

Beside the Still Waters

Psalm 23

For some reason, the middle of April is a cruel time of infamy in American history. Obviously, the bombings at the Boston Marathon last Monday, as well as the massive explosion in Texas, have been on our minds all week. But these are only the most recent tragedies that have plagued these early Spring days—one of many bloody and violent events that have scarred the American memory. The grim and sobering list of anniversaries reads like this:

- April 12—the Civil War began with the battle of Fort Sumter in 1861—nearly 650,000 casualties;
- April 14—the assassination of President Abraham Lincoln in 1865;
- April 15—the sinking of the Titanic in 1912;
- April 16—the massacre at Virginia Tech University in 2007;
- April 17—the Bay of Pigs fiasco in 1961;
- April 18—the great San Francisco earthquake and fire in 1906—over 4,000 lives lost;
- April 19—the first shot of the Revolutionary War was fired on Lexington Green in 1775—app. 50,000 dead or wounded;
- April 19—the siege and destruction of the Branch Davidian compound in Waco, TX in 1993;
- April 19—the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995;
- April 20—the Columbine High School shooting in 1999.

Suffice to say, what occurred in Boston this past week just adds to the mid-April tragedies in America.

What is it about this time of year that generates this kind of horror? What makes the middle of April such a violent and brutal period in our collective history? T.S. Eliot wrote that “April is the cruelest month...”, but was he being poetic or prophetic?

Obviously, no one can say, since none of these events are directly tied to each other by year or circumstance. They are unrelated, for the most part, but they form a strange and disquieting constellation of tragic memorials on our national timeline.

Yet, even with this doleful history, if you’re like me, doom and gloom is not what immediately comes to mind when April comes around. I don’t dread this month, or sense foreboding when the calendar changes. Instead, for me, the middle of April is normally associated with springtime renewal—of seeing the first signs of brighter days and warmer nights—of anticipating the seasonal changes and suffering through the allergies that accompany budding trees and flowering gardens. It’s a time to look forward to because of what it promises after the unrelenting cold of a New England winter.

When I was growing up and well into my young adulthood, April was something I longed for—in part because my birthday falls on the tenth, but also due to the opening of the baseball season. Hope springs eternal, as they say. However, by the middle of the month, I was always looking forward to the first day of the trout season (which opened yesterday, incidentally). I would yearn to get my fishing pole out, clean up my tackle, and go out into the woods to my favorite fishing spot to cast my line for brookies. As much as I would be in

competition with others with similar ambitions, I always managed to find my own quiet pool among the underbrush, where I'd discover a few small fish hiding out under a rock in the dark, cold water waiting for my line.

Like most fishermen, what appealed to me wasn't just coming home with a catch; it was to spend time indulging myself in the "holy otherness" of Nature. I would linger for hours by a brook entertained by the purling of the water and the empty theater of the forest, adrift in my imagination, pondering the grandiose and the insignificant matters of life. Even moreso in my adult years, I would unwind the hypertensive character of my daily world to bring it down to a pace compatible with the pulse of life in the woods. Like Thoreau, I would study the shape of leaves, or compare the bark of trees, or observe which limbs had crashed to the earth as a casualty of winter's winds—all in a way I'd never notice in the usual scurry of my daily life. In late April, I'd spy the first shoots of fiddleheads, pick them and pocket them, to go along with my evening meal. All of this became a necessary escape into a world much different than the one I normally knew, yet one I considered to be too irrelevant and unproductive for me to take the time to visit frequently.

Unfortunately, it's been a long time since I've gone out to sit and fish beside the still waters—years, even. I've missed it, perhaps more than I even realize. The yearning comes back to me around this time of year—in mid-April, when the need for spiritual renewal seems more acute than at other times. I suspect that with the drama, anguish, and anger generated over the great evils of recent months and the worries of an everyday life, it's a need that beckons to be

satisfied more than I am willing to admit. The early days of Spring are a good time to return and find a way to recover a sense of balance with the pace of life that God intended for Nature, including human nature.

There's a spiritual connection, of course, between rhythms of life and our celebration of Earth Day—the date set aside to honor and respect environmental justice and conservation. The topic of saving the environment isn't addressed only at this time, obviously, but there is an important association to be made between preserving the environment and finding spiritual renewal for our winter-worn souls. In other words, April is a fitting time to focus on healing the earth and appreciating what it offers to help us heal our souls. It's something that makes sense to those who go to the woods to fish, or turn to the sea to sail, or who turn the soil over in their gardens, or go anywhere they can find a space to retune their lives with the natural surroundings. In many ways, it's akin to what Jesus often did when the stresses and challenges of his life and world required it.

