

“For Thou Art With Me”

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Sadie Lansdale on October 21st, 2018.

Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil for thou art with me.

I find that any talk about God is best understood as poetry. Our mere words, some plain and some flowery, trying to capture the uncapturable. Trying to pin down the mystery, aren't we? The Psalms and the ancient prayers show us that the sense we try to make of the world yields, in the end, to the cry which becomes the song.

I grew up in a Unitarian Universalism that wanted to make sense of things - a Unitarian Universalism that thought that we could make sense of all things - amen? We scrubbed any God stuff even from the hymns we sang - we thought our hymns were statements of belief to which we were being subjected instead of poetry that we were entering into together.

We did this (and not just my church, I mean a whole era in Unitarian Universalism) because, it turns out, pluralism is hard. A sanctuary full of atheists, theists, agnostics, some people who aren't sure what they believe but they love to sing the old songs, some people who live every day knowing the hand of God is upon them, some people who try to live with reverence for what's greater than us and our small opinions, some people who don't much care for this “God business” but who nonetheless feel moved to worship, or maybe who don't much care for this “worship business” but nonetheless feel moved to sit down in good company every Sunday, and wait to discover what all the fuss is about. Theological pluralism is a tall order. And yet - we try.

And we try to be a worshipping community that contains a lot of difference - not because we can't make up our minds, but because we recognize that each person relates differently to the tradition, to the world, and to God.

God as a being, God as a concept, God as a word to describe the indescribable. This is the great gift of our Unitarian forebears - Unitarians believed that God was one, and they had trouble with the holy trinity. But the legacy they left us is NOT that they have decided for us all what is the true nature of God - it was their *rejection of the theological authority of the institution of the church above the experience of worshippers*. It was their claiming for themselves and for us all the right to interpret the tradition, and the scriptures, and the world around them according to their deepest and most profound convictions. Even when those interpretations ran counter to the prevailing notions about the nature of divinity and the nature of the human being and so on.

I spent a lot of time in seminary wondering why theology matters. Why does it matter how or if we talk about God? Why does it matter if we use the word or not, why does it matter that we can interpret those things for ourselves, why does it matter at all how we talk about those things which are deepest and truest and eternal? Talking about God, it turns out, matters a great deal in the hospital, and at the bedside.

I spoke some last week about my work as a chaplain with the fire department and EMS. What was particularly brutal that year was dropping of a patient at the CPEP - the comprehensive psychiatric emergency program - this is the Psych ER, and watching as the EMTs filled out the paperwork, and then leaving. Never knowing what happened to someone after they passed through the doors of the hospital. So the next year, my final year of school, I figured I would go find out.

In my final year of seminary, I served as a chaplain in NewYork-Presbyterian Hospital and weaseled my way into psychiatric spiritual care - find me the scariest and the saddest places, I thought, find me the most broken places in the system, where trauma and homelessness and lack of preventive care and stigma and a for-profit health insurance system

combine to land people in - truly - the valley of the shadow of death. Not because they were hit by a truck, that's not why they're in the valley of the shadow, but because they wanted to die. And it hadn't worked.

That was an absolute crisis of faith for me - to be exposed to such suffering. To spend so much of my time with people who had tried to die, many of whom were pretty mad that it had not worked. For my only job to be to treat the people around me like human beings in a system that didn't. And I was thanked, over and over, by people from all walks of life with tears in their eyes - for caring, for listening, for helping them feel human.

And it broke me. When I tell you it plunged me into despair. To be thanked for doing such a small thing, the least thing, the littlest thing - it revealed to me just how un-human these people had been feeling. It revealed to me the depths of suffering and dehumanization they experienced. I was lost. I was cracked.

Humanists have crises of faith too - though sometimes we don't have the language for such a feeling. I cried every Monday during our chaplaincy training group - we were asked, essentially, to reflect theologically, to make meaning out of those experiences and my faith didn't hold up. It couldn't hold me. Previously I had thought "it matters how we treat each other. It matters what I do. My faith is a faith of action." Which is all well and good, and still very important to me, but which does not at all account for the depths of despair when you realize, as I did, how small you are, and how all the good work in the world cannot stop death.

Many people find that the religious and spiritual traditions of their childhoods serve them in some ways and fail them in other ways, and I am no exception. My people, those good UUs in Bethesda Maryland whom I love and cherish, had gone so overboard with the gift of interpretation and the necessity of applying reason to the mysteries of love and death that we had forgotten how to spiritually fortify one another. We had heard a lot of wrong or harmful proclamations about suffering elsewhere: someone deserves it, it's part of God's plan, your faith is bad, you can't ask those

questions here - but we were so devoted to pointing out that other people's faith was insufficiently reasonable in times of crisis we forgot to build our own collective spiritual habits for times of crisis.

