

“Walking in Shadows” – Good Shepherd Sunday (April 26, 2015)

Late in the summer of 2003 I responded with an engine and crew to the largest residential fire I had seen (and would ever see) during my time on the Amherst Fire Department in Western Massachusetts. The fire was in a neighboring town that was served by a volunteer fire department, which had called Amherst for mutual aid.

A retiree boiling syrup for her hummingbird feeder wandered away from the pot. The pot boiled over, spilling onto the burner. The sugar in the syrup ignited immediately and the wall behind the stove quickly caught fire.

By the time my engine made it to the Granby Heights housing units, seven townhomes had already burned and two more were threatened by the flames, which had travelled up into the attic – a crawlspace shared by all of the homes.

In alternating shifts, six crews fought the blaze while six crews sat in the rehab area set up by the local Red Cross. They each rotated in and out. Even without the fire it was a balmy day – the temperature hovering around 95 degrees. Over half the fire fighters were pulled from their crews and treated for dehydration during the six hours we remained on scene.

Back and forth, in and out, I stayed on rotation through the day and eventually found myself on the final crew to enter the burned-out units one last time. Our assignment: to go up to the second floor – now exposed to the sun because the roof had burned away – and extinguish any smoldering areas that remained.

It was a great crew of fire fighters. Some of them had been through academy with me two summers before. Our officer, Kevin, basically raised me as a green recruit. What I knew about fire fighting, I knew because of him. Beyond what is often referred to as the ‘brotherhood’ of fire fighters, my bond with Kevin was truly familial.

He and I and two others worked our way through the second floor of the remaining units and hit hot spots with quick bursts from the hose line. Once our task was complete Kevin suggested we walk back through and make sure all of the hoses, axes, pike polls, and other equipment were recovered from the building and returned to their respective trucks. The four of us walked through the exposed rooms one final time, the sun still beating down on us from above, the residual heat still radiating up from below. We were all exhausted. Our legs leaded and our necks stiff from the weight of our turn-out gear and self-contained breathing tanks.

Nearing the end of the last unit, Kevin pointed across a room to an axe propped up in one of the corners.

“Hold on,” he said to me, “I’ll go grab that.”

I watched him walk across the room, pick up the axe and turn back around. He was saying something; I can’t remember what. I don’t remember a particular sound. There wasn’t a crash or a crack. Just a look on his face. Surprise. Perhaps horror. One moment he was walking toward me talking idly, and the next he was falling through the floor.

He stopped at his waist, his lower half dangling above the dining room below us.

For the briefest of instants my feet wouldn’t budge. Training hones your reflexes, but I think at a base level, survival instincts conflict with that training. Especially when exhaustion has set in. I took two big steps and lunged for him. I grabbed the shoulder straps of his breathing apparatus, looked him in the eyes and said, “I’ve got you, Kevin.”

“I’ve got you, Kevin... I’ve got you.”

At that moment, despite my spoken reassurance, I existed in a valley of shadows. As I pulled him free, images of what could have been twisted and turned in a macabre dance – an accident of the imagination fueled by dehydration. It’s not the Valley of *Death*, it’s the valley of

the Shadow of Death – those shadowy moments in life we recognize our mortality is a reality – when shadows creep toward us and ever so briefly blot out the light. These aren't necessarily moments when we're faced with the actuality of death, but moments when we're struck by the revelation of our own human frailty.

Sometimes it's a moment we live in the shadow of something that could have been. For some it's an instant – the shadow of a passing cloud on a windy day. For others it's lingering – a lurking phantom. And for others, the shadows are insistent, consuming – in fact, no longer shadows, but black holes so dense they indeed absorb any and all light that remains around them.

Our task, inspired by our psalm today, isn't to be mere shepherds, but to be shepherds of the *light*. We've all murmured those words known to many of us through the King James translation, "Lo though I walk through the valley of the Shadow of Death, I will fear no evil..." *I will fear no evil* – though we tend to murmur these words those times we are indeed *most* afraid. Right?

We make every effort to remember Barbara Brown Taylor standing in this pulpit a year or so ago reminding us that there cannot be shadows without light to frame them. When we see shadows, we should be reminded of the light that helps create them and to be shepherds of that light for those who have difficulty gaining perspective on their own.

Having experienced our own shadows, we might remember that verse in Amazing Grace...

*When we've been there ten thousand years
Bright shining as the sun
We've no less days to sing God's praise
Than when we'd first begun...*

“When *we’d* been there ten thousand years, bright shining as the sun...”

