don't."

With Fr. Joe's words reverberating in my ears, I turn to our Bible passages set aside by the lectionary for today, texts that very often, over the years, have been interpreted as full of black and white descriptions, of us and them, of God's people vs. all others. The portion of John's gospel that we read today has been used by vicious anti-Semites to pit Jesus against "the Jews," as if Jesus and the disciples were not also Jews themselves. The terrors of the Nazi Holocaust are only the latest horror against Jews purportedly "justified" by John's writings. And Calvinists, who held sway in Massachusetts for some time, from whom my tradition of the UCC has descended, relied on today's passage for their doctrine of "election" – that some were predestined by God to be Jesus' true "sheep" and the rest were predestined for hell. Even within our beloved Psalm 23, we hear the psalmist say that his God will set up a fine spread right under the nose of his enemies. It can sound as if the psalmist were gloating over his enemies, can't it?

Oh, the evil we Christians have done, trying so hard to distinguish ourselves as better than other faiths. Nazi horrors and Calvinist intolerance *must* teach us not to pillory whole sets of believers – like Muslims. Anytime we get caught up in "us" vs. "them" narratives, we will likely miss the deeper meanings of holy scripture, the ones Jesus tried time and again to show us.

You see, neither John 10 nor Psalm 23 have to read as us vs. them, one set of good people vs. another set of bad enemies. To say, as our beautiful anthems have said today, that Jesus is the apple tree under whom *I've* found *my* truest rest, to say that that "*The Lord is my shepherd*" describes not who I'm against, but *whose I am*, in whom I trust. In the 23rd psalm we say God is the one I will follow; I intentionally choose to live letting God lead. If the Lord is my shepherd, then I am God's sheep; my relationship *with God* is the one that is most important when disaster strikes.

This powerful narrative of trust in Psalm 23 is what has made it beloved for centuries; that has resonated with people when they face hardship and suffering;

that made it meaningful when we read it here on Tuesday, the day after the bombs; that gave us comfort when it was sung earlier by our choir.

To say that “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want” is to say that God suffices for me, when all is said and done. When the way is so difficult, though I may be strong, I don't rely solely on myself; I rely on God. When tragedy arises, though I may be in the strongest country of the world, I do not count on my position or my power alone for security; I turn to God.

Because if I'm a sheep, and God's the shepherd, I acknowledge that I am not in charge all by myself. There is one beyond me whom I follow, who leads me where I need to go, whom I'm willing to follow even when I can't see where we're headed, who seeks me out and finds me if I am lost. This narrative in Psalm 23 says I live my life letting God be the one to guide me, knowing that this Love will always be present, no matter what.

I follow God to green pastures where I am nurtured with what I need. To still waters, where I quench my deepest thirsts. To safe places where I lie down to rest. God restores my very soul!

When I go through very dark places, where I can stumble or lose my way, I trust that God keeps me on the path that leads where I need to be or will find me when I've strayed and bring me back. Even when I am near places of greatest danger – when genuine evil, and real enemies who wish me harm are near – even there God hosts me, is present with me, feeds me well, soothes me with oil. With God, my life is overflowing.

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How would our lives have been, this past week, if this were our narrative, if we saw everything through the lens of the 23rd psalm? Was it your narrative?

I know that it was, for some of you. I saw you in action, what you did, what you said, despite your fears. That's why I need church, to see others living Psalm 23's trust.

I wish it had been more of my narrative. I'm still growing and learning my way into it. This narrative of trust did flicker in and out of my consciousness, but I can't say that it was the predominant one I lived by this week.

I think that's because, during interludes of my life when my own resources seem adequate to handle a situation, I'm quite content to rely on them. It gives me a good sense of myself, as independent, competent, in control. I like that. I'm the shepherd, and I'm strolling life's fields by myself, choosing the paths that will get me where *I* want to go.

So when the diagnosis comes, or the bomb explodes into a sunny Marathon Day, I am disoriented, accustomed as I am to trying to shepherd myself. Why do I so easily forget what I've learned in the past, loving and leaning on God? Why does it take me a while to gain traction each time a new challenge comes?

