

May 14, 2023
“God of Advocacy”
Psalm 66:8-20 / John 14:15-21
Pastor Tim Emmett-Rardin

“Re-examine all you have been told. Dismiss what insults your soul.”

That’s advice from none other than Walt Whitman – advice that invites a deeper, the deepest, reflection about what we believe, what informs our personal morality, our ethics, our philosophy, our theology, our spiritual center.

And this morning, it’s advice that resonates for me when reading something like this passage from the Psalms that Gerry just read for us.

In it, the Psalmist describes a journey of profound tribulation and transformation.

The translation from Eugene Peterson’s “The Message” goes like this: “God trained us first, passed us like silver through refining fires, brought us into hardscrabble country, pushed us to our very limit, road-tested us inside and out, took us to hell and back; finally God brought us to this well-watered place.”

The New Revised Standard Version says, “For you, O God, have tested us; you have tried us as silver is tried. You brought us into the net; you laid burdens on our backs; you let people ride over our heads; we went through fire and through water; yet you have brought us out to a spacious place.”

You can feel the intensity of the journey. You can feel what the author has been through, and so appreciate all the more how it feels to arrive at a “well-watered place.” A “spacious place.” You likely know what that feels like yourselves.

And what the author has been through, at the very least, is the wilderness, the Israelite journey from enslavement in Egypt and eventually to the promised land.

Backing up a bit to verses 5 and 6, again from the New Revised Standard Version, we hear this: “Come and see what God has done: God is awesome in God’s deed among mortals. God turned the sea into dry land; they passed through the river on foot.” That, of course, is Moses and the miraculous parting of the sea.

And from "The Message" we hear: "Bless our God, O peoples! Give God a thunderous welcome! Didn't God set us on the road to life? Didn't God keep us out of the ditch?"

I can't argue with the author's experience of trial and tribulation. Suffering. Like so many of the psalms, this is a prayer – a heart-felt offering of praise and thanksgiving for a God who led them through.

I can't argue with the author's experience, but back to Whitman's advice, I do argue with the author's understanding of God's role in that experience. I do argue with the underlying theology because, well, it "insults my soul."

I very much believe in the God, the Divine Presence, who journeys with us through life's trials. Through what life throws at us, unpredictable as it is – including, of course, what we as a people so often throw at each other.

I do not believe, I will not believe, I CANNOT believe, that it is God who orchestrates those trials. I cannot believe in a God who deliberately tries and trains us up, pushing us to our limits, laying burdens on our backs, taking us through fire and water, to hell and back.

Back, YES. Hell, NO.

Such a testing, mad-scientist God IS more or less the God I was told about growing up in the church. A forgiving God, for sure, but an all-powerful, almighty, manipulative and judgmental God.

"Re-examine all you have been told," Whitman says. "Dismiss what insults your soul."

And so I have long since dismissed that God, because that God insults my soul. I can't get with that God.

I get the appeal, when life is hell or has been hell, when life spins out of our control; I get the theological appeal of a God who is in control of everything – hell AND heaven – when we are not. Which, you know, is most of the time.

There is some comfort in that theology, to be sure. There is some comfort in a theology where everything – including, then, all manner of human cruelty and suffering – falls within the reach of God's so-called "will."

There is some comfort in a theology that provides a pre-ordained purpose for everything – including, then, for all manner of human cruelty and suffering.

But it's a theology with a seriously slippery slope. It's a theology that serves to justify such cruelty and suffering, to explain it away as some kind of divine mystery or mandate. But that itself is cruel. The theology is cruel. And it absolves us of any responsibility. Either for the hell that is, or for the heaven that may yet be.

And it's a theology, I believe, ultimately rooted in our own discomfort with uncertainty. In the anxiety that comes from not being in control.

Theologically speaking, I cannot reconcile such a God with the God of Love. The God I know, who is Love itself, would not do that. Would not PLAY us. TEST us. TRY us, to see what we're made of, or to refine us like silver, or to make us into something or someone else.

God is not the One who puts us through hell; God is the One who GETS us through hell; who journeys with us through hell. The One who offers and invites us to heaven on earth.

The One who created abundance and so longs for us to know and experience abundance in our lives. And in our shared life together.

"Re-examine all you have been told. Dismiss what insults your soul." And so embrace what compliments your soul, nourishes your soul.

The God I know is about the well being of our very souls. And the well being of Creation.

Some have argued, and do argue – especially within the rigid confines of conservative Christian teaching and doctrine – that to apply Whitman's advice is to assert that anything goes. That is the primary critique, as I understand it, of so-called "progressive" Christian theology. Of progressive Christian churches.

Believe whatever you want. Do whatever you want.

But Whitman's advice is not without standard. What is good for your soul, deep down?
What is good for honoring, LOVING, the Divine within you?

Because when you do that, you not only end up honoring and loving yourself more fully,
you cannot help but more fully honor and love others. Each other. Love begets love.

Love is the standard. And that's backed up by our reading from John.

"If you love me, you will keep my commandments." But understand that the
commandments are not about following a bunch of rules. They're not about orthodoxy,
but orthopraxy. They're about cultivating and maintaining a community rooted in love.

Who cares WHAT you believe? God cares about how you live and love, and how we
live and love together in concert with Creation. Interconnected.

William Sloane Coffin puts it like this: "Rules at best are signposts, never hitching posts.
Personally I doubt there is such a thing as a Christian rule. There are probably only acts
that are more or less Christian depending on the motives prompting them. ... if we exalt
freedom as Christians, we must remember that freedom is grounded in love."

And he goes on, in the spirit of Whitman's advice, to say this: "Though setting no outer
rules, love exacts much from within. As Paul Ramsay says, 'If everything is permitted
which Christian love permits, everything is demanded which Christian love requires.' So
let others say, 'Anything goes.' The Christian asks, 'What does love require?'"

The Christian asks, the human asks, "What does LOVE require? What loves your soul?"

These are the questions God asks, the answers to which God advocates on our behalf.
We hear in John Jesus' appeal to the God of advocacy.

"And I will ask God, and God will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever.
This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees nor
knows the Spirit. You know the Spirit, because the Spirit abides with you, and the Spirit
will be in you. I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you.

In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live."

God is not the source of our trials, friends. God is not the judge. God is the defense attorney, the public defender.

And not – PLEASE hear this! – NOT because we are perpetually, hopelessly guilty, as traditional Christian teaching also insists. But because we are perpetually, hope-FULLY loved. And called to deeper love.

God does not leave us alone. God, Jesus reminds us, is our Advocate.

Where Jesus is one – and NOT the only one – who shows us who God is, God with us in the flesh, Emmanuel, the Spirit is God ever with us and within us.

The One in whom we live and move and have our being, and who lives and moves and has being in us.

The One who abides within and around us. The One who is ALWAYS, forever, on our side. The One who, as Eugene Peterson's translation puts it, comes "on the double" when hearing our prayers. The One who stays with us, "loyal in God's love." The One who sets us, again and again and again, on the road to life.

We are bound together in love toward life made new – within ourselves and our souls, and with God and each other. "Because I live, you also will live."

God does not test or judge; God advocates. Defends. Supports. Champions. Promotes. Connects and re-connects. God is not the judge but the loving Advocate who always has our backs against the judgments of the world. That we might find our way back – individually and collective – to Love. To that which compliments and nourishes and loves our very souls. And to that which complements and nourishes life! Life full and whole and abundant.

May we offer our praise and thanks to THAT God.

May it be so.