

You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD
my whole life long.

- Psalm 23

Exodus 16 is about one of faith's unhappier surprises; namely, getting saved does not necessarily mean that all difficulty evaporates.¹ *The path to the Promised Land leads through the desert.*²

The people begin to wonder: "Is salvation no more than a desert mirage?"³ Is all this talk about salvation naïve or just plain unrealistic?

Why would God redeem us, only to lead us to this God-forsaken place?

The Israelites are scared and hungry. They see now that the way forward leads through a place of grave danger. Life in the wilderness – it becomes so bad that they even consider heading back to Egypt. I could picture someone saying: "Let's all just go home and pretend that none of this stuff even happened... this talk of salvation... and a Promised Land. It's just gotten our hopes way up...and... for what?!"

The Israelites are doing all they can to place their trust in God. And yet – it is difficult to trust God when it appears as though God is not a reliable partner. To the Israelites, it feels as though God gives, then God takes away. It seems like God is about to give something – the Promised Land – and it simply does not come to fruition.

A consistent message of the Bible is this: *The Promised Land awaits us, but the path to the Promised Land leads through the desert.*⁴

It was true even for Jesus. He was baptized, and then where was he led? – the Spirit drove him into the desert, where he was tempted in ways he had never been tempted before! He had to journey through the desert of painful betrayal and then a painful death.

¹ *The Lectionary Commentary*. "The First Readings: The Old Testament and Acts." Ed. Rober E. Van Harn. (92-95).

² *The Lectionary Commentary*. "The First Readings: The Old Testament and Acts." Ed. Rober E. Van Harn. (92-95).

³ Insight from Terence Fretheim

⁴ *The Lectionary Commentary*. "The First Readings: The Old Testament and Acts." Ed. Rober E. Van Harn. (92-95).

The way through the desert is difficult, I think, because it makes us think of death – it makes us think of OUR death... the fear of the UNKNOWN... and HOW we will die.

Perhaps that question: “How is it that we will die?” is a question that haunts us.

One of my mentors – an Episcopal minister – once told me: “Jonas, at your age I used to be afraid of death. I am no longer afraid of death. What I am afraid of most is: incapacity.”

It is fears such as these that bring us to prayer – perhaps reaching for that old psalm of comfort, psalm 23. “Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff— they comfort me.”

I am reminded of death’s dark valley each day I turn on the news. I must confess, sometimes I have to just turn the TV off because my stomach turns at the constant acts of violence... as well as – what appears to me – our cultures attraction to violence. As a teenager, it didn’t seem to bother me as much, but as an adult – I am increasingly aware of how we are bombarded with violence – especially on television and video games, which can really numb us.

It did not seem like all that long ago... 8 years ago this week... that I was visiting my family in Akron, OH with a seminary friend, Andy Kort. My mom woke us up to say that a plane had crashed into the Twin Towers.

Such a situation makes me wonder: *In death’s dark valley, how is it possible to fear no evil.*

We were numb with fear as my mom, dad, Andy and I watched how the tragic events unfolded on TV.

As the days went on, the feelings moved from fear to sadness as one begins to process the human lives affected by the tragedy.

I read the following obituaries in the New York Times.

Books, card games and cruises were Margaret L. Benson’s preferred pastimes, and her older sister, Kathy Savidge, was here constant companion. They had scheduled a Mediterranean dream cruise for 2005 and hoped to retire in North Carolina. Sibling rivals, they grew up to be best friends and sometimes – not always – let their husbands in on their high jinks. “We planned to become little old ladies together,” Mrs. Savidge said. “She was stubborn, set in her ways. I remember in grammar school when the nuns wouldn’t give her a perfect 100 average even though she got all 99s and 100s. They told her only God was perfect. She was mad!” Marge Benson, 52, worked for the Port Authority of NY and NJ for 33 years, starting as a clerk and working up to a human resources post. She lived in Rockaway, NJ with her husband, Jim, and two children, both in college. She was last seen outside a

Borders bookstore next to the Twin Towers. “A friend told me to think of it this way,” her sister said. “She’s in a back corner full of books, she’s got a card game going, and she’s winning. I wish I could call and tell her that. She’d laugh.”

Daniel Suhr was the recipient of many nicknames. Captain America was one. Whenever he went out with friends, we would point to exit doors and tell them where to meet him if anything happened. “He kept everyone safe,” said his wife Nancy. A firefighter, Daniel was rushing to the trade center when someone tumbled out of the sky and on top of him. “The other firefighters stayed with him because they wouldn’t leave him behind,” his wife said. “Because they didn’t go in, he saved their lives.” Daniel, 37, loved his job and the Engine Company 216. His father was a firefighter and his brother is one. He grew up in Brooklyn, where he was the captain of both the baseball and football teams at James Madison High School. He and his wife began dating when they were in grammar school. Their home is in Rockaway Park Queens. Even though, he was considered this big, brave firefighter, he could get fairly mushy over his two-year old daughter, Briana. He was terrified when she did things like run toward him too fast. “He loved her more than life itself,” Nancy said.

