

Faith in the Darkness

Psalm 121 and John 3:1-17

*"...he who keeps you will not slumber. He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep." Psalm 121: 3b-4*

Rev. Julie Wells Blythe March 15 and 16, 2014

Life is hard. We all know it and there is no point in pretending otherwise. Life is also an incredible gift given to us so that we may experience love and joy, relationships with people and with God. Hopefully each of us has enough love and deep relationships with others and with God to get us through the sometimes inexplicably horrible events that can happen during a lifetime. This sermon is going to be tough. I am going to talk about some very painful circumstances both individual and corporate, and I hope that you will be able to stay with me until the end because within these difficult stories are examples of incredible 'Faith in the Darkness.'

On Thursday evening we had the first presentation in our Lenten Series, Journeys of the Heart. More than 60 of our members came together for dinner and a presentation by Mary Caroline Mitchell about her travels to Vietnam and Cambodia sponsored by the group, Dining for Women. Mary Caroline has always had a heart for justice and women's issues and this trip was a chance to see if her work and financial support for this group which helps women worldwide was really making a difference. She has given me permission to share with you from her presentation. For those of you who were there, I hope this 2<sup>nd</sup> hearing will bring more insights. Mary Caroline shared three inspirations. Mary Caroline's "Inspiration #2: "Many people's lives can be changed when you give them some tools."

Our dining for women group spent two days with the staff and the recipients of DFW funding given to the Empowering Foundations for Women and their Children which support single women and their families with education, training and housing. We went into the highways and byways split into 4 groups seeing women who were helped in the inner city as well as in more rural areas. Here is an overview of who we met and what we saw.

34 year old Mi has a 19 year old son that speaks very good English (do the math – she was 14 when she had her first child) and who is now a freshman at a technological polytechnic institute studying information Tech, She also has a 12 year old son. Her husband left when the youngest was 1 year old. The two boys and their mom live upstairs in [a]tiny shop. Mi would do anything so that her children could go to school. She is so proud of them. They deserve a much better life than she has had she says. She works extremely hard.

A microloan, a chair, and a hairdryer equal a better life for her and has resulted in a son who is going to college. Instead of being an assistant at a shop, she has her own shop now. [A] blow dry is .80; a perm is 3.50;

a hair cut is \$1; and nails .50. [The] average loan is \$250 - \$500. The women pay a .5% loan rate.

[A] new sewing machine and a serger gave Trang, who is 43, the opportunity to keep her son in school. Abandoned by her husband soon after the birth of her son, she had to move in with her grandparents [in] a small house already crowded with 8 other relatives. She has tripled her daily income since receiving the new equipment and paid off her loan with interest in Nov. of 2013. Most of the women we met have already paid back the first loan and some now have an additional loan. 90% of 70 women who have stayed in the program have moved out of poverty.<sup>1</sup>

In the darkness of these women's lives, faithful women have provided a way out of the systems that would keep them in poverty and they have done so one meal and one month at a time. We can be beacons of God's light and love in a world where the darkness of injustice can easily overwhelm.

If God loved us, why did he take our 31-year-old son, Barry? asks Carl Douglas in a story of faith in The Washington Post. He was the joy of our lives, the son every parent dreams of having. Successful and full of joy, he was a principled young man who influenced many lives with his honesty and zest for life.

Barry was a coastal engineer working on a small boat off the coast of Hilton Head Island, South Carolina, in March 1996. The crew was taking soil samples for a dredging project when a storm hit. A large wave overturned the boat, dumping all five occupants into the frigid water. All five perished.

Carl was angry with God, and his faith was a shambles. He read and reread the biblical account of Christ rescuing the disciples from a storm in the Sea of Galilee, and he wondered why God didn't rescue his son. He cried out to God: You have taken our son, but can't we at least have his body for a decent burial? Why are you punishing us so severely?

His family and friends prayed that Barry's remains would be found. After waiting three weeks, they scheduled a memorial service. A few hours before the service, Barry's body was miraculously found and identified. He was recovered 60 miles out to sea by fishermen on a small boat. The probability of that occurring in the ocean, says Carl, 23 days after the accident, and just hours before his memorial service, was near zero without God's intervention.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Caroline Mitchell: Presentation on her Dining For Women trip to Vietnam and Cambodia for the 2014 Lenten Series, Westminster Presbyterian Church, March 13, 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Bob Kaylor, Senior Writer, for Homileticonline and Senior Minister of the Park City United Methodist Church in Park City, Utah.

