“SECURITY IN UNCERTAIN TIMES” (4/21/13)

SCRIPTURES: Psalm 23 & John 10: 22-30
KEY CONCEPTS: Given this past week of tragedy (Boston Marathon bombings, Explosions in TX & Atlanta, etc.) – how does our faith support us during these times of uncertainty?

OPENING COMMENTS:
Well, now it’s been a week, hasn’t it? I am truly grateful to have made it to Sunday given all that’s occurred in our nation & our world since Monday. We continue to offer prayer support to our brothers & sisters in Boston, MA & West, TX – along with all who are suffering due to the bombings in MA & the plant explosion in TX.

As I prepared to today’s sermon, I had an overwhelming sense of gratitude to God because today’s texts & the sermon topic/title were all selected back in mid-March long before any of us could have imagined what this week would hold for our country.

The bombings during the Boston Marathon – on Patriot’s Day – probably took us all back to another tragic day in our nation’s history (September 11, 2001). I bring 9/11 up because while we were on vacation in New York City week before last, Dondi & I visited the 9/11 Memorial – which is hauntingly beautiful, solemn & sacred. While there, I learned something that lifted my heart. A story of survival on one of the worst days in America’s recent history: The Story of the Survivor Tree.

9/11 MEMORIAL ILLUSTRATION: The Story of the Survivor Tree
Planted in the 1970’s on the eastern edge of the original World Trade Center plaza, a Callery pear tree stood for decades. Following September 11, 2001, rescue workers found the tree damaged & barely an 8 foot tall stump in the wreckage at Ground Zero. The tree – that many thought would not survive – was moved to a New York City park & nursed back to health. In December 2010, the pear tree was returned to the WTC site – at a full 30 feet tall – to the west side of the south reflecting pool (the represents the fallen South Tower). (From: http://www.foxbusiness.com/personal-finance/2012/06/27/what-survivor-tree-at-ground-zero-can-teach-us/#ixzz2QqKtoI00)

This lone Callery pear tree sits among rows & rows of swamp white oaks – anonymous without a plaque or any sort of fanfare. And unless you’re deliberate in your search, you’d miss it. It’s main markers – padded ties that hold it in place & an aluminum piping that surrounds it to keep it free of people who might try to climb on it. What I noticed when I approached the tree was the clear line of demarcation where the “pre-9/11” bark was on the entire trunk of the tree – with limbs that never regrew due to the charring & destruction that was rough bark & looked differently- than the new “post 9/11” growth of the limbs that were smooth & bearing blooms. The line of demarcation was an amazing visual reminder that sometimes in our lives – when uncertainty & bad circumstances come into our lives, we may be scarred but we can rest assured in the security that we are (1) not alone & (2) that our faith & the love/care of others CAN see us through to better days.

WILL YOU PRAY WITH ME? PRAYER:

CANTICLE READING – PSALM 23:
When I first saw (about a month ago) that Psalm 23 was the lectionary reading for today, I was thrilled. It’s a well-known & often quoted psalm even in our postmodern era. In most cases we have used Psalm 23 at funerals/memorials & to offer peaceful, calm comfort to people for decades; however, the truer historical setting for this writing is anything but calm, peaceful & serene. Scholars are not 100% sure which conflict, concern or “enemy” the psalmist was referencing. For Basically any conflict of either Israel or Judah, canonical or non-canonical issues – from David in the 10th century BCE to the Maccabees in the 2nd century BCE (intertestamental period) – could be the
historic setting of Psalm 23. However, regardless of which tragedy was being addressed when Psalm 23 was originally written, we can for sure draw strength from its words for this day.

Read through the lens of our personal & national security, Psalm 23 challenges us to at least 3 key faith actions:

1. “I will fear no evil, for you are with me.” (v.1)
2. “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod & your staff – they comfort me. (v.4)
3. “You spread a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil. My cup overflows.” (v.5)

A. “I will fear no evil, for you are with me.” (v.1)
The author of Psalm 23 doesn’t deny the reality or the havoc of evil. However, he is sure of his resolve to stand & face the threat – without paralleling, debilitating fear. The Psalmist did not fear evil – not because of Homeland Security, the FBI or even better surveillance – no, the Psalmist didn’t fear evil because “God was with him.”

“For YOU are with me.” It’s the core assertion of our biblical faith that there is but one God & that all trust belongs in/to that God. Yet, if we’re honest, when evil reigns in our country – like on 9/11 or even on 4/15/13 – even the most committed followers of God are shaken. Yet in our shakiness, we can get our bearings & reaffirm our trust in the certainty of an unshakable God who loves us all!

B. “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod & your staff – they comfort me. (v.4)

Next, if we can survive the unknown & uncertainty of daily life – many of us are afraid as we near the end of life – for ourselves and/or for those we love. It is true that “death is a mystery” for most, if not all of us; however we DO follow One who defeated death (Jesus Christ.)

