

Keep Walking

April 21, 2024

Psalm 23

Prayer: God of ancient story and present moment may the words I offer in reflection, be acceptable to you and echo your wisdom in our time. Amen

Sunday morning, last week, as I crossed McKercher heading east on Taylor, I could see flashing lights up ahead. Several police cars were scattered along both sides of the of the street, just past the SGI. As I turned into the church parking lot, I knew that something significant had happened. Later in the day I discovered that a young person was driving, with speed along Taylor, lost control of the car and hit a pole and flipped the car. One young man in the car died at the scene. The young man who died was a student at Evan Hardy. My son Isaac who is a substitute teacher, who is working at Centennial at the moment, and his fellow teachers were bracing themselves for Monday morning. The death of a young person sends ripples of sadness and fear throughout the city's young people and it impacts the heart of every parent. My heart breaks for the young man's family. Those investigating the crash are still looking for the reason WHY. We all wonder why.

Saturday morning, last week 64 women gathered for a women's retreat organized and hosted by the Congregational Care committee here at McClure church. One of the guest speakers, Tina talked about her experience of being diagnosed with Parkinsons at a very young age and how she is choosing to live with the disease. Tina also spoke about **WHY** she has Parkinsons. The answer to her **WHY** was not the answer I would have given. But her answer to WHY belongs to her.

It is ingrained in us as human beings to ask **why**. We're hotwired to look for patterns; to look for cause and effect in everything. That's how we've survived for six million years.

We learned that if you strike two stones together, for example, sparks would come out. Cause and effect.

We learned that if you try and ride a Woolly mammoth, it will not end well. Cause and effect. ///

We start at an early age asking things like, "Why is the sky blue?" "Why are there leaves on a tree?" "Why do we have to eat lettuce?"

We continue to ask **why** into adulthood.

We question the silly things, like why is it that when a sign says "do not touch – wet paint," we are compelled to touch it to be sure?

We question the big things too. We ask the vast and unanswerable "why" about human suffering and pain. Like why that drunk driver swerved into that lane, on that day, in front of that car? Or why that cancer cell started growing in that person? Or why that freighter hit that bridge on that day, and why those workmen were on the bridge as it collapsed. Why?

Why does suffering exist? For people of faith, this is an especially troubling question. It is troubling because we have come to assume that the world is governed by an all-powerful God that has got this whole thing figured out. We have come to believe "that all things happen for a reason".

But, Friends I don't believe this to be true. My answer to the big **why's** of life are - **I don't know**. But I'm pretty sure we are not puppets on some divine string.

I like how the author and theologian C. S. Lewis dealt with it. Lewis lost his wife to breast cancer, and out of his questions – his “why” – he wrote the now famous book, *A Grief Observed*. In it he said, “Sometimes, Lord, one is tempted to say that if you wanted us to behave like the lilies of the field you might have given us an organization more like theirs.” Which was Lewis's way of saying that when it comes to human beings the usual cause and effect, predictability and patterns do not apply.

So many of us are in great pain. Pain from loss, pain from illness, pain from a hopeless heart. And we ask **why**? We search for predictability and patterns. Unfortunately, there is no clear cause and effect. And the Bible doesn't give us crisp, clear, or consistent answers either.

Take the story of Lazarus. Jesus gets word that his friend Lazarus is about to die. Rather than hurry to his side, Jesus takes his sweet time getting there. Meanwhile Lazarus dies. When Jesus arrives, he then raises Lazarus from the dead. **Why?** Why not just save Lazarus before he died in the first place? And while Jesus was at it, why didn't Jesus save all the other people in that tomb as well?

Why?

If we are looking for clear cause and effect in the Bible, we're not going to get it. And you know why? Because the writers of the Bible didn't have an answer either. Biblical writers struggled with this big question in the form of stories, and parables, and poetry. They were trying to figure it out – just like we are all trying to work it out.

We all experience tragedy, pain and loss. Sometimes in horrible and unexplainable ways. And we ask why? **And that's okay**. God gave us a brain to question and to wonder. ///The challenge is not to get stuck in that place of questioning.

Friends, It's okay to ask why. But doubt and questioning are not our ultimate destination. It's simply a place of pause. At some point, we must start moving again. And I think the key to moving forward is found in our scripture lesson today, the beloved 23rd Psalm.

This is a scripture I suspect most, who have been part of the church for awhile can recite by heart. If you don't know it, might I suggest that you take some time this week to put it to heart. Here is one of those places in the Bible that is wrestling with the big question, and I think it has some wisdom for our modern-day pain. Especially the line “Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; or as an older version of the bible puts it “Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil.”

This is such a powerful statement of courage and faith. ///

Dr. Otis Moss, suggests the most important part of the Psalm is the word “**walk**.” The Psalmist didn't say, “Yea though I **sit** in the valley of death,” or “Yea though I **stand** in the valley of death,” or “Yea though I am **stuck** in the valley of death.” No - the writer of this beautiful Psalm used the Hebrew word *halakh* (please excuse my pronunciation) which means to go, walk, or travel.

When we focus on the word “**walk**” in Psalm 23, we realize that any time we find ourselves in the shadow of the valley of death or the shadow of a huge obstacle or the shadow of change and transition, the best and only thing we can do is keep walking.

If you pause to consider the cause and effect. Fine. But just keep walking.

If you want to be angry with God about your pain or misfortunes. Fine. Just keep walking.

If you want to ask **why** for awhile. Fine. but keep walking.

Why? Because with movement comes meaning.

The author Rabbi Harold Kushner lost his son at age fourteen to a rare and horrible disease. But he rejected the idea that God was somehow responsible, or even that there was some rational explanation for suffering. Kushner wrote, "Let me suggest that bad things that happen to us in our lives do not have a meaning when they happen to us... But we can redeem those tragedies from senselessness by imposing meaning on them ourselves." After struggling for years with the **why**, Rabbi Kushner took his pain, kept moving and wrote a book entitled, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* – a book which has helped millions of people through loss like his. In short, he just kept walking.

When people in the worst of tragedies have made the difficult but bold choice to keep moving. Somehow the movement brings meaning and with meaning comes a reminder of the love that surrounds us always.

Friends, we've all been in that vortex of trying to make sense of this crazy world – feeling angry, confused, resentful, asking *why, why, why!* But this cycle of questioning is not our ultimate destination. It's only a place of pause. For even in the places of greatest loss - love still surrounds us. And if we keep walking, eventually we'll start to connect with the beauty of green pastures and the peace of still waters, and the love of God, that did not let us go and will never let us go.

So, let us just keep walking.

For the Lord is our shepherd; we shall not want. (Please, say it with me)

He makes me lie down in green pastures: he leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul: he leads me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Even, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil. You are with me; your rod and 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 will dwell in the house of the Lord forever. Amen.

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