

The week that has passed

Monday, as we know, Tamerlan and Dzhokar Tsarnaev bombed the Boston Marathon, the beginning of a long and exhausting week. Wednesday night, an explosion at a fertilizer plant in the town of West, Texas, killed fourteen folks and left the small town of under 3,000 distraught. It was difficult to notice amidst all that news that ricin laced letters were addressed to the president and a congressman. The Senate did not to pass gun control legislation, nor did it offer any reasonable alternative for future debate. Closer to home: Becky Norris, a member of our `ohana, also passed away Wednesday night. And this is just some of what has been happening in our nation and in our lives, a sliver of the lived experiences of terror, suffering, and the cycle of life & death around the world!

I agree with a CNN online writer, Todd Leopold, who wrote about this week: *“It was so exhausting, so intense and so preposterous that one could only hold on for dear, dear life and wonder when - if? - the whole dizzying ride would end....* The texts for this Sunday each speak so very pointedly and vividly to the common experiences that weigh on our minds as we lay to rest one week, and as we pray anxiously or hopefully for the week ahead.

The Book of the Acts of the Apostles

The reading from Acts begins and ends with surprises. First, we are told that in Joppa there was a disciple, a woman, whose name was Tabitha (or Dorcas, depending on which language you spoke). This is the only instance in the entire New Testament that the Greek word for disciple appears in the feminine. So if anyone ever tells you there were no women disciples, you can point them to the ninth chapter of Acts! The reading ends with Peter in the house of a tanner, where the proximity to death and blood would have been clearly flaunting the purity laws constricting the ancient Hebrews. In this passage, the miracle of Tabitha’s resuscitation can quickly overpower this important reminder that the kingdom of God, in Jesus Christ, was having its doors thrust wide open.

In Acts, Peter kneels and prays. Before Peter turns to Tabitha and says, “get up,” he turns to God and prays. Then he turns to Tabitha, and gives that command, “get up.” And Tabitha does! She comes back to life. A miracle. It’s worth reminding ourselves that the story of miracles in scripture are written not so much to convince us that if we behave right and believe enough that we will never suffer, or that we will be able to perform magic tricks. Miracles are meant not as reward for an individual, but as a sign for the community - a sign that points to the mystery of life and love, of God’s will for both life and love in this world and in this life, as well as in kingdom beyond the veil. So we are all Peter, and we are all Tabitha. And if we are, then we, too, ought to be signs that point to the grace of God in lives.

Do we ground our work in prayer, such that we expect to become the conduits for miraculous signs that give hope for those who suffer and grieve? Do we answer our vocation, in Christ, to call the world into the way of life? Do we extend our hands as Christ’s hands to help people rise into a new, more life-giving way?

The 23rd Psalm

The popular 23rd Psalm begins with assuring words for this life, and hope for the next life: that in this life, God leads comfortingly through pleasant pastures, and confidently through deathly ones, gathering us into a new order, where enemies become friends, wounds are healed, and we are no longer sojourners, but at home and at rest. While Psalm 23 is a compelling psalm for its ability to comfort and console, couldn't we also say that it tells us as much about what God wishes to work *through* our lives as what God wishes to work *for* our lives? Perhaps we could hear this popular funeral psalm as a hymn giving birth to hope that shapes our future, rather than as a eulogy for the haunting events of the week that is past. Isn't this what our country and our communities need right now?

I mean: if we are to allow our lives to be conduits for the reign of God in this world, then we can become apprentice shepherds. We can participate with God in leading our friends to the refreshing streams from which we ourselves have found the thirsts of our hearts quenched, to verdant pastures where we felt peace. We can anoint and heal. We can open our tables as a sign of welcome and peace. The extraordinary events of the past week, closer and louder than similar happening in distant lands more routinely, ought to provoke us to give witness through our lives and give witness to God's works of love and mercy as balm for the despair so many feel. These events might provoke us to open the doors to this house of prayer as a sign of the open doors of the God's heart.

In what ways might the verses of this psalm serve not only to comfort, but to guide our vision – not only our vision of where God is leading us, but who God is leading us to become? Is the table of our Eucharist and are the tables of our hearts prepared for a feast that includes our enemies? If not, are we willing to commit our lives to praying for that which we cannot yet imagine?

The Book of Revelation

The passage from the Revelation of Christ to John opens with the gathered worshipping community giving praise to God. If we worship things that can never truly hold us safely - things that die and decay we will grow frantic in our competition and fervent in our divisiveness. The false barriers we construct to differentiate ourselves and create enemies, these all wash away when we worship – that is, when we give our lives to, or let our lives be gripped by – the source of life and love and light. Though we live in a finite world with finite resources, we live in a world of great abundance. The life of the world, and especially it's suffering in poverty, is a testimony against a life-taking way, rather than a life-giving way. Our work continues, as Christians, in spite of our past complicity, to place this vision of God's reign above and within our politics; that is, the vision of the abolition of hunger and thirst, not only spiritual, but emotional and physical as well.

How intentional are we, as a worshipping community, at being a visible sign of the fellowship of Christ, in which these barriers pass away? Is our house of prayer a sign of the house of God, in which people from every language and tribe and people and nation are uncountable?

The Gospel of John

Finally, in the Gospel, folks gather around Jesus and ask him, 'Tell us plainly, Jesus, are you the Messiah or not?' Apart from the context of Jesus' inquisitors who are asking a politically charged question, the question itself can help us give voice to that age-old question, 'God, are you still there?' God, do you remember the promise to shepherd us - that is, to keep us safe, to guide us, to sustain our life. Jesus challenges the assumption of what that means, both in his life and work, as much as in his reply on this particular occasion.

We live in a world full of people who will not listen for the gentle words of the good shepherd, who do not know the voice of Jesus. We also live in a world where accidents and coincidences result in suffering as much as the evil intentions of people's hearts. In spite of both, we Christians receive a story through the ages that invites us to hear and then become the voice of compassion and hope. Our story is the voice of God heard throughout time, most especially for us Christians in the Word, Jesus. If we silence the noisy words that fill our mind and withdraw, for a time, from the chatter of 24/7 tweets and posts and commentary we may be able to hear and then find the voice God has given us, voices that can join in praise not merely by ritual, but living our lives as liturgy of healing, peace-making, joy-giving, and hope-restoring. If we stop flailing around trying to grasp hold of God, we may begin to feel that God already has a hold of us, and then we can find courage to become sacraments of Christ's hands in the world - as Teresa of Avila once said, Christ has no body now on earth but yours, no hands but yours....

How are we tuning our ears and hearts to hear and to know the voice of Jesus? Do we know how to pray, and if so, will we strive to pray without ceasing? If not, will we strive to learn how to pray, by listening and speaking, so that we can be open to the miracles God wishes to work through us?

I pray that we will know Christ's voice, and that God will pour out the power of the Holy Spirit upon each of us to be signs of the resurrection as we continue our journey to become one with God and one another.