

April 21, 2013 / Fourth Sunday of Easter / David L. Edwards

The Left Hand of God

Psalm 23 *The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.*

Revelation 7:13-17 *“...for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”*

Rabbi Michael Lerner wrote a book entitled THE LEFT HAND OF GOD: HEALING AMERICA’S POLITICAL AND SPIRITUAL CRISIS. Lerner says that in Jewish and Christian tradition, there is the Right Hand of God and there is the Left Hand of God. The Right Hand of God is associated with the God portrayed in portions of scripture as wrathful, vengeful, and demanding righteousness. This would be what Michael Morwood calls the “elsewhere God” who presides over the world from above, at a distance. The Left Hand of God is also present in scripture, and even more prominent, once we have eyes to see. Here we find the God of nearness, of loving kindness, compassion, just relationships, and peace.

The Right Hand of God, the God of anger, revenge, and punishment, is of no interest or use to us anymore. We have had enough of religion that instills guilt, fear, and no motivation to be better persons except the threat of punishment, eternal or otherwise. The Left Hand of God, the God known essentially as love and compassion, resonates with our deepest desire, which I believe is to give of ourselves for the enhancement of life. In short, to love.

Psalm 23 is a stellar example of the Left Hand of God. God is imaged as a caring shepherd, guiding, protecting, shielding from threat. In the loveliest of poetry, the psalm expresses sublime spiritual insight and comfort, as well as the very heart and essence of God.

“The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.” Or we could translate it: “God is my shepherd, therefore I have everything I need.” This is one of the most radical statements in the whole Bible. We can find complete contentment in our unshakeable relationship with God. We may have become convinced that we want or need many things in life. But when it gets down to it, what we most need is awareness that our lives have meaning, that we are connected to life in an unshakeable and positive way. Having this kind of contentment in the depths of our souls means that nothing can fool us. Nothing can lure us into the cycles of dissatisfaction and the endless and futile seeking of fulfillment in things or people or anything

else. Our culture, and our political and economic systems, count on our restlessness and discontent. That's the only way we can be talked into buying all that stuff, or supporting unjust policies and systems, or falling into any other trap. If we have everything we need, in this sense, we do not need people in the unhealthy ways that lead us into dependencies and expectations that cannot be met.

When we practice *God is my shepherd, I have everything I need*, we learn to be at peace. We grow in awareness of our discontent or restlessness or tendencies toward addictions of all sorts, but without condemning ourselves. We practice self-understanding. We become less attached to people's approval or acceptance. We are freed from the seeking of external things that are held up to us as the measure of our worth. As we practice this contentment rooted in God who loves us unconditionally, we see life more clearly and act more lovingly, without possessiveness, fear, or violence.

"God leads me beside still waters; God restores my soul." This can also be translated, "God leads me beside waters of rest; God restores my life." This means rest and refreshment in every dimension of our lives—physical, mental, spiritual. It is much like the words of Psalm 46—"Be still, and know that I am God." Stop struggling. Stop fighting within yourself or with others. Practicing the contentment rooted in our relationship with God leads naturally to these green pastures, these waters of rest, the restoration of our lives. We do not serve God's loving purposes very well when we are harried, feeling under pressure, running around exhausted, or doing things to which we are not genuinely called.

This is why we have worked to bring into being the Chrysalis Interfaith Retreat Center here, the fulfillment of a vision that has floated around these acres almost from the beginning. For centuries upon centuries, religious communities have provided havens of rest and refuge for people. It is a ministry that acknowledges our need at times to withdraw from the press of life in the world in order to re-root ourselves in the sacred, to heal, to rest, and to be refreshed in the works to which we are called. In order to better serve God who calls us to the service of life, we need places and times for the rest that God wants to give us. With rest comes the clarity to know who we are and what we have to give to the world.

"Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil." It can be translated "the valley of the shadow of death," but there are other experiences in life besides death that make us fearful. The psalm is not saying that there is no evil, that there are no fearful experiences. It does say that we can live without being overcome or controlled by our fears. This, too, is connected to our relationship with God and the contentment and restfulness that come with it. It is the awareness of being deeply cared for even within the most difficult of

circumstances.

Michael Lerner writes: “In Judaism, sin is overcome through repentance, a return (*teshuvah*) to the divine image in which we were created. In Christianity, sin is overcome through faith in the person of Jesus...whose mission on earth was to enable human beings to once again find that divine good and hence repair the evils around them. In both traditions, we are told that evil can be overcome and that we need not live in fear.” (p. 83) Today our society and world are soaked in fear. Political, religious, military, and corporate leaders count on our being fearful. When we are afraid, we can be turned in directions that are harmful to others, the earth, and ourselves. Here again is the deceptively radical nature of this sublime psalm. If we are deeply, spiritually content, able to live without fear, trusting in our created goodness and that of others and the world, we cannot be easily manipulated by those who perpetuate and profit from selfishness and violence.

