

***AT THE WRONG END OF THE RAINBOW?***

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**Reading: Genesis 9: 8 - 13 (NRSV)**

**Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, “As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.” God said, “This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth.”**

Given the storms, tornadoes, cyclones, and floods of the last few months one can only wonder at the meaning of this covenant that God promised to Noah and all living creatures following the flood. On May 2nd, cyclone Nargis struck Burma, leaving over 2.4 million people homeless and 65 - 100,000 dead. Flooding in China has killed 200 people, destroyed 9,000 square miles of cropland, and factories in Foshan and Zhongshan. We are still calculating the destruction of lives and property along the Cedar River and the Mississippi. So far 35,000 people have been displaced in Iowa and 24 have been killed. At the end of this week it was estimated that Iowa has suffered two billion dollars in damages. Cedar Rapids alone has 96,000 tons of debris to clean up. We do not know the damages yet to be inflicted on Missouri and states further south. Crop lands will inevitably be destroyed, along with homes and towns. So, we wonder about this promise that God made to Noah.

Now you can imagine that if you are operating a big corporation like God's you would surely have a very large legal department. This covenant was carefully vetted by God's corporate attorneys before it was issued to Noah. It is very clearly written and on careful examination there is no small print to confuse the covenant receiver or tie up Noah, his family, or all future generations in litigation for years to come. In fact, the text very clearly states that the promise is not the end of all flooding. The promise is that there will never be another flood that will entirely destroy the earth and all of the creatures of the earth. The way is wide open for regional flooding, death, and destruction. And thus far in human history, God has kept God's promise.

Personally I do not believe that God causes or ceases floods, hurricanes, and other natural disasters. They are the result of climatic conditions, with growing evidence that human behavior and consequent global warming aggravates these natural occurrences. Disease, old age, and death happens to every one of us. Every nation suffers disasters such as volcanoes, typhoons, earthquakes, and droughts. If you live on this planet you need to understand that this stuff happens all the time. You also need to understand that it is not about you, or your people, or your state.

Of course people say to me, "If God does not cause or prevent such disasters what is the point of believing in God, or worshipping God, or praying to God?" My first response is that no where in the Bible is it written that life on this earth is

without suffering. No where are we led to assume that even in the garden of Eden was it ever understood that all living things did not die. If Adam and Eve never broke a single rule, never ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, they would have lived out their days and died, just like every human being that has ever walked the planet. So the first thing I think we have to challenge is our assumptions of what it means to be God's creature on this earth, before, during, and after Eden.

Perhaps we need to look for an additional source of comfort. Maybe we should move beyond the universal symbol of the rainbow to the more intimate symbol of the shepherd found in the XXIII Psalm. It is probably the most beloved psalm, and perhaps the most well know piece of scripture. Listen carefully to what the psalmist says about the role of God, the Shepherd (NRSV) :

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.  
 He makes me lie down in green pastures;  
 he leads me beside still waters;  
 he restores my soul.  
 He leads me in right paths,  
 for his name's sake.  
 Even though I walk through the darkest valley,  
 I will fear no evil;  
 for you are with me;  
 your rod and your staff -  
 they comfort me.  
 You prepare a table before me  
 in the presence of my enemies;  
 you anoint my head with oil;  
 my cup overflows.  
 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me  
 all the days of my life,

and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord  
my whole life long.

The psalmist nowhere suggests that the faithful follower of the way of God will not encounter calamity, danger, and death. Quite the opposite. The psalmist is very clear that the most faithful and the most devout will, like every human being, walk through dark valleys, yea, even the valley of death. Enemies lurk everywhere, be they cancer cells, depression, the betrayal of false friends or loved ones. You know the old saying, “Just because you are paranoid does not mean they are not out to get you.” It does not matter what religion you belong to or how faithful you are to it. We all suffer at the hands of adversaries and even assailants. Indeed, perhaps the psalmist wants to especially remind the faithful that each of us is vulnerable to hostility. Our trust in God does not remove us from this threat. Now listen very carefully to my diction: IT HAPPENS.

