

GOOD HAPPENS

*a Sermon delivered by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno on May 8, 2022
based upon Psalm 23, Philippians 4:4-9, John 10: 22-30*

I remember once visiting a dear woman from a congregation I was serving a dozen years ago, who lived in a nursing home. She's gone now but at the time she had some form of dementia that had taken her sense of place and time and turned them upside-down.

She recognized people but couldn't recall anyone's name. We had a pretty good visit and then I took her hands to pray with her, as I had done a number of times before. It was then that she did something I thought was remarkable. Before I could begin my prayer, she began spontaneously praying the twenty-third psalm.

"The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want . . ." She prayed it from beginning to end, never missing a word. How amazing, I thought. When nearly everything else, including the names of her own children, were gone from her mind, this psalm was still there, intact.

It's such a confident testimonial this little poem. In the face of a life that is anything but easy the psalmist has made his peace with the valley of the shadow of death. He knows there is evil encamped about him but still, there is a table set by a benevolent God. His cup overflows, and, to top it all off, the Psalmist adds : "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life." Such a great expression of hope.

But note this: that English word, "follow," is not strong enough. The original Hebrew root word, *radap*, is more literally translated, "pursue." "Surely goodness and mercy shall *pursue* me all the days of my life." The word is not a bit passive. It is a hunter's word. The Psalmist who has been pursued by his enemies finds now that he is pursued by the Creator and Sustainer of the universe.

This God the Psalm writer is talking about is not like the supreme Greek god, Zeus, sitting, indifferently, up on lofty Mount Olympus. No, this God is irrepressibly benevolent.

This God in the most mysterious ways, pursues us with goodness and with mercy.

Dorothy Day, the late editor of *The Catholic Worker*, speaks eloquently of the goodness that pursues us and will not let us go in her memoir, *The Long Loneliness*. In that book she attests to a curious kind of malaise that came upon her in her early life in the 1920s when she ran around with some of the notables of her day; people like the socialist, John Reed, born in Goose Hollow, and Eugene O'Neill, the dramatist: She says,

Something happened to me when I was around twenty-five. I had lived a full and active life, . . . I had met so many good people, interesting and intelligent people.

But I yearned for something else than a life of parties and intense political discussions ...

When I fell in love with [my husband] I thought it was a solid love that I had been seeking. But I began to realize it wasn't the love between a man and a woman that I was hungry to find. . .

When I became pregnant, I thought it was a child I had been seeking, motherhood. But I realized that wasn't the answer either: I loved [my husband], I was as happy as I had ever been when pregnant, and when [our daughter] Tamar was born, I was almost delirious with joy, and I could hold and hold and hold her, and feel that with her in my arms my life's purpose had been accomplished. But only for so long did I feel like that, I have to admit.

No, it wasn't restlessness . . . I was happy but my very happiness made me know that there was a greater happiness to be obtained from life than any I had ever known.

Her marriage and motherhood were like the spires on the most lofty Cathedrals of Europe which are glorious in themselves but which serve to point to a goodness beyond -- to the great architect of life itself. Her very happiness had pointed her beyond itself.

It had, in fact, put her on what I would call, a trajectory of hope.

Jesus was once asked the question: "What is the Kingdom of heaven like?" Casting about for some familiar homey detail that might open a window for those listening, he said: "It is like a treasure hidden in a field which someone finds, to his great surprise. He hides it and sells everything he owns just to buy that field." Then, Jesus paused and thought a bit more. "No," he said, "let me go one better. It is like a seller of pearls; someone who already traffics in treasures, who, in his travels, comes across a pearl of such size and color and incredible value, a pearl he had no idea might even exist, and what does he do? He goes home and sells all the pearls he once treasured, all the jewels he prized before this moment, to buy this one supreme pearl." That is how precious our hope is.

And this bit of optimism, you know, comes to us from Jesus, a man who was on his way to Jerusalem, and not on vacation, either. No, Jesus knew in his bones that once he got there his life wasn't going to be worth two copper coins. But in his heart I am sure he also believed those words from the psalm: "thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies, my cup [still] overflows."

What we have in the 23rd Psalm is not mindedless happy talk. It acknowledges the stark topography of the "valley of the shadow of death." It speaks of "enemies" who threaten. Yet, in the face of real terror, the Psalmist attests to the bounty of life and the abundance on the table God continues to set before us.

Note also, that the hope expressed here is a deeply relational hope. It says, "I will fear no evil for THOU art with me." The great French philosopher, Paul Claudel put it perfectly when he said, "Jesus came not to banish suffering but to fill it with his presence." Claudel gives us the truth of the twenty-third psalm in a single phrase.

This is interesting and seminal for Christians. The Buddha, in contrast to Jesus, came to banish suffering. Buddhism is all about finding a way around suffering, or perhaps even to find a way to triumph over suffering's power.

That is all well and good. I find much of the wisdom of Buddhism to be indispensable, but in regard to suffering, it does not take Christianity's way.

Christianity looks at suffering square-on and knows it as painful, but knows it also to be a potent catalyst for bonding human beings to one another. It does not dismiss it or disengage from it. It embraces it and fills it with the same purpose that imbued the life of Jesus.

So, it's true; in this world terrible things happen, unspeakable things. But it is also true that in this world "GOOD HAPPENS." Do we dare try to account for that?

You know, many skeptics are so very willing to dismiss any notion of the existence of a loving God because of the presence of evil in the world. All the books by popular atheists that sold so well fifteen years ago harp on this.

I read Sam Harris, and Chris Hitchens, and Richard Dawkins. They, each of them in their own way, rail against a fundamentalist version of Christianity that I, personally, have no use for.