So, yes, we will all walk through the “valley of the shadow of death”. We have felt the sting of loss through the death of loved ones. And some of us have felt the sting of the tragic deaths of our fellow brothers & sisters just this week in Boston, MA & West, TX. The shadow of death has fallen across each of our lives this week – as a collective human community. And we are more loving & supportive as a result of this week’s tragedies: we are more like Christ in our brokenness than in our usual strength & self-sufficiency. We are “walking” in the valley; however, we are NOT consumed by it.

C. “You spread a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil. My cup overflows.” (v. 5)

If being fearful of evil & death is our first response, then our second impulse/emotion is often vengeance. Psalm 23 recounts a very real threat of evil & the fact that there are people in the world who meant to do real harm to the Psalmist & maybe even the readers/audience of the psalm. However, the author was quick to weigh the evil & the desire for revenge against the enemy against the goodness & abundance of Almighty God.

Even in the midst of this one’s enemies, God blesses & offers more than enough. God’s grace & generosity can short circuit the need for revenge in our humanness – if we let it. Focusing on the radical grace, gifting & generosity of God is an alternative worldview to our growing need for revenge & the usual retaliatory “eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth” worldview. The Psalmist’s call to a more thoughtful process integrates one’s faith tradition into our everyday dealings with people – even dealings with our enemies – who may desire to kill or maim us. (Summarized from the blog post of Timothy F. Simpson, The 23rd Psalm in an Age of Terror: A Pastoral Response to Boston, 4/16/13)

**GENERAL APPLICATION – 50TH ANNIVERSARY – “LETTER FROM BIRMINGHAM JAIL”**

This biblical mandate to not exact revenge when an enemy (or so called friend) wrongs us is one of
the hardest teachings in all of Scripture. And yet, did you know what anniversary occurred this past week, sandwiched between the Boston bombings & the Texas explosions?

**April 16, 2013** was the 50th anniversary of Dr. Martin Luther King’s open letter entitled, “Letter from Birmingham Jail” which defended the strategy of nonviolent direct action toward racism. The document eventually enjoyed widespread publication & became a key text for the American Civil Rights Movement in the early 1960’s.  

(From: http://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.html)

Violence begets violence…so if we’re truly sick & tired of violence in our land – in our world – we’re going to have to try something else. The Psalmist knew it; Jesus knew it; Gandhi knew it; Bayard Rustin knew it; Dr. King knew it; Rev. Troy Perry knows it…AND we know it too!

Personal & social transformation comes when we dare to use trust God & believe God holds us securely in God’s care AND then we dare to meet our enemies – not with hate & vengeance – but with confidence, faith & justice. Justice must prevail; just not vigilante justice….that makes us no better than the people who perpetrated such horrific acts against humanity.

**CLOSING:**

As spiritual people, as followers of Christ – we must have a different response to tragedy than merely hatred, vengeance & hopelessness. Do we feel sadness & shock? Yes, of course! However, our faith is a resource to guide us beyond the anger, hopelessness & despair.

As we close today, I return to the **Story of the Survivor Tree**. According to one report there are actually SEVEN “survivor trees”. These 7 trees (4 Callery pears & 3 Little Leaf Lindens) are planted throughout the area: near New York City Hall & near the Brooklyn Bridge in Manhattan.


These trees experienced arguably one of the worst disasters ever & yet they still live. The tree at the 9/11 Memorial stands sentry over a reflecting pool that is visited by thousands of people every day. People, like Dondi & me, who went to pay our respects to those we ALL lost on 9/11/01…to let them know – somehow – in the midst of their tragic deaths, that we are still remembering them & that we will not allow the hatred that took their lives take ours too.

**ONLINE INSIGHT:**
The 7 trees in NYC is NOT the only “Survivor Tree” here in the USA as a result of a terroristic attack. Just this past Friday (April 19), we may remember that date as the 18th anniversary of the Oklahoma City Bombing. The Oklahoma “Survivor Tree” is an American elm located on the north side of the Memorial that was the only shade tree in the parking lot. The tree suffered serious damage but survived & is now protected & cared for. Hundreds of seeds are harvested each year from the Survivor Tree & are then planted annually with the saplings being distributed EACH year on April 19 (the anniversary of the bombing). Thousands of these survivor trees are growing in public & private places all over the United States. AND the inscription around the inside of the deck wall around the original tree reads:

*The spirit of this city & this nation will not be defeated; our deeply rooted faith sustains.*

(From: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oklahoma_City_National_Memorial)

**The 9/11 Tree:** And the 9/11 Survivor tree’s response to the past 11+ years: to survive, to allow itself to be nursed back to health & to grow…to just grow. For its mere grow is a victory! Its growth – like your growth – is a testimony to God’s unending faithful even (& especially) in the midst of violence, hatred & yes, evil!

**Our Lives:** And what shall we learn from Psalm 23 & the Survivor Tree? **Simply, that the greatest response to violence, to hatred, to evil – is simply to live our lives out loud, with smiles on our faces, with joy in our bones & with love in our hearts!**