It is *we* who are shining – *we* who are shepherds of that light. Oftentimes the best shepherds are those who have been lost before. The disorientation of unfamiliar territory helps prepare one for future disorientation. I think it helps us empathize with those who, themselves, experience disorientation as the result of darkened paths.

||

My paternal grandparents named my dad ‘Kenneth’ after two people. His Uncle Kenneth was a landscaper who – while pruning rose bushes – was pricked by a thorn. Some small bit of the thorn broke off and entered his blood stream, making its way into his heart and eventually killing him. My dad’s other namesake was his half-brother – the second youngest of his siblings (only older than my father). The day this brother, Kenneth, was being deployed by the Navy for World War II, he went to help a young girl under a tree in a thunderstorm. Lightning struck the tree and killed my dad’s brother and the little girl.

My dad grew up hearing these stories of his two namesakes, their names spoken with reverence. As a result of the family’s own oral tradition, the uncle and brother became titans. My dad lived in their shadows.

These were not only shadows cast by their magnitude, but also the confounding shadows left by their deaths at very young ages. As a child, he eventually came to believe that he, too, would suffer an untimely fate. He lived with this foreboding reality hovering over his shoulder for much of his young life.

But things change. Sometimes we learn to channel our fears into opportunities for deep empathy. Carl Jung writes, “Knowing your own darkness is the best method for dealing with the darkneses of other people.”

My experience over the past 39 years is that my dad is a shepherd of light who knows what it means to walk in the valley of the shadow of death.

He explained all of this business about his namesakes to me as the two of us drove across the country a few years back. He was quiet at intermittent moments as he tried to put all of the pieces together for me – as if he was talking about all of this for the first time aloud.

I remember him saying very slowly, “You know, I really believed I would never live to see thirty...I lived with that fear my whole life. Then I *turned* thirty and everything changed.”

“What changed?” I asked.

“You were born,” he responded.

I guess sometimes we get to be shepherds of the light, and we don’t even realize we’ve done anything at all. Just by *being* we crack open the shadowed realm, and tendrils of light break in.

This conversation with my dad on our cross-country trip became a lens through which I was able to look back on life with him. I was able to find clarity in moments that required this refracted light in order to illuminate their significance.

My maternal grandfather died when I was very young. After years of living alone, my grandmother eventually met a man who she *tolerated* enough to become close friends with. His name was Jack.

Jack was a gentle soul, who – I believe – softened my grandmother during their time together. Though, given even the slightest opportunity, she could produce a lengthy list of Jack’s faults. He was a blessing in her life.

Eventually Jack developed a chronic ailment that left him debilitated and weakened by pain. Near the end of his life, we visited him at his small home. I was only eight or nine at the

time, but I remember it was the middle of the day when we arrived and all of the curtains were drawn. It was very dark inside. Jack was in bed, surrounded by dark shadows. He couldn't get up or even move, so we sat with him for a bit, and eventually said our goodbyes and moved back toward the front door.

As I turned to go, I remember hearing my dad ask, "Jack, do you want me to pray with you."

I looked back and saw my dad's hand on Jack's shoulder. It was the first time I remember being aware of my dad's life outside of our family. He was a pastor, after all; this is what he did.

As my mom encouraged me to leave Jack's darkened bedroom, I remember hearing Jack begin to sob and whisper, "Yes, that would be nice."

Just before I went into the hallway, I heard my dad begin to pray. The prayer was familiar, but sounded a little odd to me at the time. I didn't quite know why.

"The Lord is *our* shepherd; we shall not want.
God maketh us to lie down in green pastures: and leadeth us beside the still waters.
God restoreth our souls: and leadeth us in the paths of righteousness..."

By changing the 'I' to 'we,' my dad was making it clear: Jack wasn't alone. My dad was with him on this journey. Even in the shadows.

"Yea, though *we* walk through the valley of the shadow of death, we will fear no evil: for thou art with us; thy rod and thy staff they comfort us.
Thou preparest a table before us in the presence of our enemies: thou anointest our heads with oil; our cup runneth over.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow us all the days of our life: and we will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever."

These were words of someone who had spent time in shadows – perhaps shadows of a different kind, but shadows that still whispered of some potential reality.

Sometimes being shepherds requires *doing*, and sometimes it requires *being* – being present, being aware.

Sometimes our mere presence brings a light that we never even knew we possessed. Sometimes we cast off our own concerns and grab a friend by the shoulder straps, saying, “I’ve got you. I’ve got you.”

Being shepherds of light for those walking in dark places is a call to a kind of ministry that happens outside of this sanctuary. It’s a ministry we all participate in. The suggested hymn for Good Shepherd Sunday, *God the Spirit, Guide and Guardian*, is also the traditional hymn sung for ordination and installation services for new pastors. We sing it this morning as a reminder of our universal call to love one another, and to be good shepherds of the light.

In these words we seek the inspiration to imagine a brighter world, and the ongoing strength to say to one another, “I’ve got you, friend. I’ve got you.”

May that continue to be so.