



TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

on the Branford Green

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

Fear No Evil

By the Rev. Sharon Gracen

April 21, 2013

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want...I will fear no evil. The 23rd psalm is present in many forms in our worship this morning. We love it; it is a source of comfort and familiarity, often read at funerals. This week has caused me to contemplate it quite a bit. We have all been immersed in the unfolding drama that began with bombs designed to cause fear. That is what terrorism is about— making people afraid.

There are many translations and interpretations of the 23rd psalm. There's the well worn King James versions that to me, is less helpful as time goes on. We have lost contact with the intent of the Elizabethan language and therefore miss the ordinariness and intimacy of the words. We have come to think of 'thee' and 'thou' as holy pronouns instead of the common, familiar sense that was used to bring God closer, into our own kitchens. The nearness of the familiar pronouns was a part of the comfort.

There are several clunky reworkings of *I shall not want...Therefore can I lack nothing...I shall not be in want* as we have in our own BCP. A translation, closer to the intent of the original Hebrew is *because the Lord is my shepherd, I have all that I need*. I find that to be a powerful statement of faith. Whichever version you like, tuck that into your awareness as you think of God's presence in your life. Belonging to God gives us our identity, our connection, courage and hope. In a week like this one, those are the things that we need.

We have seen the *valley of the shadow of death* too much this week, in Copley Square and in the plumes of smoke over the little town of West, Texas. There have many pleas sent out that we might be delivered from evil in the last few days. Those prayers are big prayers because we observe what is happening with depressing frequency and the reality is so huge that we look small, vulnerable and ineffective in comparison. It will take something big and powerful to deliver us – to stop this violent madness. If this week were a Greek drama, it would end with some fantastical plot device, a *deus ex machina*, swooping down to save the day because we need to be rescued.

If we stop at a literal reading of the words of the psalm, *I will fear no evil for you are with me* it might sound as if we are saying that if God is here, nothing bad can happen to us so there is no reason to fear. Expecting God to keep harm from us as if by some magical force field is to flirt with disillusionment. God will not take away human vulnerability. However, if we read the 23rd psalm in a different way it can lead us to a stronger place. One of the newer translations says, *Even if I walk through the dark valley of death I will not be afraid, for you are close beside me, guarding and guiding all the way*. The use of the word *guiding* is important here. This says that we know that God's presence does not abandon us when we are in trouble but rather fills us with courage and a larger view. Something frightening might happen but we understand it from a different perspective. We experience trouble from a place of strength and perseverance. And we also understand that fear is a choice. The Hopi Indians believe that there are only two emotions; love and fear. If something is not love it is fear, regardless of how well it is disguised. "What am I afraid of" is one of the most profound questions you can ever ask yourself. It's been a while since I returned us to the wisdom of Teilhard de Chardin. *We are not human beings seeking a spiritual experience, instead we are spiritual beings having a human experience*. Spiritual beings understand the

1100 Main Street, Branford, CT 06405

www.trinitybranford.org

203-488-2681

[e-mail rector47@trinitybranford.org](mailto:rector47@trinitybranford.org)



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human experience from a very different place than, “why is this happening to us” or “how do we punish someone for this?”

I have worked diligently this week to keep de Chardin's words in mind as we saw families maimed and torn apart, suspects identified, killed and captured. How we react to weeks like this is critical to our understanding of ourselves as spiritual beings having a human experience. For if we give in to fear, anger, and helplessness we move away from the one thing that will deliver us and that is love. To love your enemy is a refusal to be afraid of them. To love an enemy is to know that regardless of actions, they are our brother or sisters. Love is the only thing that stops the spiral of fear and hatred and separation.

Loving an enemy does not mean condoning or excusing behavior. It is to look beyond behavior and for the common presence of Christ. When we can manage that it is we who benefit the most, for practicing love overcomes fear. Love will keep us from being incapacitated by fear. Think of it, when something frightens you, you contract, curling up in a protective posture like an armadillo, an armored individual. If you stay in that place of fear beyond the momentary instinct, you will have isolated yourself except from others who share your fear. I was in the bank on Friday and talking to the teller about our concert coming up that night. Another woman nearby said that she couldn't attend because she was too afraid to be in a crowd because that would be dangerous. She might be a target. Fear is a trap that you can only get out of by letting go of anger and thoughts of vengeance. If you cannot do that, terror has succeeded.

As we pray for the recovery and healing of those who were injured in the bomb blasts in Boston, we must also pray for the recovery of the other young man in the hospital. If we want his heart to be opened and transformed, so that he is no longer someone who would do such things, we will not bring that about by hating him or being afraid of him. Are we a people of retribution or redemption?

It is no challenge to have compassion for the innocent victims, it is the challenge of those who follow Christ to find love for those who would do harm. A violent, vengeful response only ensures more of the same. We must have faith that love will make a difference.

When we walk through the valley of deep darkness, fearing no evil means that we do not let fear dictate how we will live. Trusting in the presence of God, we choose a response love and courage. That is the only way to be free. You cannot dwell in the house of the Lord any other way.

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