This is not only beneficial in reducing our normal levels of stress; it also is an important source of spiritual balance, perspective, and hope as we are confronted with the frightening traumas that impact us, directly or indirectly—much like we've experienced this past week. For despite the heavy burdens and terrible things that can occur in life, we gain a needed perspective away from it all with the renewing presence of God—where in spite of all that goes wrong in course of human activity, in Nature the sun continues to rise and set, the foliage buds and birds migrate across the sky, and the vibrant colors of Spring burst forth from a landscape that has been frozen,

dull, and foreboding. It is where we can sense and embrace that April is a *gracious* month...more hopeful than it appears to us at times.

In her famous diary, Anne Frank, reflected on how she yearned for the chance to find such solace. Hidden away in an Amsterdam attic in the terror of Nazi occupation, she wrote:

The best remedy for those who are afraid, lonely or unhappy is to go outside, somewhere where they can be quite alone with the heavens, nature and God. Because only then does one feel that all is as it should be and that God wishes to see people happy, amidst the simple beauty of nature. As long as this exists, and it certainly always will, I know that then there will always be comfort for every sorrow, whatever the circumstances may be. And I firmly believe that nature brings solace in all troubles.

Anne's word is poignant for many of us in these disquieting days, when our spirits are traumatized and despondent over terror and sorrow. She would urge us to find our place beside the still waters; to find our peace in the places that God created and humans have not yet destroyed. She would be right.

She would echo the voice of the Psalmist, who beckons us to do the same—namely, that it's in the fears and anguish of life when we best appreciate the intended message of even our text for today—the beloved twenty-third Psalm. Rather than this being a song of ceremony or lilting lullaby—the way we often hear it in worship or in personal devotion—it sounds different to us when it addresses our deepest human fears.

For example, what did it sound like when the one who gave it voice was a young girl hiding from the Nazis in Amsterdam? Or how does a traumatized soldier haunted by the war in Afghanistan hear its message? What does it mean to a West, Texas mother sheltering her children for yet another restless night of sleep? Or how does a

bystander horrified by the carnage of a senseless murderer's bomb hear these words? And what does it mean for any of us, who may not have been directly impacted by horrible experiences, but who suffer the trauma of fearing them?

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall lack nothing.
God makes me lie down in green pastures;
I am led to sit beside the still waters to restore my soul.
...Even though I walk through the darkest valley—even the valley of death—I will fear no evil; for God, you are with me...
You nourish me in the presence of my enemies...

What does it mean to believe there is a steady, reassuring presence in the chaos and cruelty of this world? How can we hear God calling us to get out of our heads and heartaches and away from our horrors and hardships to find our way back to the solace of a divine Presence? If not in Nature, then where? To where the air breathes the breath of God—to where there is restoration of the soul and spirit beside the still waters.

Is this not April's promise of renewal, even when it appears the world around us is falling apart? Away from the cacophony of continuing conflict and political partisanship and human brutality and selfish egos! God calls us to run away into the beauty of Nature for a time to replenish our souls again as part of the Created Whole. There we will remember we are not alone—we will discover we are among all that returns to life after the bleakness of winter. There we will realize that those who hunger and thirst for righteousness' sake shall be satisfied! As naturalist John Muir wisely put it, "The clearest way into the Universe is through a forest wilderness." Maybe this is our exodus story—our deliverance for a time—to run away into the wilderness to find what we yearn for and truly need.

For that very reason, taking care of the earth and the air and the waters and all that walks upon the land and soars in the sky is not only our noblest responsibility as caretakers of the environment, it is our spiritual hope for renewal and for strength and for balance while in this life we lead. Whenever the landscape suffers, our souls suffer, because there are fewer places to go to find our needed rest and renewal. When the land is overdeveloped, there are fewer forested wildernesses to run to; when the waters are filthy and fouled, there is no renewal in being near them.

So taking care of the earth is integral to our overall wellbeing for there is a balance to Nature and human existence, not only for our physical survival, but for our spiritual survival—so that we can have places to go to recover from the traumas that horrify us, that brutalize us, that make us forget who we are and whose we are. Being loving caretakers of the world that takes care of us is our spiritual return to the One who gave us life to live and enjoy. We are to be good stewards of the earth, not only for the sake of Nature, but for our own need for renewal and restoration as human beings. When we have found our place, when we have rested our souls, when we have regained perspective, when we have reduced our stress and found some peace, when we have recovered a sense of God's presence in our lives and in the world, then we can return to everyday life and face its challenges with greater strength than before. That is a grace we cannot live without. These troubled days in April are just the time when we need to find such grace.

So do yourself a favor: respond to God's beckoning. Find your place of grace and make the time to go, so you may experience

deliverance from your anger, stress, worries, and fears in order to recover peace, renewal, and restoration for your soul. And when you go there, look into the forest wilderness or upon the still waters and know that the presence of God—the Shepherd of your spirit—the resurrected Christ in your life—is there and waiting for you.

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