

Trinity Church in the City of Boston

The Rev. Morgan S. Allen

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IV Easter: Psalm 23

In you, O Lord, have we taken refuge; for the sake of your name, lead us and guide us.ⁱ *Amen.*

Well, it came to pass in those days that COVID finally found me. [Dadgumit!] After the Anne Berry Bonnyman Symposium this March, I woke with what presented as a cold and a negative COVID test, but that quickly devolved into a flu and that fateful pink bar. As it happened, my wife and our son were out-of-town, leaving only our teenaged daughter and I to face the virus. Ginna was a loyal nurse, encourager, and chief-cook-and-bottle-washer, and I faithfully stayed in my bedroom to keep her healthy. Confined and feeling crummy, I watched more television programs during those two weeks than in all this decade combined.ⁱⁱ

Aiming for a connection with my caregiver, my binging included *The Walking Dead*, which has lingered on Ginna's "Recently Watched" list for most of this school year. Though I had tried the American Movie Channel's long-running series some years back,ⁱⁱⁱ I couldn't remember where I left off. So, during those solitary evenings last month ... while I was all by my lonesome in my room ... weakened and with no easy escape if attacked by a throng of flesh-eaters ... I started from Episode 1, Season 1. As it turns out, this was not a strategy for restful sleep!^{iv}

The series begins in a small Georgia town, with the protagonist, Rick Grimes, awaking from a coma in his hospital room, only to discover that he is alone in the building ... you know, save for a few dozen, hungry zombies. He soon learns from a (still living-living) neighbor that the Center for Disease Control in nearby Atlanta might have found a solution to the "Walkers," as the program names the monsters, and so he sets out for the city. The series then chronicles his and his cohort's adventures and struggles for survival.

In an early episode,^v Edwin Jenner, a doctor at the CDC, encourages Rick and his group to stay in the government complex while it self-destructs: "You should have left well-enough alone," Dr. Jenner denounces their efforts. "You know what's out there: a short, brutal life, and an agonizing death ... Wouldn't it be kinder – [wouldn't it be] more compassionate – to hold your loved ones and [just] wait for the clock to run down?"

In a meaningful exchange, Rick replies defiantly, "I have [kept] hope *alive!*"

"[But] there is no hope!" the physician decries.

"There is *always* hope," Rick responds, forcefully. "Maybe it won't be you. And maybe it won't be here. But somebody, somewhere ..."

"What part of 'everything is gone' do you not understand? ... This is what takes us down. This is our extinction event."

“All we want is a *choice*,” Rick pleads, “a *chance*. “Let us keep trying as long as we can.”

...There is *always* hope.

While neither as depressing (despite this scene) nor as erudite, *The Walking Dead* resembles Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*^{vi} in its dramatization of fundamental, existential questions in a pilgrimage through impossible odds and unimaginably difficult circumstances. These works ask: What is the meaning of life? Is hope reasonable? What is our responsibility to one another? How do we keep going? Where is God in all of this?

In the case of *The Walking Dead*, archetypal characters explore these questions. There is The Leader; The Sage; The Trouble-maker; The Tough; The Wife; The Child; The Moral Authority ... and their engagements with one another often represent different philosophies in agreement or in argument, as in this exchange between Dr. Jenner, a fatalist, and Rick, an idealist: while Dr. Jenner has conceded the inevitability of his own death and, therefore, readies to seek it sooner, hope endures for Rick: as long as there is *any* chance for life, then *there is a chance*, and he will pursue that possibility with all he has, for himself and for his family.

Apocalyptic tales like *The Road* or *The Walking Dead* beg of us the question, “What would *you* do?” *What would you do* if the world as you know it suddenly ended? What would you do if vandals or Lakers fans ... Republicans or Democrats ... assumed absolute control and disintegrated the structures of civilization?

By their desperation, these stories also expose the vanity of our priorities and pastimes, challenge our entitlements and our assumptions; more than staying up too late [and clicking that “Next Episode” button] made me fearful of “Walkers” breaking down my door, the show challenged me to consider the reason and the meaning of my identities as father and son, husband and priest – *as a person* – to consider: am I doing what I think I’m doing? Where is God in the life that I am living? Do God’s hopes reach me?

