

Catherine Healy on 4 Lent March 22

*"...though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death..." (Psalm 22)*

I have to tell you that I am starting to develop some bad associations with Psalm 23.

It is so beautiful. But even though it is many people's favorite, it stands out to me because it was also the appointed psalm for the last Sunday I spent on lockdown, which was several years ago now in the wake of the Boston Marathon bombing. I am sure that many of you remember that. I remember it very vividly because I was living in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and spent several days sheltering in place in my apartment with Heather and with all of our roommates while the bomber was still on the loose. We knew that shots were being fired but we didn't know quite where. We knew that we were in some kind of nebulous danger, but we weren't sure what that meant.

I spent a lot of time during those days thinking about that phrase "the valley of the shadow of death," which sounds almost nice, right? It sounds pretty; it sounds like part of the green pastures that are mentioned in the psalm. But as we're all realizing right now, actually being in the valley of the shadow does not feel romantic. It's scary; at sometimes boring; and certainly extremely stressful. The valley to me is more of a gutter or a ditch. We're all in it together and it's not clear when we will get out.

But the more time I spend with that psalm, the more I realize we're not promised that nothing bad will happen to us. But rather we are promised that when we are down in the ditch, God is there too, that God does not leave us alone even when bad things do happen, even when we have no idea what is coming next.

I want to remind you of a couple of things I know you already know from our other readings. One is what Jesus teaches us over and over and over. In every one of the healing stories, people who get sick or have harm befall them most often didn't do anything bad. "Who sinned, this man or his parents?" None of them sinned. Sometimes things just go wrong. So when you or someone you know gets sick (and many of us will, and so will many people we know well), remember it's not because they went out to get gas or to a bar when they shouldn't have, not because they did something bad. They're sick because a lot of people are going to get sick. We in Chicago have access to some of the best medical care in the world. People who get sick will be well cared for. But they can use your compassion and your support and your prayers just as much as they can use the excellent medical care that they will receive.

Remember also that God can use all of us in ways that we probably don't even know about. Remember that David was the most unlikely of heroes. Nobody expected him to be able to rise to the challenge that was put before him. Nobody even thought of him when a hero was needed. But he was found, and he showed up. His willingness to show up was what turned him into a hero we still remember. We certainly know he was not perfect, or a great example of moral courage throughout his whole life. That's not the point. You don't have to be perfect to be a hero. You just have to show up and be willing to do the work that God has given you to do.

God is giving each of us work to do right now. I know some of you are out on the frontlines caring for the sick. Some of you are caring for your neighbors. Some of you are like me, caring for your children while also trying to work full time. Some of you are just making phone calls, making sure that people who are sheltering in place by themselves don't feel so alone.

There is a lot of work to do, but we will do it together, and we will do it with God's help. We will do it with Jesus walking beside us. We are not going to be trapped in the valley of the shadow forever, even if we could really use a little extra goodness and mercy right now, even if we really want answers. We have no idea what the next few weeks hold, but we are in this together, and God is with us always—always, to the end of the age.

Amen