

Jeff's Reflection – Nov 14

One of today's readings is from Psalm 16. When I read this Psalm, I find my soul dancing with divergent reactions and interpretations.

One reaction tells me that the writer wanted God to administer a vaccination that would protect from any troubles or suffering in life.

The psalmist calls out to God, "Protect me, O God, for in you I take refuge."

The Psalmist says to God, 'those people who choose other gods, who get their faith vaccination from some other deity, not only experience sorrows, but their sorrows multiply. Their choice to worship other gods nets them even more problems.'

'But I am not like those people,' says the Psalmist. 'I am a person who admires the holy people, the pious people who trust in You, God. You, my God, are my cup, I feed from you. My life depends on You.'

The Psalmist says this loyalty to God has led to a good life – the Psalmist writes, "the boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places."

"I draw a line in the ground between myself and those others and on my side of the line life is pleasant."

The psalmist feels safe, feels courageous, feels secure.

I read this Psalm and I think, "Whoever this psalmist was, he or she was having a good day when he or she wrote these words. Maybe he or she was having and had had to that point, a good life."

As my internal discussion of this Psalm begins I discover part of me wanting to say AMEN to the Psalmist's trust in God- trust that nothing removes us from God's care, God's love.

I say amen to the idea that the good in us, the best in us, derives from God, that God has created us as expressions and extensions of God's sacredness, of God's love; that focusing our attention, our lives on God will lead to us not only feeling blessed by God, but lead to ourselves being a blessing to others – being people who offer healing, who give hope, who affirm worth, who welcome others home to the heart of our Creator.

I say AMEN to experiences of joy and to discerning a way of living, a path of life that is grounded in being a part of one amazing wondrous creation, that is grounded in a sense

of my spirit awakening and constantly being reborn and birthing new life, of discovering that my capacity to love is expanding and deepening, that I am more able now than I was yesterday to see the image of God in others, to feel compassion for others, to embrace non-violence as a path of life, to be an expression of God's life-giving presence.

So, I read Psalm 16 and hear the psalmist's faith in God's presence, in God's spirit active in his/her life to shape the writer into a person of courageous love and faith. Amen to all of that.

But, I read Psalm and the other opinion in my internal dialogue says that God doesn't vaccinate us against or protect us from experiencing any troubles in life. Unlike many other Psalms, the writer of this Psalm does not begin saying, "Where are you God when I need You?" or "People mock me and make fun of me". Psalms that begin in those ways usually go on to say, "Nevertheless, You are my God and I trust in Your faithful love and presence."

The writer of Psalm 16 not only asks, but seems to expect, that because the writer has faith in God, God not only can BUT indeed does protect him/her and fill his life with good things, gives him a good life.

That is why I read this Psalm with divergent reactions. The writer writes from his or her own experience, from a life of devotion to God, a life that seems safe and secure. It is an attitude of blessing to hear other's experiences and affirm those experiences.

But one person's experience should not become the standard for evaluating everyone's experiences. If you are reading Psalm 16 and you are experiencing crisis in your life, or if you are reading it when you find yourself on the other side of that boundary line, on the side where life is definitely not pleasant, then this Psalm can sound like an indictment of your faith – if you just took refuge in God, then your life would be good, you would rest secure, life would be full of joy. And that isn't everyone's experience.

Most of us know this. Most of us know that we journey through life straddling the Psalmist's boundary line.

We experience times of joy, of laughter, of celebrating accomplishments, milestones, of walking along a river bank, of playing peek-a-boo with an infant in the grocery cart of the person just ahead of us at the grocery store check-out counter. At those times life seems filled with LIFE and JOY.

But we also experience times of grief, grief as we sit with someone who is dying, grief as we visit a parent whose dementia means they no longer can speak our name, grief as company downsizing means that after 15 years of working we find ourselves unemployed, grief as we read of wars and rumours of war.

This is not one of the Psalms Jesus quotes in the Gospels. He does quote Psalm 22, “My God, my God why have you forsaken me?” He quotes it as he suffers crucifixion on a cross of the Roman Empire.