Joseph Zaccoli’s wife, Helen, teaches theology to schoolchildren and yesterday, a few days after her husband’s body was found, she went to her children’s school, Holy Name of Mary, in their community of Valley Stream, NY to talk. “These kids are so traumatized, not just mine,” said Helen, who is mother to three, all under 14. “I was trying to say that they had to look for the miracles beyond the building, little miracles that are happening all over the place.” “A woman I don’t even know at Jamaica Hospital made red, white and blue pins and sold them and gave me all the money. Every day for the last 15 years, my husband brought me coffee and a muffin. I was telling people that was one of the things that I was going to miss. Yesterday, somebody left coffee and a muffin outside my door.” Joseph, 39, was a municipal bond broker at Cantor Fitzgerald who somehow found time to coach five different elementary school athletic teams. Another thing his wife counts as a little miracle – “His ring said, ‘Til death,’ mine said, ‘Till us part,’” Helen said, “He was on the 104th floor. With all that debris, I can’t fathom how they found it.”

I was a student at Princeton Theological Seminary during the time of this tragedy – an hour train ride from New York City. The tragedy hit close to home for me – perhaps because it was the first big national tragedy I had experienced in my adult life.

I'm sure many of you can remember times in the life of our nation – moments of tragedy. I have heard my parents and many baby boomers recall stories of where they were when they heard John F. Kennedy was assassinated.

At times of tragedy and suffering – our life is in the wilderness. We have a tendency to lose our inner compass... and we get into survival mode.

We look for those closest to us... we want to make contact. We call our loved ones and just want to hear their voices on the other line: "Are you okay?" "Yes – I'm okay."

As people of faith, we look for God our shepherd to lead us – even at times that God may seem invisible, perhaps even uncaring. "*God is my shepherd, I shall not want.*"

We look for the green pastures... the still waters... the right paths to which God will lead us. Yet – it is difficult to see the green pastures... the still waters... the right paths... when we are living in the wilderness.

In fact, it can even be insulting to say such a thing to a person who is suffering: "Don't worry. (Look at the bright side of things.) God will lead you to green pastures... still waters... and right paths." Such words are hollow. They don't help relieve a person's pain. Such words make it worse.

The psalmist in Psalm 23 (King David) had a lot of intense grief – he had a lot of honest, heartfelt questions to ask God – before he makes his statement of trust in this famous psalm. We get a glimpse of his grief, when he says that haunting line... "Even though I walk through the darkest valley..."

It takes eyes of faith to see God's work in the wilderness-world that is filled with tragedy. Even in the lives of the most faithful, it can be a challenge to recognize the green pastures... the still waters... the right paths."

A professor of systematic theology at Princeton Seminary who many admired admitted to us after the tragedy of September 11 – that this posed to him a crisis of faith... the crises of faith that he has ever known.

His only consolation (he said): "I have seen signs of God's presence since this tragedy."

When we look closely enough, we may still find evidences of God's care in the midst of it all. The manna was one such evidence for the Israelites.

There is a misconception in the Christian Faith that the manna was a wonderful (luxurious) meal that rained down from heaven. Manna was not a four course dinner; not by a long shot, but for the time being it was enough – enough to assure people that they were not alone, that the covenant was still on track, that a better day really would come.

The wilderness is not a pleasant place.⁵ We would all just as soon detour around it.⁶ For now, however, that is not possible.⁷ The challenge of faith is to resist the temptation to turn back to the house of bondage and death to proceed forward, looking for God's glory.⁸

The miracle of this text, as I see it... it is revealed to us suddenly. The miracle is revealed so suddenly... we just may have forgotten the words, which we heard.

Exodus 16:10 says: "And as Aaron spoke to the whole congregation of the Israelites, they looked towards the wilderness, and the glory of the LORD appeared in the cloud."

This text says to us: God would be with them in the places of danger and death.

God will be with us in places of danger and death. That is why we can walk through the valley of the shadow of death and fear no evil.

On this Lord's Day we come here, each one of us, with our own personal needs . . . our doubts and fears . . . our weariness . . . our resentments and wrongs . . . our anxieties and uncertainties . . . our apprehension about what tomorrow will bring. But here, in this sanctuary, we are reminded that we are never alone. The great Shepherd of our lives goes with us . . . up every steep hill and through every dark valley.

A young man once confessed to a Presbyterian minister:

"I am not sure if I believe the 23rd psalm."

The minister said: "Say it!"

The young man said, "... but I'm not sure if I believe what it says."

He said: "Say it!"

Please stand and recite the twenty-third Psalm . . . recite it in the version you learned it as a child . . . Our voices may not be in sync but our hearts will.⁹

⁵ *The Lectionary Commentary*. "The First Readings: The Old Testament and Acts." Ed. Rober E. Van Harn. (92-95).

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⁷ *The Lectionary Commentary*. "The First Readings: The Old Testament and Acts." Ed. Rober E. Van Harn. (92-95).

⁸ *The Lectionary Commentary*. "The First Readings: The Old Testament and Acts." Ed. Rober E. Van Harn. (92-95).

⁹ Phrasing of sentence by Rev. Clifford J. Hayes