One of the biggest lies that I could ever tell my children is that God will protect or save them from catastrophes, crippling diseases, child molesters, or any thing else that lurks in the shadows. And I will personally show the door to any person who would dare tell me that in the advent of my nine year old daughter’s death that, “God needed another flower for his heavenly garden.” If the book of Genesis got anything right it understands that we live this side of Eden. We live in an imperfect world populated by human beings who are flawed, broken, afraid, or sociopathic. Whatever cause you attribute to it, there is evil in the world and there

are evil people in the world. My trust in God and my faith in the Way of the Cross of Christ does not protect or immune me or my family in any way. God never promised that!

What, then, is the promise? What is the covenant of the Shepherd? The psalmist says that the Shepherd's role is to be with us, to lead and guide us in the paths of right, or righteousness, or right relations. The fundamental issue is what kind of character will you meet suffering with? Do you have that inner moral compass that will guide you through the complex labyrinth of moral confusion and ethical compromise that is so typical of a fallen society? Have you placed your soul on the anvil of God's grace, to be forged and shaped on God's values of truth and justice? Will your soul be tempered in the coals of mercy and forgiveness? Will your soul be hammered by God's arm of courage and wisdom? The Shepherd's role is not to keep you out of the valley of shadows but prepare you to enter it with dignity and veracity.

Rushworth M. Kidder and Martha Bracy wrote a white paper for the Institute of Global Ethics entitled, "Moral Courage." They begin their paper with this story:

"Like most independent schools, St. Paul's School for Boys posts athletic schedules on its Web site. In the spring of 2001, it listed baseball games, tennis matches, and crew events from its campus in suburban Baltimore.

But not lacrosse. Not that spring. Despite being ranked No. 1 in a nationwide lacrosse poll earlier in the year, the prestigious 151 year old institution cancelled its entire varsity season on April 3.

The reason? Earlier in the spring, a 16-year-old team member of the lacrosse team had a sexual tryst with a 15-year-old girl from another private school, and, without her knowledge, videotaped the whole thing. When this student's teammates gathered at a player's home to look at what they thought would be game tapes on an upcoming rival, they saw his tape instead.

None of the teammates objected. Nobody tried to stop the showing. Instead, they watched.

The story of what happened next is a tale of moral courage - a lack of it among teammates who failed to stand up against the tape, and the expression of it by an administration that took a formidable public stand. The debate could not have been an easy one. At St. Paul's lacrosse has a 60-year history and attracts some of the best young players in the region. It enjoys solid alumni support, which translates into funding. But the school, affiliated with the Episcopal Church, still requires chapel for its students and retains a serious tradition of ethical concern.

What do you do when a popular sport crosses swords with an ethical collapse? In this case, the answer was clear. The boy who made the tape was expelled. Thirty varsity players were suspended for three days and sent into counseling with the school's chaplain and psychologist. Eight junior varsity players were made to sit out the rest of the season. And the varsity season was terminated.

"At a minimum," Headmaster Robert W. Hallet wrote to parents, "we should expect each boy here will, in the future, have the courage to stand up for, to quote the Lower School prayer, "The hard right against the easy wrong."<sup>1</sup>

And so it is that our journey in faith is learning the essential lessons of moral agency. They are lessons that we learn from our parents, our churches, the wisdom of the world, the example of women and men who impress us, and sometimes in

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<sup>1</sup> Rushworth M. Kidder and Martha Bracy, "Moral Courage," The Institute for Global Ethics, 2001; [www.globalethics.org/pub/moral\\_courage\\_11-03-2001\\_downloads\\_6/20\\_2008](http://www.globalethics.org/pub/moral_courage_11-03-2001_downloads_6/20_2008)

the failure of our own moral comportment. One hopes that even the boy who was expelled, who experienced the rod and staff of moral discipline, will be transformed by his failure. We hope that the process of St. Paul's discipline set before his eyes a clearer model of what it means to be an ethical person.

I submit to you that this is how we experience the presence of God in our daily lives. While God does not divert us from the presence of enemies or valleys of shadows, the promise is that God is with us. "Thou art with me," declared the psalmist. In her book, *God Cried at Auschwitz*, holocaust survivor, Betty Lissing writes about those who wonder how God could have allowed the deaths of so many millions of Jews under the Third Reich of Adolph Hitler. Of her entire family, only she and her brother survived. Lissing points out that millions of other Germans suffered under the the Reich. She declares:

"I have since learned that humanity must realize a deeper truth, and this is: unless we acknowledge the one Fatherhood of God for all people, we have no common cause for being on earth and fulfilling our destiny of the brotherhood of man. God resides in man in His fullness, but man has to make that connection and acknowledge it for Him to function in our individual lives.

