

Psalm 23:1 (KJV 1900) The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. Psalm 23:4 (KJV 1900) Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; Thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.

We're all Bostonians this week. We spent Monday watching the TV in horror; we spent Friday watching the TV in hope; and in between, we said a prayer for our brothers and sisters in West Texas.

What a week! And as we begin a new week on this the Lord's Day, it is a testimony to the shepherd's care of the sheep that today's lectionary passages include Psalm 23 and Revelation 7. Decisions made long before any of this week's events were in any of our minds saw to it that we would reflect together on these promises today after a week of tribulation like this. With God, a promise made is a promise kept, and our readings today bear witness to the faithfulness of God, Who promises us: *Revelation 7:16–17 (NRSV) [We] will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike [us], nor any scorching heat; for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be [our] shepherd, and he will guide [us] to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from [our] eyes."*

This is our hope; this is our prayer for West Texas and for Boston, especially for the wounded and the grieving. Hope brought us here this morning; when we don't know what to do but do know that we must do something – we worship. We take our stand with the multitude in Revelation and worship *Revelation 7:10 (NRSV) ...[with] a loud voice, saying, "Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!"* We worship as an act of hope that God will not leave us behind; God is with us in the midst of great tribulation.

✦ The Great Tribulation – More than “Left Behind”

Revelation is the Bible's book of hope par excellence. It is also a much misunderstood book; that misunderstanding produces fear so that we both avoid reading Revelation and put book after book about Revelation on top of the best seller lists. In the 1970's Hal Lindsay's *The Late Great Planet Earth* was in *The New York Times* opinion, “the #1 non-fiction best-seller of the decade.” To date, there are over 10 million copies in print. That's a lot, but with the publication of the first book in the *Left Behind* series in 1995, 65 million copies of this 16 book

series have been sold. 65 million! That’s a lot of interest; no one wants to be “left behind.”

What these books popularized is the dispensational interpretation of “the end times.” To briefly summarize this view: the book of Revelation and similar passages offer us a ring-side seat to the end of the world. The final conflict between God and Satan occurs over a 7 year period; during this period, Satan reigns supreme through the Antichrist (known by his #666) and the Beast. They bring hell to earth; hence it is called “The Great Tribulation” or in the NRSV – “the great ordeal.” Those who believe in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior may escape this terrible period; they are “raptured,” that is taken up into heaven. The most popular view of the rapture, the view in both *The Late Great Planet Earth* and *The Left Behind Series* has the rapture taking place before the great tribulation. Others teach that it occurs at the 3.5 year mark (mid-tribulation) and still others at the end of the tribulation (post-tribulation). During this great tribulation, some will come to faith, but they will be at the mercy of the Beast. They will suffer. They will be martyred. The message of both of these books and of dispensational theology in general is – God help those who are “left behind.”

Revelation offer us more hope than these books provide. They are entertaining, but they are wrong; and the outcome of their error is the fear and disconnection we feel when we turn the page from “The Letter of Jude” and see the title, “The Revelation to John.” These books confine Revelation to some far-off future; dispensationalism says to us, “If you think things are bad now, just wait until you see what Satan has in store! God help those who are “left behind.””

When all is well, we can enjoy a nice cup of coffee and a vigorous theological conversation about the relative merits of various interpretations of Revelation and the Bible in general.

When all isn’t well, we have neither the time nor energy nor the interest in intellectual speculations. God help those who are “left behind?” No, God help us and those we’re praying for; the people of Boston and West Texas. God help us today, right here, right now.

After a week like this, we don’t need a book that offers hope for tomorrow; such a book does not inspire us today. No, we need a book that offers hope today; a book

that equips us and empowers us for action today; that book, the book to which we can turn after a week like this, is the book of Revelation; it is the Bible's book of hope par excellence! There's far more in these pages than - God help those who are "left behind."

✦ A Promise Made is a Promise Kept

The peculiar gift of our age is that we can watch an event over and over again. We can see too much to be sure, but we can also see beyond sight to insight – to revelation; and the revelation that came to us on Monday was the revelation of the courage of the police and the first responders and the ordinary folks who ran to those in need even as the second bomb was going off; we saw people choose to resist evil rather than run from it; there was good to be done; it was theirs to do, and they did it. The hour of trial came and they didn't "*walk through the valley of the shadow of death,*" they ran.

Courage is hope in action. Courage is the call of Revelation; courage inspired by the reality that with God a promise made is a promise kept.

The great lie that evil tells us is, "It doesn't matter. It doesn't matter what you do. It doesn't matter what you don't do. Do what works for you; save yourself, because no one cares."

Revelation opens our eyes to see the truth. God sees. God knows. God cares.

Psalm 23:1 (KJV 1900) The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. Psalm 23:4 (KJV 1900) Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; Thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.

Revelation 7:17 (NRSV) for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."

A pastor who served at the UCC church near where the bombs went off gave eloquent voice to this hope when she wrote: Whomever placed the bombs at the finish line of the Boston Marathon today knew what they were doing. And they knew that when they were detonated, they would strike a psychic as well as physical blow to the city. They timed this, and they knew what they were doing.

They wanted to forever transform that block of Boylston Street from a place of celebration to a place of pain.

They don't get to do that.

Boylston Street is both beautiful and real. Boston Public Library sits on the corner of the block where the finish line is painted. Copley Square is the next block up. The Prudential Center is the next block down. And on the street a mix of business people commuting, Berklee students playing instruments, homeless people selling newspapers, and tourists meet. And there is no one block in the city that says "Boston" more to me than that stretch of Boylston between Dartmouth and Exeter. When I first saw it, I was immediately in love.

What happened today is a tragedy and I will mourn it with Boston and with everyone who has turned their hearts to the city tonight. But whomever it was who tried to blow the block apart, and who tried to forever turn it into a place synonymous with terror and pain...you don't get to.

Love always wins. I believe that because I believe that God is love, and I believe that God's love is ultimately impossible to resist. Love wins when we refuse to stop seeing it. And I refuse to stop seeing it. No matter what we learn about the who or the why of what happened today, I choose to believe that in the end "perfect love casts out fear." In our hearts. In our minds. And on that one city block in the heart of Boston.¹

God sees. God knows. God cares, and we should too. With God, a promise made is a promise kept, so keep your eyes open. Signs of hope are everywhere! See them. Be them. Run; don't walk, so that when someone finds themselves "*in the valley of the shadow of death*," they will know that they aren't alone. God is with them, because we are with them. God will dry their tears as we dry their tears.

God sees. God knows. God cares. God is with us every step of the way through the great tribulation. Amen.

¹ God's Love Wins: Reflections on Boston Marathon Bombing http://www.huffingtonpost.com/rev-emily-c-heath/gods-love-wins-reflections-on-boston-marathon-bombing_b_3088437.html April 16, 2013