

Sunday, August 26, 2007

A Sermon Preached by
The Reverend Roland P. Perdue, III



What Are You Doing Under The Porch?

Psalms 23

A child in Oklahoma, named Kelsey, died from alleged abuse. The little girl's grandfather, in commenting on the investigation of the child's death, said:

"Today was another hard day in a long line of hard days."

If you have lived very long, you know that reality, that feeling. "Today: another hard day in a long line of hard days." Been there! You too, I bet. Oh, I think so.

All of us, I would think, greet the news reports from Iraq thinking "another hard day in a long line of hard days." And for those brave men and women who serve there, it must always seem like "another hard day in a long line of hard days." For those along the border who face our Mexican neighbors over a fence, it is "another hard day in a long line of hard days." And our city, state and national leaders, the fire at ground zero, the death of firefighters, the hurricane battling the coast, the trapped miners and their families, and on and on: "another hard day in a long line of hard days."

We do not have to be very old or bright to realize that Scott Peck is right on target with the opening line of his book *The Road Less Traveled*. He writes, "Life is difficult!" We know it is. Difficult. Hard. Very!

An Existential Fact of Existence

I want to suggest that it is healthier and more faithful to our biblical tradition to anticipate more than your fair share of hard days and troublesome nights than it is to allow them to slip up on you unexpectedly. The hard and tough aspects of life are simply an existential fact of our existence. As the New Testament puts it: "It rains on the righteous and the unrighteous; the sun shines on the righteous and the unrighteous." Everybody gets wet; everybody dries off, in other words.

It helps, I believe, to face that fact: life is hard. And all of us slip into valleys of disaster, stumble into glens of gloom. We need to hear the healthy and harsh reality of this ancient bit of Wisdom literature from the Psalter and let it work its way into our constant awareness.

That wisdom is contained in the phrase, "Yea, though I walk through the Valley of the Shadow of Death, I will not fear, for Thou art with me."

The wisdom is contained first in the word *though*. "Though I walk ...the valley of Death's Dark Shadow ..." Beloved friends, it is not *if* or *maybe* it will come to pass that I walk into trouble or horrific times, it is guaranteed that we all will! It is a 100% guarantee. This "though" has the meaning of "as" or "when" I walk into trouble, in the "glen of gloom and the valley of death." In Texas earlier this month, I was doing some pre-marital counseling with a couple whose wedding I will conduct in El Paso this November. And I asked, "As you contemplate your life together what is the worst thing you can imagine happening to your relationship?" And they said, "That one of us will die!" And I said, "I am sorry, but that is guaranteed to happen. You know, one out of one! Death is guaranteed. Not *if* but *though*..."

When "though" happens to you and it will, who is to blame? Is God punishing you? No. The fact of life's hardness and harshness is as much the result of chance, circumstance, and wrong or delayed choices as anything else. Bridges collapse because they have not been cared for, repaired, and built correctly. When a young woman in Minneapolis says that God had her car in just the right spot on the bridge, saved her life and the life of her children, that had they been a car ahead or behind they would have died, and that God blessed them because of their faith, it sickens me! Did God not care for the occupants of the cars who died? I simply cannot believe in that kind of god. Do we really think that the God and Creator of our Lord Jesus Christ does not care from all he victims of the war in Iraq, and for those on of all sides of the conflict? Are they too not loved by the God I know in Jesus Christ? Surely God weeps for all God's children when they hurt.

Wars are waged for reasons of expanding territory, national self-interest, control of resources, greed, selfishness and stupidity as much as a desire to

increase freedom or our brand of democracy. On the national scene, wars, walls, governmental corruption, corporate greed, bribes at all levels of government and military machinations contribute to our long line of hard days. And on the personal level, our personal choices also make for the hardness of life as we strive with raising children in this city, trying to earn enough to remain in this wonderful location, living with the strain and stress of urban life. "Today: another hard day in a long line of hard days."

Life is hard. It is an **existential fact** of our existence; a fact. And when by reason of circumstance, choice, or sheer luck you and I escape some of the deep valleys, we can not make the self righteous mistake of believing God has blessed us in some special way and withheld the blessing from someone else, whom we suspect is a greater sinner than we are. The "though" into which we all walk on occasion are not some form of Divine Judgment or Punishment, but the result of our poor choices, lack of follow-through, failure to follow well-established rules of human relationships. Sisters and brothers, God does not have to punish us; we punish ourselves, we bring it on our own heads!

