

PSALM 23

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters, he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake. 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. 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.

JOHN 3:16-21

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgement, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.

FROM DARKNESS TO LIGHT: PART I

WHO IS WINNING?

Psalm 23
John 3:16-21

When we are born into this world, it does not take us long to understand on some primitive level that pain is going to be a significant part of the experience. Not only have we

just been squeezed through a very tight birth canal, but we were just ejected from a warm, comfortable and safe environment where all of our needs were met without us having to lift a finger on our own behalf. And that trauma, of course, was the just the beginning. And guys, I am not even going to mention circumcision! Indeed, being birthed is the Adam and Eve equivalent of being evicted from the Garden leaving them to face not only the hardship of human existence, but the evil others would inflict upon them. Because in theological terms, sin was now unleashed and its power became a threat to every individual who was subsequently born into the world. Mythologically, the forces of good have been in mortal combat with the forces of evil since the beginning.

And on how many levels is this conflict played out? You can start at the top and characterize it as God's never-ending competition with Satan for the fidelity of the citizens of planet Earth. And I suppose the next level of combat would occur between the rulers and peoples of powerful nations. While the United States is disparaged as the Great Satan by the leaders of Iran, American politicians paint the Iranians as purveyors of evil across the Middle East. And then there is the name calling between "Little Rocket Man" and the "Mad Tweeter". It is obviously the rock upon which you stand that determines whom you see as evil and whom you perceive as good. No one would place the mantel of "evil" around their own necks. Even an ISIS fighter would claim he is glorifying Allah by cutting your throat.

Reduce it another step and do we even have to mention the chasm between the Donkeys and the Elephants, the privileged and the poor, the legals and the illegals...the list is endless. And if we boil it down to the individual level, we realize that we too face the struggle between loving and hating, between good and evil urges within our very own selves. Yes, the conflict is universal and no one is exempt. So the question becomes: Who is winning?

From the biblical perspective, the resurrection set the stage for the final contest for the hearts and souls of humanity. God gave it all up with the supreme sacrifice of His only Son. And while I prefer gender neutral terms when referring to the Deity, the use of male terminology

is appropriate in this context since in those days and in that culture, a male progeny was immensely more valued than female. It all had to do with the passing down one's name and one's property. It was considered a wife's sacred duty to produce a son and she could legally be set aside if she did not do so. With this in mind, let us then return to our scripture: *For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.* Now consider the power of that statement for John's readers! It was the declaration of a victory lap in the ultimate struggle between good and evil.

You would think this all would be very comforting *ala* Psalm 23: *The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads beside still waters, he restores my soul.* But I am not sure that we are experiencing that peace of mind. Why not?

Perhaps it is because in a host of different ways, we feel that evil is winning. Where is *the light that has come into the world?* We see chaos; we see terrorist attacks; we see school shootings; hatred, racism and discrimination; we see disease; we see corruption; we see fires, floods and earthquakes. The news gets more disturbing each day. Sometimes it seems as if we are catapulting toward self-annihilation.

A couple of months ago when Rob Porter, one of Trump's closest advisors who was fired for allegedly abusing his two ex-wives, the issue of security clearance became the topic du jour of much discussion. During the media discourse, a top advisor in national security for former President George W. Bush appeared on a panel of one of the national news shows. In expressing his grave concern over aides in the White House having access to daily intelligence briefings without full security clearance, he explained that some of the information presented would "make your hair stand on end." He went on to emphasize how sensitive these briefings are and how important it is to keep the details secret from the American people because they

would “scare us to death.” Again I ask, Which side is winning?

How do we avoid the cynicism and hopelessness over the human condition that is expressed in Salman Rushdie’s novel, *THE GOLDEN HOUSE*? The first-person protagonist is recalling his dumb luck in even being alive when a couple of years previously both of his parents had been killed in an automobile accident. At the last minute, he had declined to go out with them for a libation. *So I did not get into my parents’ car, and because of that I am alive today. Life and death are both meaningless. They happen or don’t happen for reasons that have no weight, from which you learn nothing. There is no wisdom in the world. We are all fortune’s fools. Here is the earth and it is so beautiful and we are so lucky to be here with one another and we are so stupid and what happens to us is so stupid and we don’t deserve our stupid luck.*

Back in my umpiring years, one of my favorite partners shared with me a story from his life’s journey when I asked him why he never wore a wrist watch (many of our tournament games had time limits so it was incumbent upon us to keep track of that). And he told me that after he had been drafted into the Army to serve in Viet Nam, he was scheduled to catch a flight in Indianapolis to be deployed. He overslept and arrived at the airport just after the plane had departed. It crashed, killing everyone on board. And since that time, he had never worn a watch.

Am I not raising existential issues that all of us struggle with from time to time in our lives? Does life have a purpose beyond procreation? How are we doing in the conflict between good and evil? And in this post resurrection period between Easter and Pentecost, what difference is the resurrection making in the world and in our personal lives? These are important questions which have everything to do with our faith and the difference our faith makes in the choices we make and how we conduct ourselves in the world. And it will ultimately affect our peace of mind and the state of inner joy we seek. We are not playing around here. Receiving the gift of life is serious stuff—I don’t care what you believe about it. We do not live in vacuums; exercising our options has consequences. And John makes that

perfectly clear at the end of our scripture: *And this is the judgement, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For those who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.*

For whose benefit did God sacrifice His Only Son? Obviously for ours. Why? Because God loves the world. No other reason. And why do we seek the light and love as a response? Because in the words of author Paulo Coelho: *To love abundantly is to live abundantly. To love forever is to live forever. Eternal life is coupled with Love. Why do we want to live forever? Because we want to live another day with this person by our side. Because we want to keep going with someone who deserves our Love, and who knows how to love us as we think we deserve to be loved. Because living is loving. Even Love for a pet...can justify the life of a human being. If he no longer has this bond of Love in his life, any reason to keep on living also disappears.*

The resurrection unfetters us to live our lives with the freedom to give expression to our love in whatever way is best suited to us. It is our purpose. It is our reason for being here. And when we embrace that, then we no longer have to ask, Who is winning? Because then we will know: We are!

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