**Living in a Dangerous, Unpredictable World**

**Cooke’s-Portsmouth**

**Psalm 23**

**May 3, 2020**

A man shared the recollection of the house that he had lived in as a child of formative years. It was large and sprawling with three floors. The bedrooms were located on the uppermost floor, a type of finished attic. The family slept in bedrooms on the third floor because rooms on the second floor were often rented out to offset the mortgage. As the youngest child, this individual recalled having to go to bed first; without the company of parents or siblings in the upper reaches of the house. That space in the topmost part of the house was akin to the ends of the earth; remote from other humans and filled with creaks and groans common to most old houses.

Attempts had been made to stop the scary noises that were amplified at night in the dark. A story read and fears addressed ultimately lead to the time when a parent would shut out the light and retreat down the steps, leaving the lad alone and hostage to his imagination. One night his father asked him, "Would you rather I leave the light on and go downstairs, or turn the light out and stay with you for a while?" The youngster chose presence with darkness, over absence with light.

I suppose that most of us would want the same: presence in the darkness rather than being alone in the light. We trust the presence in the dark in a deeper. We may not see with our eyes but we know that we are not alone and that helps us to fall asleep in peace. Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow I fear no evil…for the presence of the rod and the staff proffer comfort and encouragement.

 Psalm 23 is probably the most familiar and beloved of all the Psalms; known to the faithful and those who may not attend services regularly. It is the scripture requested most often to be read at funerals but it is so much more than a funeral Psalm; Psalm 23 is a “song of trust”.

Songs of trust have two things in common: a perceived calamity of some kind and trust that the calamity or disaster shall pass and all will be well. In fact, as scholars often note, in these songs of trust it is the very crisis that instigates the psalmist to cry out in trust -- and not, as one might expect, in despondency or dejection. The trust that the Psalmist has in God is implicit from the first verse to the final verse.

The author lives life free from want. Even in the valley of the shadow there is the stated faith in the presence of God. The presence in the darkness. The faith in the abiding presence of the shepherd is so strong that the Psalmist’s appetite is unaffected by circumstance; seated at a table for one in the very midst of the enemy and feasting. This image models the power of the presence in the darkness over absence in the light.

These are dark times in which we live. Because I too am living with restrictions related to Covid19 and having to provide care for children whose single parent works in an essential service, I have needed to tape these reflections well ahead of time. In the nigh on 39 years that I have worked in ministry I was not one to work too far ahead. Something could happen on the world or domestic stage that would need referencing in a sermon or prayer, and this is more challenging if a finished product is already in the can. So as I reflect upon the shepherd’s Psalm it is scant hours after the terrible events in Nova Scotia that occurred over the weekend of April 19; when a gunman driving a RCMP vehicle and posing as an officer conducted a 12 hour reign of terror. As I write this the body count is up to 22, making this the worst mass shooting in Canada. As a nation we join in solidarity with our brothers and sisters in Nova Scotia in the valley of the shadow.

Innocent lives have been lost. Families torn apart. Communities reeling. Questions outnumber answers. This is the kind of event that can leave even the most faith-filled person reeling. It would be easy to succumb to the darkness and to doubt the power and presence of the shepherd. Rabbi Harold Kushner, who had a child who was born with an incurable disease and who succumbed at age 14 was moved to write the book, When Bad Things Happen to Good People, in the wake of that loss. His is still the voice of faith and reason that is sought out when both the skeptic and the faithful are struggling to understand unsettling tragedies and cruelty.

In an article written on this very Psalm he has been quoted as saying I want to believe in a loving God. And when you see children dying, when you see innocent people suffering, and when you see parents stricken with illness, how can you believe in a God of love and compassion unless you are prepared to say “Some things happen in the world that God does not want to happen. God is good. Fire burns and bullets wound and rocks injure and germs infect everybody whether you believe or not.

He wrote a book out of his pain and grief and loss. “I ask myself how did my wife and I get through that? You would think that would shatter the faith of the average person. Where did we find the strength and the ability to raise him, to comfort him when he was sick and scared, and ultimately to lose him? And the only answer is, when we have used up all of our own strength, love and faith, there really is a God who replenishes your love and your strength and your faith. But people who have been hurt by life get stuck in the valley of the shadow and they don’t know how to find their way back out. And that is the role for God. The role of God is not to explain and not to justify but to comfort, to find people when they are living in darkness, take them by the hand and show them how to find their way into the sunlight again.

God the Shepherd is the presence in the darkness that comforts and sustains. The presence of God in the darkness that removes want. Encourages the psalmist to seek out the green pastures and find renewed strength. Enables the writer to drink from still waters and become refreshed. To lean on the rod and staff for comfort and encouragement. To trust in and believe in the presence in the dark.

We live in a scary and unpredictable world. Many of the comments that I referenced from Rabbi Kushner were answers that he proffered in the wake of 911. People are still desperate to know how to believe in a God who maintains silence in the wake of tragedy when we might want to hear a providential roar to cease and desist. We must not confuse the seeming silence of God with apathy. Kushner has said, The Psalmist is not saying “I will fear no evil because evil only happens to people who deserve it.” The Psalmist is reality based and hoped filled reminding that we live in a scary out of control world but God is with us, most keenly in the challenging and confusing times.

When there are no answers to unanswerable questions; when bad things happen to good people who are out taking a daily walk, or preparing for bed when the smoke alarm sounds; yea when someone becomes dissociative such that the line between right and wrong, good and evil becomes blurred and results in violent and tragic endings for innocent bystanders we need to be reminded of the presence in the darkness who does not abandon or forsake; who remains near to calm; who may even shout to the person “Do not harm my precious sons and daughters.” There are things that happen that are simply not the will of God. And in the ensuing confusion and the crises of faith that may be born out of the tragedy we may be tempted to lose our faith in God who does not stay the hand of the one wreaking havoc. But to do that is to opt for absence in the light.

The light of reason may tell us that there can be no reconciliation between a benevolent God and the tragedy of circumstance.

Seeking answers in the wrong places may leave us hungry and thirsty for meaning.

Looking for a toehold in the shifting sands may result in feelings of hopelessness and building a house on sand may mean that we lose everything that we have worked so hard to gain. But even when we seek answers to unanswerable questions and look for truth in the wrong places and allow the misery of the moment to overwhelm us and leave us grasping at straws, the rod and the staff are there in easy reach.

God is there in the darkness of uncertainty and grief as constant as the Northern Star, patiently waiting for us to trust in the presence and gently leading to refreshing water and safe places where we can rest in comfort.

Disappointing things happen to people who deserve better; people who are simply in the wrong place at the wrong time. My heart is broken over the tragic events that occurred recently in a Canadian Province known for its hospitality and friendliness. I have no answers for what precipitates a loss on reality and may not be able to resolve my sadness and anger over the loss of life even if some word of explanation is proffered. I know that bad things happen to good people.

I know that for many of us who are distanced from those whose lives were lost, in time, will remember the tragedy and the name of the perpetrator and not the individuals whose lives were cut short suddenly, tragically and unexpectedly. But I also know that we will bow our heads a little lower in the wake. That we will hold our loved ones a little closer and for a little longer. That we will look more deeply into our souls to feel the presence in the darkness.

Even though I walk through the darkest valley I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff they comfort me. The Lord is my Shepherd and I shall not want. Amen.