These prompts, of course, are not peculiar either to graphic novels or Nyquil-infused midnights. The questions are as old as birth and death and our complicated lives between. Our scriptures make a run at them, over and over and over again, from the story of creation to Revelation’s vision of “that heavenly city, Jerusalem,” to this morning’s Twenty-third Psalm.

Each year on this Fourth Sunday of Easter, we read a Gospel lesson concerning Jesus as the Good Shepherd; we pray a collect identifying him in that image; and we pray the Twenty-third Psalm, today singing its words as “The King of Love, my shepherd is.”

Psalm 23 probes existential questions, and its verse voices defiance and seeks meaning in a grim hour. Its words are those spoken *in* the harrowing valley, along a pilgrimage of impossible odds:

Dear God, your rod and your staff, even now they comfort me ... as when we enjoyed those seasons of green pastures, you, O Lord, are always my shepherd. The Psalmist entreats, though my enemies press me on all sides, you share a table with me... you anoint my wounds, you surround me with goodness and mercy ... therefore, strengthen my body, strengthen my spirit, strengthen me for the struggle ahead.

The Psalm is an urgent plea: a desperate prayer for *resilience*.

Significantly, the psalm makes no promise against the rise of either “Walkers” or flesh-eating politicians, and its verse is not a talisman to prolong our mortal life for as long as we might choose. Notably, neither does the Easter Gospel make these promises. For the disciples and for the carpenter himself, Jesus’ mortal life ends *apocalyptically*. God’s promise – the Good Shepherd’s promise – is that no matter what confronts us or those we love, no Good Friday will have the last word, for God *will stay at table with us* – companionship at Calvary and “in the midst of our enemies,” upon the Cross and “through the valley of the shadow of death.”

See, ours is the of “unchangeable power and eternal light,” abiding always and urging us to “see and know that things which were cast down are being raised up, and things which had grown old are being made new,” and as we prayed during the Easter Vigil, “that all things are being brought to their perfection by him through whom all things were made ... Jesus Christ, our Lord.”^{vii}

These shepherd verses, this Good Shepherd Sunday, and our Easter story, encourage us to bring our faith to bear on the most demanding, most fundamental questions of existence – not to shy away, but *to lean in*. Thanks be to God the Psalmist neither resolves all life’s tensions, discourages our curiosity, nor insults our lived and felt experiences with solutions too simple to be believed! Instead, the Shepherd Psalm and Jesus’ Passion promise God’s unceasing presence with us and with the whole world.

With that reassurance, we may consent faithfully to the struggle, to grapple honestly with our mortality and an injured world... to wonder, to marvel, to explore: whether playfully, as in several nights of Netflix binging, or gravely, when standing amidst and against the realities of disease, injustice, and even war. While we know that – inevitably – we will meet seasons of shadow, by our struggle for meaning and understanding, we seek to recognize our seasons of still water and to live gratefully in our green pastures.

For as feeds the heart of Rick Grimes and the unnamed father in *The Road*, the Psalmist declares God’s loving companionship as the engine of our existence. Thereby we do not seek survival as an end in and of itself, but as a means for reaching the whole cosmos’ Easter origin, Easter organization, and Easter fulfillment – the cosmos created by Love, in Love, and for Love.

We pray with gladness and singleness of heart.

Amen.

ⁱ From Psalm 31.

ⁱⁱ Not even close, really.

ⁱⁱⁱ I stopped watching because it was too violent. I again found it too violent for me.

^{iv} I did not know whether my night sweats were zombie- or virus-inspired.

^v “TS-19.” *The Walking Dead*, written by Frank Darabont, Robert Kirkman, and Tony Moore, directed by Guy Ferland, American Movie Channel, 2010.

^{vi} The most brutal book I’ve ever read; it pulled my heart out of my chest and set it in my lap.

^{vii} From “Easter Vigil,” *The Book of Common Prayer* (1979), p. 291, among other places.