

11/15/15 (Emanuel UCC)

Psalm 16 Protect me, O God, for in you I take refuge. ²I say to the LORD, “You are my Lord; I have no good apart from you.” ³As for the holy ones in the land, they are the noble, in whom is all my delight. ⁴Those who choose another god multiply their sorrows; their drink offerings of blood I will not pour out or take their names upon my lips. ⁵The LORD is my chosen portion and my cup; you hold my lot. ⁶The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; I have a goodly heritage. ⁷I bless the LORD who gives me counsel; in the night also my heart instructs me. ⁸I keep the LORD always before me; because he is at my right hand, I shall not be moved. ⁹Therefore my heart is glad, and my soul rejoices; my body also rests secure. ¹⁰For you do not give me up to Sheol, or let your faithful one see the Pit. ¹¹You show me the path of life. In your presence there is fullness of joy; in your right hand are pleasures forevermore.

(After reading Mark 13:1-8) Try to imagine the power of the Jewish Temple to draw wonder and awe from the disciples. It took 80 years to build—as the disciples visited that day there were still 30 years to go, and it was still glorious! It represented their national identity, their symbol of pride, their security blanket. We have no Temple, but we have the world’s strongest economy, and the world’s strongest military...perhaps that’s *our* security blanket, our “Temple”.

But imagine then, hearing Jesus say: *all this is about to go away*. Little did they know that after being build for 80 years it would stand for only 7 years--& then it would be gone. But they want to know: “when will this happen, and what sign will tip us off?” In other words: Who threatens us?

We hear messages of fear too...about the economy, terrorism, immigration, ISIS...and now “Paris”. What’s your reaction—fear, anger? Our culture tells us to fear: Be afraid of *this*, while our politicians warn us: be afraid of *them*. Is that unsettling?

I wanted to focus on Psalm 16, and I will. It’s a kind of security blanket; a “feel good” psalm. But you’d be surprised at how difficult it is to preach this, *this week*. It begins with: “**Protect me; I want a refuge.**” Safety and refuge are perfectly natural concerns. There are no guarantees. This week reminds us: we’re part of a human community; no matter who or where, when others suffer, they are our neighbors, and we can’t turn away from their suffering. On 9/11, I believe it was the French who I first heard saying, “We are all Americans tonight.” And it is not only Paris that suffers: we grieve for Beirut, for Syria, for Milwaukee...and we cannot turn away.

But the psalm says: neither can we turn away from God's good gifts. Turning off the news will not help us. Turning on the Good News of God's love in Christ...will. Unlike the disciples, this writer's not losing sleep. Not because he has an answer to the disciple's question. Instead, he says, it's your question that's the problem.

This psalm is a "Sabbath" of sorts; it seems designed for a day to rest, to breathe, to refresh, especially as the you-know-what-holiday is about to engulf us. And especially after Paris. This psalm invites us to stop; look around; ask not just: *What threatens me*; but *what has blessed me*? That's counterintuitive. Crazy even, especially at a time like this. Or is it? I give this witness: it is not crazy.

For example: "**Holy ones...the noble, in whom is...delight:**" I am blessed with *delightful* people—precious, irreplaceable, delightful new friends, in my life. You at Emanuel are among the "**noble**" in my life, a gifted, talented family. In our new family of fellow marchers and protesters and advocates, Beth and I find more "**noble ones**", delightful people who lead us by example. Our annual gathering for family camp is a true family. For them, for you, I give thanks to God.

My favorite line in the psalm is "**The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places:**" To the Jewish writer and readers, this language describes the promised land—a gift from God. Think of the places that matter to you: your home, or the home of a loved on with whom you gather at Christmas; this church; where you work, or where you get away, a trail, a corner at the library; along Lake Michigan: Which of these feed your soul? Places are important, and God graciously provides *places* that feed us spiritually.

And there are two words we don't often think are particularly spiritual: "**pleasure,**" or our "**bodies**". Consider the beauty of creation, or music, or art. Or the Biblical images of feasting, or water turning into wine. How about the Song of Solomon? Don't you think God wills pleasure for us? Find pleasure responsibly? Yes. In moderation? Of course. But do not insult God by a false spirituality that fears God's good gifts. A wise saint once said: "We should not be ashamed to enjoy what God was not ashamed to create."

Did you notice how personal this writer's faith is? "**I keep the LORD always before me; In your presence there is fullness of joy; I have no good apart from you.**" Frankly, we're not comfortable with an overly-personal relationship with God. We often prefer our connection to God to be...cordial, but not too close, with careful boundaries. But here we see an intimacy, a true

relationship, of trust and gratitude. To the writer, and we can learn from him—after all, it's reflected in our name as “Emanuel” Church—God, as simply God-With-Us, is God's best, most precious, inexhaustible, priceless gift. There lies the source of our hope, our refuge, our safety: in the bond we have been given with our Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer. We are who we are and where we are, are gifts to us because of Whose we are. This text is not so much a theological statement as it is a love song, between a loving and generous God, and a grateful child of God who openly affirms: When I consider the people ...places... pleasures I have—even in pain or uncertainty: I am blessed!

In no way do I suggest that we cover our ears or close our eyes to the horrors that happen in Paris, in Syria, or in our own city. On the contrary: followers of Jesus are called to be the first who walk into the heart of the horror and suffering and injustice, laying down our lives in service to others. But I also claim that this walk with God has a defiantly joyful streak that seems to make no sense, and a peace that is beyond logic or understanding. CS Lewis described the first Christians as people who were “always in trouble and absurdly happy.”

“You show me the path of life...” How did we come to have the life we have? Is it our accomplishment, or is it a gift? Contrary to the myth we're taught in our individualistic culture, we are not self-made; we did not teach our own teachers or build our schools; we did not pave our highways or string our own power lines; we certainly did not birth ourselves. We enter the world in a posture of indebtedness to others, and that never changes. Life is a blessing we receive, and God's love and God's goodness comes to us on its way to someone else.

What difference might it make if we approached life not from a posture of protecting what we think is ours, but from a stance of humble gratitude? What if we heard the anguish of those grieve today in Paris, or the shouts of anger from those oppressed and unjustly treated, the poor and marginalized...and without running away from them, or rushing to judge them, we stood alongside them, learned from them, sought justice with them, and found them to be God's glorious ones in whom there is genuine delight?

In prosperity or suffering, we are blessed beyond imagining. Part of our Christian witness is simply our attitude: not anxious, not restless, not whining, not striving; but rather, being confident no matter what, and at peace. In a fear-filled world, we have no need to fear. Out of the abundance we receive from God in the midst of our troubled world, we can be happy—imperfectly perhaps, but genuinely, happy, free to risk, to go, to give, to follow the risen Christ into the world's pain, because *nothing* can separate us from the love of God.