The Psalm's wisdom is conveyed in the word *though*. Yea, yes! You bet, *though* I walk ..."

An Evangelical Statement of Faith

And the contemporary wisdom of this ancient Psalm is also conveyed in the blessed word *through*! "Yea, *though* I walk *through* the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me!" Yes, God knows and so do you and I that we will have valleys to walk – hardships with which to deal – but we can also know that, trusting God to be with us, we will get *through* them!

Many of us learned it in childhood. We were assured of it while sitting in our mother's lap, walking with our father's arm around our shoulders, or listening to a caring teacher or friend. It is a basic evangelical statement of faith: God is with us! God is Immanuel – God with us! God had made us in God's image – capable of intimate relationships with God and one another – and God our Creator will not let anything get in the way of God's love and abiding presence with us.

And not a few of us have been sustained by the wisdom of the Psalm throughout our adult lives. In moments of terrible confusion and deep distress, it is amazingly comforting to repeat these blessed words, "The Lord is my shepherd." To say and repeat on those words is to sense that in all the current and crosscurrents of life, in all the ambiguities of one's existence that there is an overarching presence, a divine consciousness infinitely conscious of us, guiding and directing our ways and our maneuvering through this world. Yes, though I walk through the valley of death, divorce,

depression, defeat, disease, disaster – through, through, thank God Almighty! THROUGH!

I love the way Anne Quinlan puts it in her new novel about life in this wonderful city, *Rise and Shine*. Meghan Fitzmaurice is a household name as the host of the country's favorite morning talk show, *Rise and Shine*. But one morning it happens. She is interviewing a politician and hits one of the "hard days in a long list of hard days." Using the language of the gutter, she tells him – and the country – what she thinks he really is.

The station cancels her appearance for the next few days and she disappears. Her sister, Bridget, roams all over looking for her, calling, dropping by, text messaging, emailing. She can't find her anywhere. Bridget calls their aunt, Maureen, who is like their mother, and Maureen says, "She will be fine. I think she's under the porch, dear."

"Under the porch." That is where their cat named Puff Ball went when getting over an attack by a neighbor's boxer, a possum, a raccoon. All cut up and scratched, Puff Ball went under the porch and nursed her injuries until the hurting stopped and the healing began. And that is where Meghan was; she was under the porch and getting from "though" to "through," from hurting to healing.

Conclusion

Where do you go? Where is your porch? Every evening men and women bed down on the steps on this church and go under the porch for healing from hurting. With cardboard ceilings and walls, in sleeping bags and rags they gather to move from "though" to "through." And every evening of the year, twelve men are under the porch downstairs in what we call the Homeless Shelter. Their stories will never be written, but they should be told. They are former professionals, military, current fathers, always sons – homelessness is no respecter of persons – and there, under the porch, they are moving through to health. The Bowery Mission is also a wonderful porch under which to crawl and heal from hurting. The Vacation Bible School this week was a porch for growing in the faith for a handful of young disciples. And, O, my God! What a porch this space, this sanctuary, is! For here under this magnificent porch, we gather to deal with "though" and "through," and to move from hurting to healing with the God who is always with us, for I am convinced that "though I walk through" all kinds of stuff, God is with me. And God will never let me go, "for neither height nor depth, nor angels nor principalities, nor anything else in all of creation has any power at all to separate any of us from the love of God in Jesus Christ."

God who will not leave us alone. We will get through. Amen.

Note: If you were present in the Sanctuary when this sermon was preached or if you heard it on the church's website, then you know that this may not exactly be the sermon you heard. This is a written sermon, and it is different in form and emphasis from a preached and heard sermonic effort within the context of worship. The various activities of worship – gathering, praying, singing, reading the sacred story together, participating in the holy drama and leaving to engage the routine events of one's life – add to the overall meaning of the sermon.

Sermons are not written to be read. I write the sermon out as a discipline. However, when the writing is over, the work of learning the sermon is just beginning. As you read this and other sermons, your work is also just beginning. Having read the sermon, what difference does it make in your attitudes, actions and the adventure of living before God and others? Struggling with that may help actually “finish” the sermon.

Come and be present with us as we worship God in the Spirit of Jesus Christ!

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