

“And Underneath are the Everlasting Arms”

First Parish in Lincoln

March 17, 2019

Rev. Jenny M. Rankin

“The eternal God is your refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms.” – Deuteronomy 33:27

Readings:

Psalm 23

“Beannacht” by John O’Donahue¹

It is Friday morning

Early, and the house is quiet as I write in my study,

Dog on the rug at my feet.

Your faces are before me as I write.

I am thinking of you sitting here on a Sunday morning—

This community where I am still getting to know you

Some of you have been all your lives; others are newer

I’m remembering those Saturday nights years ago when I would stand cooking in my kitchen, listening to a Prairie Home Companion on the radio

“It’s been a quiet week in Lake Woebegone”

Garrison Keillor would begin, in his deep dulcet tones,

And then he’d go on to tell stories of a small community

¹ John O’Donahue. *To Bless the Space Between Us*.

Where in fact things were not always quiet
People were not always trustworthy
Good things did not always happen
And life was not always as it seemed.

It has not been a quiet week here in our community--

If by quiet you mean a week pretty much the same as any other

Because this week we lost a young man who was born into and grew up in this church

David, the son of Sarah and Chris Andrysiak

Came home from Children's Hospital on Tuesday on hospice

He died Wed afternoon,

His family all around him.

To lose a young person—

This is a rare circumstance in the life of a congregation and when it happens it affects us all deeply.

No, it has not been a quiet week

And there are no easy things to say this morning.

There are few things, if any, that can unsettle us more

Strike fear into the heart

A dagger of sorrow into the soul

As the death of a child,

A young person

A person before their time.

David's family has deep roots in Lincoln and in this church;
Some of you are related to them or have known them for years
Others of us do not have this relationship
But whoever we are
That fundamental threat—
Of loss—
The thought that just beyond the normal surface of our days
The everyday lives we live
The comings and goings
The texts and the emails
The going to work and going home
The making supper, going to the supermarket, doing the laundry
That just beneath it all
There is a fragility that if we truly stopped,
And acknowledged it,
It would take our breath away.

A week like this one,
A loss like this one,
It brings us up short
It rips away the veneer that life is essentially trustworthy
Safe
Good
It challenges so much of what we hold dear
It shakes us to our core

And if we are a spiritual community

It may bring questions to the surface like “where is God in all this”

Where is God right now?

In this community

In this family’s life

Is God with David as he makes his passage from this world?

(I think of what someone told me once about their Native American family

And the tradition of singing a soul over, on their passage from this world to the next).

There is a bookcase next to me as I write

And I turn and pull out a thin little book

There are many books there

But at the end of a shelf, there is one section,

Set apart.

Just a few slim volumes,

Side by side.

None of them are big, fat tomes

They are small and slender

They hold some spiritual wisdom that speaks to me

Some spiritual food I need for the journey.

And so they are precious to me.

This one is a paperback,

With edges that are worn
 Its cover is brightly colored cover,
 Though faded now
 That looks like it comes from another era
 Sure enough I check the publication date
 1981
 “When Bad things Happen to Good People”
 By the Rabbi Harold Kushner who was a rabbi
 In the synagogue, just here, in Sudbury for years.

He wrote the book a few years after his fourteen-year-old son Aaron died
 Aaron who had been diagnosed around age 3, a disease of rapid aging called
 “progeria”

The day the doctor told them he said it was rare for children to live past their early
 teenage years.

Kushner says that each year when they celebrated Aaron’s birthday he and his wife
 would go into another room and weep knowing that each birthday brought them
 closer to the day he would leave them

Up until that point his life, the God he had worshipped, believed in preached and
 prayed to

The God that was important enough to him to lead him into a life of being a rabbi—
 His life essentially centered around and anchored in the Holy One—

That God was the traditional one he had been given as a child:

“God as an all-wise, all-powerful parent figure...if we were obedient and deserving,
 He would reward us. If we got out of line, He would discipline us, reluctantly but
 firmly. He would protect us from being hurt or from hurting ourselves, and would
 see to it that we got what we deserved.”²

² Harold Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen*, p. 3.

