

Psalm 23

Gospel Reading: John 10:11-18

word count 1,990

We are recently returned from a few days up north in San Francisco and Berkeley. Carl and I stayed on Nob Hill to be near Grace Cathedral. We both like to use the large stone labyrinth on the floor in front of the huge baptismal font as a means of meditation. On Sunday, I went to services.

On our first day, I walked the path into the center and out again, while colored light streamed down through the stained-glass windows. Visitors moved around the periphery, while others sat in meditation in pews. Some kneeled in prayer in front of flickering votives, and after lifting their heads, they lit a candle from a long wooden stick, which they placed back in a holder full of sand. Near the front doors came the sound of voices talking about the quilts that hung in the Interfaith AIDS Chapel. The heavy bells in the tower struck three-o'clock.

This was my meditative walk through the labyrinth, but I was able to take in everything around me. Finally, I became aware of a voice coming from another part of the church. “Devil.” The word pierced the cathedral quiet. I was able to make out that the voice belonged to a woman, and she was speaking in a tone that suggested she was reading. “Help us,” the voice said, then trailed off to a buzz for a while. “Help us,” the voice said again, followed by sentences containing words like, “angels,” “mercy,” and, “forgiveness.”

I was standing in the center of the labyrinth now facing the huge font and the heavy doors of the church. “Turn to page (something),” the voice instructed. I looked up at the rose window. Meanwhile, people walked in pairs or alone, an artist sat down on the stone floor to sketch, two people stopped and studied a pamphlet. I stepped out of the center and began the walk out of the labyrinth, carrying with me my meditation, which was on spiritual direction. The voice from the far off corner entered into my consciousness whenever I could understand a word she was saying.

I finished the labyrinth walk, which leads you up three stairs to the giant font, and I could not resist placing a finger into the cool water there and lifting it to my forehead. “Protect us from evil” I heard behind me. Blue and red glass caught the light, which fell to the stone floor, in puddled grace—inviting and spiritual in the presence it brought.

Walking through the light and past the hush of fellow pilgrims in the cathedral, I followed the sound of the voice, still speaking. In a side chapel stood a young woman in vestments, talking out loud. There were programs with no takers on a stand, and then I realized that she was officiating at the 3:00 p.m. Service of Evening Prayer. It was a service with readings, responses and prayers, and the priest (or priest-in-training) dutifully stood in front of a gothic chair and performed the service to no-one at all, while tourists wandered by, gazed into her religious diorama, and some took her photograph.

When she finished, she closed the Bible on its stand, and walked out and up a hallway to the sacristy and vanished inside. I followed her, drawn as I was by a priest who gave a service to which nobody came. The sacristy door closed in my face. I turned around and looked back at the interior of the cathedral, where light from glorious windows still puddled in amazing color, as pilgrims walked through it on stone floors. People continued to kneel in prayer and light candles, others sat in pews in meditation, and the long circuitous path of the labyrinth revealed those engaged in a walking meditation moving in and away again from the center. No-one missed the voice giving the Service of Evening Prayer in an empty chapel.

We are living in unstable times as pilgrims seeking spirituality in ways that make us feel connected to something greater, as the great paradigm shifts around us make us question anything doctrinal, let alone absolute. The old is hollow, the new untried and still untrustworthy. We question—because we know more about the nature of the universe, and science reveals something

much larger than can be contained in ancient texts that were written when the world was flat and heaven was just above that cloud over there. But we still need to answer that impulse written into our genes that compels us to search for connection, and in so doing, find that *glimpse* of God.

We need to know that we are not alone, that we are acknowledged as creatures of worth, and that we are loved. If that need is not met through one form of worship, it will be found in another.

The scriptures for today are familiar. To people living at the times in which they were written, the metaphors were very easy to understand. Are we cared for? Yes, we are cared for in the way a shepherd guards his sheep. We do not need to be familiar with what it means to be a shepherd in 21st century California. The words feel authentic and true. The 23rd psalm continues to this day to be learned and recited as words of comfort and a means of prayer.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus calls himself, “the good shepherd,” the one who is always there for those who follow him, and who would even lay his life down for his flock. Again—it is a story that connects deep caring and commitment between shepherd leader and the community, and thus between the ultimate reality and the living parts of creation in search of unity.