There is much more in this psalm. Yet, I want to connect briefly with the reading from the Revelation to John. What an extraordinary book it is, and how badly it has been used by those who want to play upon fear to serve their religious purposes. When read carefully and rightly, the Revelation is as hopeful and encouraging a book as we will find in the Bible. In vivid poetic images, the book speaks of hope for those who are giving their lives to the way that Jesus embodied and taught. It was written to Christians in the late first century facing extreme persecution in a human world filled with violence and natural disasters. It was written in the period of the Roman Emperor Nero and of the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius. It was also written to encourage the little faith communities not to sell out to the principalities and powers that surrounded them.

The Revelation is a resounding statement that God’s dominion over life is never truly threatened even when it seems that way. There is no ultimate showdown between the forces of good and evil, or God and Satan. Throughout the book, we see, IF we are really reading it, that those figures representing evil or oppression never have any real power at all. They are doomed from the start. Life always comes through. And, believe it or not, everyone is redeemed, not just a few self-appointed, self-righteous folks!

In the portion for today, John is addressed by one of the elders. He is shown a multitude of people in white robes. “Who are these people robed in white, and where have they come from?” John wisely does not try to fake something he doesn’t know. You, sir, must know. “These people have come through the great persecution; they have washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb and made them white again.”

Many of us modern-day folks don’t like those blood images. The idea that Jesus’ death

was a sacrifice to please God raises the problematic notion of a God who demands the death of his own son. That is not what is meant here. The Hebrew understanding, which carries over into Christian understanding, is that our blood is our life, which belongs to God alone. When Cain kills Abel, he takes God's place. He has "owned" his brother's life. Abel's blood has cried out to God. That is why God puts a protective mark even on Cain, so that no other human being will then take Cain's life. Even the life, the blood of Cain the murderer belongs to God alone.

Our blood, our life belongs to God alone, not to each other, not to any other human being or system. Remember? God alone is my shepherd. So when we speak of Jesus' blood being shed, it means that Jesus lived as one who knew his life belonged to God. He lived his life completely as an offering to God. Living our lives out of our relationship with God is the only fulfilling way to live these brief, precious, and unique lives God has given us. But it is not easy. That's where the robes washed white in blood come in.

The people John sees have suffered because they have lived out of their belonging to God through Christ. They have lived as those who know the Left Hand of God, who have struggled with themselves and life in order to be compassionate, loving, just and peaceful. Yes, there are multitudes of them! I love the story of Tabitha, or Dorcas. Her death brought great sorrow to the community because her life was devoted to good works and acts of charity. Not on a grand scale. Not the sort that makes the news or receives the awards. She made clothing for people, which the widows in the community show to Peter when he enters the room where Tabitha's body lay. There are countless Tabithas and Dorcases in this world, living in multitudes of ways for life and goodness. This is what it means to wash our robes white in the blood of the Lamb. And we aren't alone in our struggles, in the difficulties we face when we commit ourselves to a journey of faith in God alone, following Jesus' life and teachings and spirit. What comfort there is in this picture! What encouragement to keep it up!

A few years ago, Susan Rice, P.G., and I traveled to D.C., where we had lunch with Gordon Cosby and others at the Potter's House on Columbia Road. During our conversation, Gordon put it something like this: We all have the same problem, every one of us--What is the Founder of the Universe calling me to do with my life? It is the question that is at the center of our community here, and each of us needs to be living our lives around that question. Asking that question opens up a whole world of struggle as well as deep contentment and peace. It is the struggle of being who God made us to be, not what other people or our culture wants us or tells us to be. It is the struggle of awareness of our wounds and life-

diminishing habits, and the struggle to take responsibility for ourselves and our own relationship with God our Shepherd. It is the peace, the contentment, the joy of living in and out of the Love that called us and the world into being.

As we work with our lives to live out of the shepherding love of God, we can be aware that there are many others everywhere trying to live out of the same contentment, the same compassion, the same desire to be people the way God made us to be. This is what it means to wash our robes, making them white in the blood of the Lamb. On this journey of faith, in life and in death, the Lamb at the center of the throne, where God is, continues to be our shepherd, guiding us to springs of the water of life. And all along the way, as well as at the end, God will wipe away every tear from our eyes.