After Aaron died, he said, that no longer made sense.

“This is not an abstract book about God and theology,” Kushner wrote on the first page,

“It does not try to use big words or clever ways of rephrasing questions in an effort to convince us that our problems are not really problems, but that we only think they are.

This is a very personal book, written by someone who believes in God,

And in the goodness of the world,

Someone who has spent most of his life trying to help other people believe,

And who was compelled by a personal tragedy to rethink everything he had been taught

About God’s ways.”³

When Aaron was living and dying, Kushner says,

There were not many books—

As there were not many people—

That actually helped.

“Friends tried to be helpful

But how much could they really do?

And the books I turned to were more concerned

With defending God’s honor

With logical proof that bad is really good

And that evil is necessary to make this a good world

Than they were with curing the bewilderment

And the anguish of the parent of a dying child.

³ Harold Kushner. *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. (New York, NY: Avon Books, 1981).

They had answers to all of their own questions
But no answer for mine.”⁴

And so a few years after Aaron died
When the rawness of that first phase of grief had eased enough
Kushner sat down to write this book
Out of the depths of his own human experience
Yet informed by years of study as a rabbi
Steeped in the Hebrew Scriptures
As well as the hours and hours he, as a pastor, had spent with grieving and struggling
families
In homes and hospitals
Emergency rooms and outpatient treatment facilities

It grew out of the soil of his own grief
His walking through the valley of the shadow of death
His being angry at God
Feeling abandoned by God
It grew out of a long time of spiritual wrestling
Which led him, after a long long time,
To a new sense of **who God was**
And **was not**
In his life.

⁴ Ibid, p. 4

I imagine in the years since 1981 someone has written a better book on these kinds of things but to be honest I don't know of it

I haven't really looked

This little book, as you can tell from how worn its pages are, has been the one I've turned to

Again and again in my ministry

And in my own life

When I've been confronted again by the fragility of these lives we live

The unfairness

The tragedy that can strike at any time.

When I am trying to help someone in a congregation

Or a friend in my life

Or when I am trying to help myself

When it is me who is wrestling

In those dark moments when I live in fear and trembling for someone I love

This is the book I turn to

This is the book I take down from the shelf and read

Because I'll be honest with you

Like Kushner, I, too, want to be able to continue to believe in God even while looking into the abyss

I realize there are many here who do not use the word God and I respect that.

That has been true for me all of my ministry

Our communities of faith are big and broad and that is such a good thing

Faith comes in all sorts of different kinds, shapes, sounds, fragrances and colors.

We don't embrace one creed

We seek

We doubt

We ask questions

We struggle

“We need not think alike to love alike” said Frances David

One of the earliest Unitarians back in Transylvania in the 1560s⁵

And I've always loved his simple words

(Although to be honest some scholars question now whether he actually said those precise words).⁶

We do not have to think alike

To love alike.

Thank goodness.

We can be human here

With hearts that beat and break

Hearts that love and lose

And love again.

As for me, I **want**, I would even go so far to say I **need**,

Some sense of God in my life,

Some sense of the holy.

⁵ Frances David encouraged King John Sigismund in Transylvania to issue the Edict of Torda in 1568, considered by many to be the first act of religious toleration ever.

⁶ See Peter Hughes, “Who Really Said That?”, UU World magazine, 9/17/12 for a scholar who questions whether David ever actually said these precise words. Accessed at: <https://www.uuworld.org/articles/uu-rumor-mill-produces-quotes>, March 16, 2019.

After years of ministry among bright, well-educated, articulate people,

People who for lots of good reasons have plenty of good questions and comments on the “God issue,”

I’ve given up trying to explain, defend, rationalize.

I just know that, for me,

My life without some sense of God

A god I try to talk to, pray to, acknowledge, thank, bless, struggle with, get angry at--

A life without that is too desolate –

There’s something empty about it. Lonely.

I’ve gone through stretches in my life when I was agnostic, even atheist

But over time I have returned to God and God language

Not a man in the sky (not a woman in the sky!)