Where is God this morning in all of this? What aspect of God are we trying to understand or embrace, what needs do we have that cause us to turn to looking for a spiritual connection today? Are we hurt, do we feel broken, are we afraid of something and need assurance? Or, are we remote and on the outer edges of accepting faith because we cannot tune ourselves in to the voice in the cathedral reciting words and prayers from a book and so we look elsewhere? I know from listening to people, that the anthropomorphic version of God taught in many Sunday schools and churches does not ring true in later life.

There is a story about some children who were lined up in the cafeteria of a Catholic elementary school for lunch. At the head of the table was a large tray full of apples. The nun made a note, and posted it on the tray, “Take only one. God is watching.”

Moving further along the lunch line, at the other end of the table was a large pile of chocolate chip cookies. A child had written a note, “Take all you want. God is watching the apples.”

At some point we either shift away from those childish notions and search for higher meaning, or, unable to do bridge that gap, we become unaffiliated from religion altogether.

A study entitled, “Faith in Flux” issued this week by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, came up with some interesting results. If you were here a month or so ago, I stopped the sermon to ask what religious backgrounds you come from. More and more, people are shifting and trying out different ways of understanding their faith, in a way, much like the people in Grace Cathedral last week. They move away from what no longer touches their hearts, and try walking a different walk, or going within in prayer and meditation.

Many people leave the faith they were brought up in, and after a while, some return back to it again. I know that is true right here in this room. But the most intriguing part of the study was where it showed that people who never had any religious background at all, followed their need to discover where their Higher Power was. Most said that they first joined a religion because their spiritual needs were not being met. The most-cited reason for settling on their current religion was that they simply enjoyed the services and style of worship. Despite the spate of books denying the existence of God, more people raised in a non-religious background are searching for meaning in a pursuit of faith that makes them feel connected, and in that connection, cared for, enfolded, loved.

Charles Blow, writing in yesterday’s New York Times, had this to say, though somewhat sardonically:¹

“While science, logic and reason are on the side of the nonreligious, the cold, hard facts are just so cold and hard. Yes, the evidence for evolution is irrefutable. Yes, there is a plethora of Biblical contradictions.” Yes, yes, yes. But when is the choir going to sing? And when is the picnic? And is my child going to get a part in the holiday play?”

But then he becomes serious:

“As the nonreligious movement picks up steam, it needs do a better job of appealing to the ethereal part of our human exceptionalism — that wondrous, precious part where logic and reason hold little purchase, where love and compassion reign. It is the part that fears loneliness, craves companionship and needs affirmation and fellowship. We are more than cells, synapses and sex drives. We are amazing, mysterious creatures forever in search of something greater than ourselves.”

Dale McGowan is the co-author of the book “Parenting Beyond Belief” and he is quoted as saying that he believes that most of these people “are not looking for a dogma or a doctrine, but for transcendence from the everyday.”

Are you are looking for transcendence from the everyday? I know you to be people who are suspicious of doctrine and upon hearing a piece of scripture, first want to know who said it when, in what context was it said, and what does the Jesus Seminar have to say about it.

It’s like that joke: “Why are Unitarians such bad hymn singers? Because they’re always reading ahead to see if they agree with the words.”

A few years ago I did a survey with you for a sermon series. I asked what the most meaningful parts of the worship service were for you. Overwhelmingly, you gave two examples: The minute of silence during prayer, and the holding of hands while singing the “Alleluia” at the close of worship. That should say something to you. To me, it was most humbling to learn that in large numbers you chose having complete quiet over hearing the sermon. But more than that, it means that no matter how smart and intellectual you are, you are still looking for transcendence from the everyday.

Charles Blow concludes his article by saying, “Churches, mosques and synagogues nurture and celebrate this. Being regularly surrounded by a community that shares your convictions and reinforces them through literature, art and ritual is incredibly powerful, and yes, spiritual.”

Back to where I began at Grace Cathedral. It should be noted that the voice in the empty chapel was still speaking, though no-one may have been listening. The voice was calling faithfully to the flock, even if they were scattered or turned away. The still-speaking voice never stopped calling out for its own.

“God is Still Speaking,” as our United Church of Christ reminds us. God is still speaking, and in your own way and in your own time, follow the still-speaking presence that surrounds us even when we are too otherwise engaged to hear it. Jesus says, “I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me.”

This is an open Communion. Whoever you are and wherever you are on your journey, you are welcome here. Bring your doubt and fear, your joy and your pain to this table, and eat and drink hope.

Sermon Resources

Charles M. Blow, “Defecting to Faith,” Op-Ed article in the New York Times, May 2, 2009