So I was coming from that religious place - the "I don't know and maybe nobody knows" place. Which is an important place. But when you're the chaplain in a hospital you do not arrive at someone's bedside and say "I don't know, what do you guys think?". Patients asked me all the time for Psalm 23. A patient of mine explained her situation and I didn't hear a lot of goodness and mercy in it, at least not from human hands. And yet. Some of my patients, even in their despair, expressed an unshakable faith that God was with them. There is something magical about the proclaiming of those ancient words in times where no certainty shines upon you: surely goodness and mercy shall follow me, my cup runneth over, I shall fear no evil for thou art with me. Thou art with me. Something is with me. I am not alone. I am never alone.

We are never alone. The psalm says - thou art with me. I am not the first tremendously rational person to fall to their knees in the chapel of a hospital saying "I don't know" and "it's too much." I'm one person, late on a Tuesday night, among a cloud of witnesses of chaplains, patients, families, doctors, nurses. All of those people, coming to that place where death and breath fight for us, asking for some kind of assurance, seeking the blessing and passing it on, through life and death and loss and miracles and second chances. Though you walk through the valley of the shadow of death among those hospital halls, do not fear because you are never alone. Even in your sorrows and in your crying out, even if you feel that no one hears those cries - you are not the first person to get on your knees and scream at God and you won't be the last. All those who came before are with you. Everyone you have ever loved is with you still. That's one way that we know God. We are never alone.

Here's what the story of the Invisible String which we heard earlier doesn't ask, but a question that seems plainly in line is this - is the string still there even when you feel that it isn't? Even when the way you are treated by

other people in your life reveals that no one else can see it? When you are ready to say, the inherent worth and dignity of every person except for me?

Yes. This is Universalism. There are lots of things we deduce, and should, but this one we proclaim. This is the starting point of every UU statement of faith - the fundamental worthiness and belovedness of human beings NO MATTER what you've done or what someone has done to you, no matter your bad luck and no matter your failures, no matter if no one else in the world sees it, even including you. We do not give each other our worth - we are obligated to live in accordance with what is already there.

Part of what caused me so much spiritual anguish was the emotional demand of the work itself. But another part was how little I had prepared myself spiritually to seek comfort, how dismissive I had been earlier in my life of other people who sought comfort in their faith. I had been so wrapped up in rationalizing and reconciling my beliefs because I wanted to appear reasonable that I forgot how much the spiritual life is about experience, about reaching for comfort when the world is cold, about the human ability to do magic - and to pay attention when magic is being done. I wanted to appear reasonable to myself, but more than that, I wanted the world to be reasonable. I wanted the world to make sense. And I wanted my good actions to be enough, and I wanted somewhere to put this bottomless feeling of despair over the ways we abandon each other to the mercy of the world.

And so I would go to the chapel every day before I started work. I would sit quietly, I would say some prayers (Wild Geese by Mary Oliver, Psalm 23, the Lord's Prayer, memorized during my time at an Episcopal grade school), and when finally no one else was in the chapel, I would sing. I sang songs of comfort and petition - Spirit of Life, come unto me. Abide with me - help of the helpless, like we sang today. The verse of Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing that's not in our hymnal - oh to grace, how great a debtor, daily I'm constrained to be. Let thy goodness like a fetter, bind my wandering heart to thee.

Finally, some habit that got me to admit that the work broke me, that I had seen into the valley of the shadow and it was a terrifying place, that I was in need of some spiritual company even as I was about to go in there and mostly just keep people company. I would sing Leaning on the Everlasting Arms - whatever I could sing to cook up the feeling of presence, to feel that I was stepping in to a tradition of asking for help not from the people around me but from a greater mystery. I don't know became - spirit of life, come unto me. It's too much became - help of the helpless, abide with me. And the echo of my own voice against the old stone walls of the chapel in words that were not my own creation - finally, for me, the cry lifted into song.

So I learned to look for God. I learned to seek out mercy. I learned to put aside my obsession with supernatural whatever and my preoccupation with wanting to appear reasonable to myself or others. I learned to move past my inherited weirdness about the word God - a word whose meaning, I might remind you, absolutely no one agrees upon - and sing those prayers of comfort and company, hoping to feel the presence of the divine with me when I need it.

These questions are still very live questions in my personal spiritual life. But thank God - thank God! - for a religious tradition that permits even its preachers some theological doubts and questions, for a religious tradition that understands that a faithful life is not one that's free of despair but instead that the great questions of faith are to be asked and asked together. That the great questions of faith are not, after all, the rational ponderings when we have too much free time but instead they are the cries of our hearts that sometimes, when we cry them out together, turn into songs.