But a mystery, a presence, a sacred reality

One I confess that I seek more than I actually know.

Often elusive but always beckoning

Inviting

Drawing me on in the quest

On the journey.

I am grateful to Rabbi Kushner

For his courage in sitting down at his desk

I am grateful that he was able and willing to wade back into that grief

And write those words that have given so many of us some help

Like Jacob who wrestled with the angel in the darkest of nights on the riverbank

Kushner wrestled in and through the darkness of his own pain
 He wrestled out of his grief a kind of blessing
 A blessing for himself and his wife, his family and congregation and the world

The blessing of still being able to name a God who walked with him
 A god who was real and loving and profound and immensely important to him
 But not all powerful
 A God who could not and did prevent the death of his son Aaron
 But who, when Aaron died,
 Sat right down next to him and cried right alongside, with him.

His book is not magic
 It does not take the pain away
 Nor does it try.
 It doesn't pretend this is possible
 But it also does not persist with the platitudes, the lies, the words that hurt
 "God doesn't give you more than you can handle"
 Or "God took Aaron, it was his time to go, he lives with God."

Earlier in our service we heard the words of the 23rd psalm, those words that women
 and men have held close in some of the darkest hours of their lives.

"Thou art my shepherd." Thou? Who is that "thou?"

Who is it that walks with us through the valley of the shadow of death?

I don't know.

But sometimes, it seems to me, we need to be the hands and face of God to one
 another—

As Teresa of Avila said we need to be the hands and face and feet of God for one another.

That is what it can mean to be a community of faith like this

That somehow we become a great tide and force of love

“I saw,” wrote the Quaker George Fox way back in the 1600s,

“I saw that there was an ocean of darkness and death but also an infinite ocean of light and life which flowed over the ocean of darkness. In that also I saw the infinite love of God.”⁷

So perhaps we try to be that ocean—that ocean of life and love—for one another—

Buoying one another up

With prayers and blessings and words uttered in silence or secret

That no one ever hears or knows

But a kind of force field of love

A force field of compassion,

Of kindness.

We cannot take away the pain

The grief

The hurt

But we can bear witness to it.

We can say “We are here. We notice this devastating loss.

We will not run away from this pain. And we will not run away from you.”

Our community has lost David; it is part of our lives now, part of the life we share here, this small community of faith.

⁷ George Fox, *Journal of George Fox*, p. 11. Accessed online at: <http://www.strecorsoc.org/gfox/ch01.html> on March 16, 2019.

And we'll stand shoulder to shoulder together in it and through it
 As women and men have been doing here for generations
 Witnessing to the love and the hope that does not die, even in the face of death and
 despair.

No it has not been a quiet week.
 It has been a week of love and loss, almost inconceivable
 And we will do what women and men here have been doing for generations—

We will keep on loving one another
 Encircling one another with prayers and thoughts
 With arms that reach out to hug and hold when it is that time
 Or to watch and hope and pray from a distance
 Holding one another “in the light” as the Quakers say.

Who was it that said that sermons are to be found in stones?
 Shakespeare, my husband reminds me, Shakespeare who talked about
 “Tongues in trees, books in the running brooks,
 Sermons in stone...”⁸

Today I think **you** are the sermon
 This community of love and compassion
 Is the sermon
 It's the one you've been preaching here near the corner of Bedford and Trapelo Road

⁸ Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, Act 2, 1-17.

For hundreds of years

Way back to the roots of the first church in Lincoln in the 1740s

When this was just a small farming village

But you kept preaching it—in the church up the hill and down the hill

And you didn't just preach it on Sunday but as you went about your business in the town—

On farms and in fields, across stone walls and fences

In kitchens and schoolrooms

This message of love and compassion

This message of being there for each other through thick and thin

This message of trying to have courage in the face of adversity—

Yes, to me, you are the sermon today

Probably the only one we really need to hear

(The one I know I need to hear)

So keep on preaching my friends

Keep on being that ocean of light and love

In the face of darkness and death

And may God bless us and keep us.

Amen.