Right-wing Christianity is an easy target and always has been. But all three atheist nay-sayers simple-mindedly throw the baby out with the bath water. None of them ever addresses the robust spirituality Jesus espoused in the last years of his sweet life.

Now Jesus had similar trouble with the critics of his own day. The text from John's gospel paired in the lectionary with the 23rd Psalm is reflective of this. It goes this way ...

"So the authorities gathered around him and said to him, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly."

And Jesus shook his head at these religious officials who only see life in black and white; who make up their minds about a thing before really considering it with their hearts; they are fundamentalists who just want to be led like (frankly speaking) unthinking sheep.

They watched how he worked with the people with a compassion that had no equal.

He spoke to these scoffers about how there were less educated people who saw his gentle winsomeness, felt his touch, tried to measure the size of his heart and couldn't because it was immeasurable, and then followed him because they couldn't help themselves. Of these he said, "My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me."

The religious authorities could not understand why Jesus paid the poor any attention at all. They believed God only cared for the well off like themselves whom they considered blessed while considering the poor and marginal cursed of God because they were poor. That's called, blaming the victim.

That is the way with orthodox fundamentalist folk. Like the religious authorities in this morning's text from John's gospel, today's orthodox Christians cannot understand why Jesus cares at all for the poor, so they ignore 90% of his teachings which are about justice for such people.

Methodist pastor, David Barnhart has this to say concerning arguments from so-called "Pro-Life" Christians who are forever championing the rights of "the unborn," but curiously have little concern for the born; even for children who were put in cages along our Southern border just a short time ago by someone they considered a Christian president. David's words are so clarifying as to be definitive on this subject. Listen carefully.

"The unborn" are a convenient group of people to advocate for. They never make demands of you; they are morally uncomplicated, unlike the incarcerated, addicted, or the chronically poor; they don't resent your condescension or complain that you are not politically correct; unlike widows, they don't ask you to question patriarchy; unlike orphans, they don't need money, education, or childcare; unlike aliens, they don't bring all that racial, cultural, and religious baggage that you dislike; they allow you to feel good about yourself without any work at creating or maintaining relationships; and when they are born, you can forget about them, because they cease to be "unborn."

You can love the unborn and advocate for them without substantially challenging your own wealth, power, or privilege, without re-imagining social structures, apologizing, or making reparations to anyone. They are, in short, the perfect people to love if you want to claim you love Jesus, but actually dislike people who breathe. Prisoners? Immigrants? The sick? The poor? Widows? Orphans? All the groups that are specifically mentioned in the Bible? They all get thrown under the bus for the unborn.”

I don't want to be glib about the problems connected with abortion. Arguments on both sides of this debate are compelling. But until the Pro-Life side demonstrates that it can see the born (I'm speaking of children) for who they are, and also women for who they are, in the eyes of Jesus, they lose the argument when measured by Jesus' teachings.

Now, I don't want the fact of moral blindness to have the last word in a sermon about optimism, so let me move on to, ironically, a word about the Holocaust.

You know, this month, we find ourselves at the 77th anniversary of the liberation of the death camps of Europe. As I said earlier, people who have sought evidence to dismiss the existence of a loving, purposeful God have most often pointed to the Holocaust. But even now at this late date, we are still hearing more and more stories about remarkable acts of heroism, the hundreds of Oskar Schindlers; people whose examples of moral courage during World War II, warm and inspire all our hearts in the face of chronic instances of genocide.

I heard most recently of the Orthodox Archbishop, Andrew Sheptitsky, of Lviv, Ukraine who, during World War II, hid hundreds of Jews in his church and monasteries, dressing them as monks and nuns. He even stored their Torah scrolls and worship paraphernalia in his church. Though hundreds of Christian monks and nuns knew of their presence in the community, not one of those Jews was ever betrayed.

Which is totally amazing to me, having, just a week ago, visited Anne Frank's annex in Amsterdam where she and 8 others hid from the Gestapo for 2 years before being betrayed by one of her father's associates. I'll tell you, parenthetically, that is one deeply spiritual place.

You know, Archbishop Sheptitsky did not hide behind the walls of his church. He could have. Instead, he published a pastoral letter denouncing Nazi invaders called "Thou Shalt Not Murder." He threatened any Christian with excommunication who would dare aid the Nazis in persecuting Jews.

To one of the Jews he harbored who he disguised as a monk, he said these amazing words: *I want you to know that I do not expect any reward for your safety, nor do I expect you to accept my faith. In fact, I want you to be a good Jew. You see, I am not saving you for your own sake. I am saving you for the sake of your people.*

I find that to be such a profound Christian witness. The grace of Jesus glows in that statement.

So, I believe we have a perception problem about good and evil in this world.

Evil is flashy, but, you know, the good glows forever.

The Apostle Paul once wrote a letter from his prison in Rome. It would be his last public word to anybody, as far as we know. He would shortly be executed. His letter, in fact, suggests to us his knowledge of that fact. And yet he writes the following wonderful admonitions that call us to a living and radiant hope:

"Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things." (Philippians 4:8)

Now, let me be clear -- this is not "the power of positive thinking." Paul is about to be executed, yet I believe he is saying that when you look at the whole canvas of life you see that the good far outweighs the bad.

The evil of this life should never be allowed to boast that it has the last word. We all need to keep perspective.

14 year old, Anne Frank is remembered to have said, "It's really a wonder that I haven't dropped all my ideals, because they seem so absurd and impossible to carry out. Yet I keep them, because in spite of everything, I still believe that people are really good at heart."

So, finally, in the face of everything in this life that daily threatens to break our hearts, how comforting it is to think that, in the long run, truth and love may well have the last word. What a welcome peace is available to us in the promise that God's goodness and mercy shall continue to pursue us down all our days.

Amen