So God is present at all times within man, but we have the choice of exercising our free will - to ignore or accept Him within us, in accordance with our own beliefs.

I know that God was present at Auschwitz, and when man exercised his destructive free will, He indeed cried."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Betty Lissing, *God Cried* (Martin Systems Pty Ltd, publisher), <http://www.godcried.com.au/foreword.html>. Downloaded 6/21/2008,

God is present at all times within the human heart. The question, therefore, is not where is God, but will we go to the source of moral courage seated in our own souls? Will we gird ourselves with integrity and steel ourselves with truth?

The shepherd is with the flock at all times. We need only find God in the most ethical choices we can manage. And then the psalmist make an incredible claim. We know that God is with us when the table is set and heads are anointed with oil. Right in the midst of the valley, surrounded by enemies and all manner of calamity, God sets the dinner table. There is going to be a covered dish dinner - not on the church grounds - but on the battlefield. The enemy is stock piling weapons of mass destruction. While roadside bombs are being planted, chemical weapons deployed, and rockets are programmed for amazing accuracy; God has rented the ballroom at the Holiday Inn for a party. People are losing their jobs, families are suffering divorce, soldiers are breaking down under post traumatic stress disorder, and some idiot on television tells you that if you don't count the rising cost of food and fuel inflation is just about steady. And then God sends you an invitation to the sacred banquet.

On the face of it this seems absolutely crazy. Who would do such a thing? Perhaps it is some form of Old Testament humor. I submit to you that this is meant to be God's model for human relationships in the world. Indeed, it is a subversive model. It takes the values of a world twisted by injustice and violence, warped by confused and conflicted value systems and shows them up for what they are -

broken, meaningless, and empty of promise. While everyone in the valley is shooting bullets at everyone else the Sacred One is passing blessings. In the midst of deception, greed, and anger the Holy moves amongst the people touching a fevered brow, kissing a frightened forehead, massaging temples swollen with worry. When the valley is flooded and destruction ravages every home, business, and farm open up your eyes and look for barges floating down the river, with Dixie Land band playing on the foredeck. Tables are laden with fried chicken, watermelon, fried okra, and potato salad. Folks will be at the gunnels throwing lifelines to the drowning and stranded. And if you don't see God there it is because the Almighty is filling sandbags at the levy, making up cots in the storm shelter, passing out sandwiches and coffee at the rescue station.

Do you see what a contrasting image the psalmist portrays in the midst of suffering and death? It is meant to remind us to keep our eyes and ears open for the Sacred presence. The promise is that we will not walk alone. God is with us.

Let me recast the possibility. God is with us in sacred imagination, envisioning a different response to the age old routines of fight or flight. God is the sacred imagination that sees creative options in the midst of despair and destruction - a poetic vision for a world enslaved by violence and oppression. Betty Lissing envisions a humanity bound in brotherhood by a shared faith in the one true God, however differently we name that God. How about this vision of for all the people of the earth, offered by Archbishop Desmond Tutu: "My humanity is

bound up in yours, for we can only be human together.” Or consider the sacred vision that is offered by Greg Mortenson, author of *Three Cups of Tea: One Man's Mission to Promote Peace One School at a Time*. If you have read the book, you know that it is Mortenson's story of mountain climbing and near death.

Disoriented and nearly frozen, Mortenson was found by his porter, Mouzafer Ali. Ali took Mortenson to his village where he was restored to health and made at home by the village mullah Haji Ali. Mortenson fell in love with these people and became fascinated by their way of life. One day he visited their school and discovered that it was nothing more than a mountain ledge. Children practiced their writing with sticks in the dirt. Mortenson determined that he would return to that village and build a school. With the financial help of elder mountain climber, Jean Hoerni, Mortenson was able to fulfill his promise. But his work did not stop there. Throughout war torn Afghanistan and Pakistan he has built over 50 schools. Now that is sacred imagination! The Shepherd is with us, leading and guiding us to moral stature, building schools in the midst of terror. That is the rainbow we will find true shelter in!

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