When I read the gospel accounts of Jesus, my impression is that Jesus did not so much spend time contemplating a God who kept him safe and secure. Rather, Jesus spent time discerning how God’s love could be expressed in and through his actions; discerning how he could be a source of healing in people’s lives; how he could give hope and lessen suffering for others; how in his presence others could experience God’s presence.

The passage we read today in Mark’s Gospel offers, I think, an insight into Jesus’ understanding of God and Jesus’ understanding of his role in participating in whatever it was that God was up to at that moment and that place in history.

In Mark’s Gospel, Jesus and his disciples have been to Jerusalem. They have seen the temple in Jerusalem. That temple was one of the wonders of that ancient world!

The temple was massive. It encompassed 2700 square feet. The entire Temple Mount occupied 37 acres. Walls rose 10 stories high. Some of the stones used in construction weighed 500 tons!

For people who lived in villages of single-room or two-room houses, the temple must have seemed like an architectural miracle that would last forever.

With eyes wide open and awe in their voices, the disciples, staring up at the walls of the temple, say to Jesus, “Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings.”

To which Jesus replies, “these are GREAT buildings – Great – and these great buildings you see, will not last. One day those large stumbles will tumble, the walls will collapse, and this greatness will become memory.”

And so it was, about 40 years after Jesus and his disciples visited the temple, about the time – give or take a few years – that this Gospel according to Mark was written – the temple was destroyed.

The Roman general Titus arrived to end a revolt against the Roman Empire. Titus and his legions attacked the city of Jerusalem, and by the time the siege was ended, fire had ravaged the temple and the walls had crumbled.

The disciples asked when this would happen – when the seemingly impossible would happen and the walls would tumble.

Jesus responded by telling them that there would be wars, and rumours of wars, and nation would rise against nation, and there would be earthquakes- sounds like our time, sounds like any time, sounds like every time – wars, threats of wars, plans for wars,

earthquakes, storms, droughts...

Jesus knew that living as part of, as an expression of God's wondrous creation, meant also living in a world in which both joy and pain were present. Jesus, the one who had discerned God naming him God's beloved, God's child – would die on a cross.

And so he spoke to his disciples about God's act of creation being ongoing; he described all that we experience in this world being the beginning of the birth pangs, of being not a finished creation, but a creation being born, of God not sitting and admiring God's completed creation, but of God being in labour, giving birth.

So as I read the Psalm, as I read Jesus' words and life, I think they lead us to a faith that trusts in God's love, trust that God's love is a love that is still birthing this creation as a world of peace and some kind of sacred harmony; faith that in all our experiences of life we are somehow experiencing the birthing, creating love of God.

Pema Chodron, a Tibetan Buddhist who teaches at the Gampo Abbey in Nova Scotia, speaks of this understanding of life from the Buddhist tradition. Let us hear her words as we remember Jesus'

Image of no stone being left upon another:

"Things falling apart is a kind of testing and also a kind of healing. We think that the point is to pass the test or to overcome the problem, but the truth is that things don't really get solved... They come together and they fall apart. Then they come together again and fall apart again. It's just like that. The healing comes from letting there be room for all of this to happen: room for grief, for relief, for joy."

We experience life like waves that rise and fall, that come together and fall apart.

The Psalmist invites us to let there be room in our lives for God, God who is always with us, God who does not give us up to despair, but shows us a path of life. Jesus invites us to let there be room in our lives for God, God who is giving birth in the times and places when the walls collapse and the world seems pulled apart.

God, who is with us in all those times and places. God who invites us to also give birth in this world - give birth to new hope, new economic structures, new relationships with this earth, new relationships with all people;

God who invites us to trust that the world we inhabit is God's birthing room, in which tombs become wombs, in which Easter follows Friday's grief, and in which a life we call resurrection is still being born.

God whose love has no boundary line. God, in whom we live now and for ever.

God who has created and is creating.

God, who assures us that we live in God's world. We are not alone. Thanks be to God.

AMEN.

Thanks be to God. AMEN