The powerful life-changing narrative of Psalm 23 is not a gadget that any of us can snap into place, right off the shelf, when the need arises. It's a learned way of living, a trust that fills a deep reservoir within us as we choose -- or are forced by hardship -- to practice living from it. We learn to live in the trust of Psalm 23 if we've heard its language previously, in this place or another; if it's sung to us often, or said aloud, and it's rung true, so we remember it. That's why we need one another, this flock of followers, to hear from each other that there is a Shepherd who is faithful, worthy of our trust. Psalm 23 becomes our life-long narrative, if we've experienced it before, or someone we know has, and they passed it along to us.

If sometime in our past, we were so desperately thirsty that our lips were cracked and our throat ached, and then some hand led us to a place where we could drink cold, refreshing water. If we've lurched in darkness, our hands in front of us groping for the way forward, our feet uncertain on rocky ground, and then someone with a lantern came up the path and showed us the best way down. If a police officer who would rather have been home with his own kids used his skills to detonate the unexploded bomb left in the street, so other kids wouldn't find it. If we were knocked off our feet by a blast and a stranger ran toward us with a wheelchair and rushed us to the medical tent where our bleeding was stopped, or if we witnessed that heroism, in person, or on TV.

You see, to say that "God is my shepherd and that suffices" does not mean that the bomb squad officer or the stranger with the wheelchair is omitted from our narrative of this week, our understanding of how God is present in our lives. Rather, living from the perspective of Psalm 23 means recognizing God at work *through* these men and women; as God has always worked through humans; as God worked through Jesus and Peter to heal others. As God can work through you and me, also. Sheep do recognize the voice of their shepherd, however the shepherd appears.

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How do we love our enemies, including the young men who planted the bombs? Alone we may not be able to. But we are not alone! God is present with us, and God can enable what we alone cannot do.

That's what I've learned from the women and men who, through history, have been able to love their enemies. Think of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. or Bishop Desmond Tutu or Jesus -- these never said that enemies weren't real, or that hate should be tolerated. They *strongly* resisted all evil. But they also never insisted solely on narratives of triumph, of "us" over "them," but rather preached that we are all God's children. They lived trusting that "God is my shepherd, I shall not want." Trusting

those words of Psalm 23 made all the difference in their lives. They had nothing to fear, so they could not be manipulated into demeaning others in order to feel safe themselves. They had nothing to fear, even when their walk with the Shepherd led them right into the very presence of their enemies. Even there, they were fed, nourished, provided for, in a feast spread out before them. They had nothing to fear, not even when they walked through the valley of the shadow of death, so they too could run towards victims even after bombs had exploded. They didn't fear that death would be the end of their relationship with God, but trusted that somehow, in ways beyond their knowing, they would continue to live in the house of the Lord forever.

That's the good news we proclaimed just three weeks ago on Easter: That nothing, not even death, can separate us from God. It's still the good news today!

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One way or another, in the next few weeks, all of us will be choosing a narrative to explain to ourselves what happened this week – we will do it as individuals, and we will do it as this church, King's Chapel in our beloved, strong City of Boston. What story will be planted deep in your own heart, growing there, guiding your future actions, and your future *reactions* when times are terrible? What is the story you will tell, to pass on to your friends and your children? What will we say to the children?

One possibility, here for each of us, fruit available for our us from the tree, are the words of Psalm 23. Sing it with me. Taste and see, the beauty of the Lord.

The King of Love my shepherd is, Whose goodness faileth never;
I nothing lack if I am his, And he is mine forever.

Where streams of living water flow, My wayward soul he leadeth,
And where the verdant pastures grow, With food celestial feedeth.

Perverse and foolish oft I strayed, but yet in love he sought me
And on his shoulder gently laid And home rejoicing brought me.

In death's dark vale, I fear no ill with thee, dear Lord, beside me,
Thy rod and staff my comfort still, Thy light before to guide me.

Thou spread'st a table in my sight, Thy unction grace bestoweth,
And O! the transport of delight, With which my cup o'er-floweth.

And so through all the length of days Thy goodness faileth never;
Good shepherd, may I sing thy praise Within thy house forever.

(Hymns of the Spirit, #87).