As many of you know, I have spent much of my time in my careers as a nurse and as a pastor working with families who have lost children. It doesn't matter when it happens - whether before or immediately following birth, or when your children are adults and you are in your later years. We are never, ever supposed to bury our kids. Westminster has had more than its fair share of families who have travelled this dark and painful road and who continue to. And yet they are sustained in part in their journeys by the love and support of this congregation and others who have had to make the same journey.

I had an experience with one family I walked with through this valley which I have struggled with sharing with you. I called the child's mother and together we made the decision for me to share the following with you because we believe it is so important.

I got the call early one morning that someone's child had been killed in an accident. I got up and went and spent the day with the young person's family. Mid-morning, the mother looked at me and said, "I just can't stand the thought of [my child] being scared and alone and in pain." How does one respond to that? We weren't there so we didn't know what had happened. I look at the mother and said, "Obviously we don't know but I suspect, based on my experience as a nurse and a trauma chaplain that we are going to find out that [your child] probably had a massive head injury and probably never knew what hit them." That took care of "scared" and "in pain" but I could not speak to whether or not the child had been alone. About 30 minutes later my phone rang. I didn't get it in time and really didn't feel like calling back. But given all that was happening I decided I better. So I called and said, "This is Julie Blythe, did someone from this number call me?" The voice on the other end of the line said, "Hi Julie, this is Debbie from [a place that I had worked previously.]" I responded, "Oh - hi." She said, "Are you o.k. - you sound like you are sick or something?" I said, "Well I am. I am with a family whose child was killed in an accident last night." She said, "was that the accident" [and gave the location]. I said it was. She said, "Julie, I came up on that accident and called 911. There were two cars in front of me and everyone from those cars ran to help. One of them was an EMT. Be sure to tell [the child's] mother that [her child] was never alone." I said I would and then asked why she was calling me. Deb replied, "Julie, I wasn't calling you. I was calling my husband and dialed you by mistake."

Frederick Buechner once said, "Faith in God is less apt to proceed from miracles than miracles from faith in God."<sup>3</sup> Nicodemus did not understand this - that's o.k. - there is a lot Nicodemus did not understand. But I have no doubt that he learned from Jesus and ultimately the miracles in his life that we do not know about likely proceeded from his new found faith.

The writer of Psalm 121 however, understood this completely. Those of us who have faith in our lives often call out to God in distress - the psalmist is no exception. "I lift up my eyes to the hills - from where does my help come?"<sup>4</sup> This is the cry of

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<sup>3</sup> Frederick Buechner, Wishful Thinking: A Seeker's ABC (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1973, 1993), p. 74.

<sup>4</sup> Psalm 121:1, NRSV

someone who is in pain or despair. But the writer continues and we learn what the psalmist has come to know: Our help comes from God, and that God's love and care for us is constant, it keeps us, and it is forever.

Robert W. Fisher has pointed out that this eight verse Psalm uses the word *shamar*, which means 'to keep' six times. He goes on to say, "English language translations vary in their word choice for *shamar*. Differing translations use 'to keep,' 'keeper,' 'guarding,' 'watching over' and 'preserve to describe what the word *shamar* means."<sup>5</sup>

All that means for us is that God is faithful in caring for us, in keeping us and watching over our lives. That is not to say that everything will go perfectly because of that. We have been given free will and we make decisions or have things happen to us because of other's decisions. Because God's care for us includes free will, which we were reminded last week we exercised early on in humanity's history, bad things will happen to us. But as the three stories I have told you also remind us, in the darkness of our lives, faith will see us through. It is not just our faith in God but God's faith in us that upholds and strengthens us, even when we don't have the power to lift our hands or our voices for help.

"A businessman was asked to tell what his personal faith meant to him. He reached back to his boyhood experience. He recalled walking with his father one day, having to reach up to hold on to his hand. After a while he said, I can't hold on any longer, and you'll have to hold on to me for a while. And he remembered the moment when he felt his father's hand take over."<sup>6</sup>

May each of us, in our own lives, be open to allowing our faith to reach to God in our dark times. May we trust that when we can't even do that, when the darkness has knocked us to the ground and we can hardly breathe, our faithful God, who never slumbers or sleeps, keeps and sustains us until we can stand again. Amen.

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<sup>5</sup> Feasting on the word, Year A,, Volume 2, "Psalm 121, Pastoral Perspective," Robert W. Fisher, p. 56.

<sup>6</sup> Bob Kaylor, IBID