

“But for the grace of God, go I”

Psalm 124

If it had not been the Lord who was on our side
— let Israel now say —
if it had not been the Lord who was on our side,
when our enemies attacked us,
then they would have swallowed us up alive,
when their anger was kindled against us;
then the flood would have swept us away,
the torrent would have gone over us;
then over us would have gone
the raging waters.

Blessed be the Lord,
who has not given us
as prey to their teeth.
We have escaped like a bird
from the snare of the fowlers;
the snare is broken,
and we have escaped.

Our help is in the name of the Lord,
who made heaven and earth.



“But for the grace of God, go I.”

Has anyone ever heard someone say that? “But for the grace of God, go I.”

It’s another way of saying what the pilgrims of Israel are saying in our Psalm reading for today. If it had not been for the Lord who was for us...we wouldn’t have survived. But for the grace of God, we would have experienced the same terrible fate that befell

our peers. Or in other words, *if it weren't for the grace and mercy of the Lord, it very well could have been me.*

I'm used to feeling this way every day of my life.

Much has been said and written about the impact of Michael Brown's death and the demonstrations that have followed in Ferguson, MO and across the nation. As I watched the story unfold and tried to come to grips with my own feelings about it, I kept hearing that same refrain:

If it had not been for the Lord who was with me...and my husband, and my brother, and my nephew...

*But for the grace of God, it could have been me. It could have been **any** of us.*

And it's truly heartbreaking. In fact, that doesn't even begin to describe the feeling of knowing that you may not be thought of as fully human, but rather a walking list of pathologies: "at-risk" "ghetto" "dangerous" "untrustworthy" "poor"...

Most young people growing up in black households know this. Typically are a child when you learn the rules, because if you don't, you may pay for it with your life.

I learned the rules when I was a little girl, but my husband did not. Jacob wasn't raised in the United States, so when he moved here a year ago, I knew that I had to teach him immediately. His survival depended on it.

I'll never forget we were in an electronics store a week or two after Jacob moved here, shopping for a cell phone cover. We entered the store and I asked him to get a cart. He asked, what for since we were only in there to buy one, small item that we could easily carry in our hands. "That's your first mistake," I told him, "it doesn't matter if you need a cart or not. Carts show people that you are intending to make a purchase." "But we are making a purchase," Jacob said, "We don't need to push around this big heavy cart. Let's just go get the cover and be done with it." "It's not about what *we* need," I said, "it's about what *they* need to feel secure. We are already being watched in this store.

They will think we are trying to steal stuff unless we put it in the cart. It's never a good idea to carry things in your hands when you're shopping – at least not a good idea for us – and *never, ever*, keep your hands in your pockets! They need to be visible at all times." "That's so crazy," Jacob replied. "Yes," I said, "it's a terrible shame, but it's for your own good. You have to learn how to stay alive out here."

On the drive home we discussed some of the other rules of how not to be offensive to the majority: never run in public, *definitely* never run in public with something – anything – in your hands (they'll think you stole it), keep your hair a certain way if you want to get a job (no more dreadlocks), always keep your ID on you (3-4 varieties if possible), smile a lot, be careful of the pictures you take with friends, especially women, etc. Then we rehearsed a number of different scenarios if he were to ever be stopped by the police.

These are some of the rules that have kept me safe thus far, but I always had a sense that there was something more keeping me safe.

But for the grace of God, go I...

We see that in the Psalm, the enemy of the people is not explicitly named, but rather described in a series of images that evoke a sense of power before which the Israelites are helpless. The forces against them can be obvious like raging waters, or more hidden like the fowler's snare. Regardless of their form, the Israelites always knew that God was for them, and the forces against them were not of God- they were of man. And so it goes for folks who experience racism on a daily basis. You know the existence of powers against you – whether they be obvious are not subtle – that can swallow you whole had it not been for the Lord on your side. Our survival thus far is testimony to that.

Initially after going through the rules, Jacob – like many of you perhaps – thought I was being paranoid and melodramatic. But as I assured him many times, I am trying to protect you. I'm trying to save you! That's how the rules came to be in the first place.

We can't trust the authorities to have our best interest and our safety at heart. *We* can't trust other people to look out for us, to stand up for us, to protect us. *We* only have ourselves to look out for ourselves...that, and the grace of God.

After all, what am I supposed to think when doing something as common as going into a store or walking down the street can be extremely risky? I'll never forget one fateful night in graduate school, when a co-worker of mine was arrested inside the campus library for talking. You heard me correctly! He was on the lower level of the library, the space designated for students doing group work to be able to talk to one another. He and another student were discussing a project and laughing, when they were told to be quiet. Since they were in the space designated for talking and group work, they continued talking and doing their work. They were approached again and told to quiet down. When they continued working, the one who approached them called the campus police to report an "unruly disturbance" by an "aggressive man" in the library. The police came immediately, put my co-worker in a choke hold and wrestled him to the floor. At no time did any officer attempt to solve the matter peaceably. This was all on a Wednesday evening at 8pm mind you. The one who called the police believed my co-worker to be trespassing and not a student at all. As witnesses pleaded with the officers to release him, saying that this was a student study group gone terribly awry, the officers paid them no mind. Instead, they arrested a 4th year undergraduate in the Public Policy department for criminal trespassing and resisting arrest. He spent the night alone in jail. All for trying to finish his homework in the library.

That's real. That really happened. I saw it happen. And it is not an isolated incident. That's why there are rules.

But the rules can't save us. They never could because the culprit is something we cannot change – our bodies.

And as a minister, I wish that I could say in church it's different or that Christians are somehow above all this because of a commitment to Jesus, but I can't. In American

society at least, there is some sense in the general culture that God and whiteness are too often synonymous.

And we can feel it in our bodies. It's when gospel songs or spirituals are used in the service and folks complain. It's when our style of worship is seen as strange, rowdy, or just "too much." It's when the thought of reading a black theologian never enters the psyche. It's when someone brings the issue of race into a small group conversation and is ignored- or worse, attacked.

These moments remind us that our very existence as autonomous human beings is in itself uniquely offensive. I say 'uniquely' because it seems that when whites strike a nerve between each other or embody a pet peeve, the result is rarely violent. But embody that action in the form of a black body and all bets are off.

Death is *always* possible...but for the grace of God.

It's a reality with which *we* have had to live since our arrival on America's shores. Resistance to the will of the majority could result in death. Offending the sentiments of the majority could mean death. And for far too many of us, it has.

I have not been asked by anyone what can they do to "help" with the situation in Ferguson or stand in solidarity with those who are demonstrating, but I have been thinking about how I would answer.

There are no easy answers. But as Christians, as those claiming to believe that we are our brother's and sister's keepers, as those believing that we are all created in the image of God, and that we all make up the body of Christ. If then you want to know what you can do, my answer is this: risk death.

Risk the death of your comfort zone. Risk the death of your reputation. Risk the death of your worldview and perspective on the past and the present. Risk the death of your status quo and 'business as usual.' Risk asking the 'unpleasant' questions and making the tough decisions. Risk what we risk every day *just trying to live and thrive*.

Thinking about risk and death is an interesting theological exercise, knowing that Jesus did the same for us. For the followers of Jesus, the final risk is gone. Paul's letter to the Romans reminds us that there is nothing that can separate us from the love of God in Christ; but in order to face the challenges of our now – in the face of Ferguson, Gaza, Iraq, and right here in DC – we have to ask ourselves, what separates us from the love of our brothers and sisters? Do we believe that Christ risked death for us so that we would risk nothing for one another?

We need to do better and I think we can. I'm hopeful that we can. As a Christian, this is the hope of the resurrection as embodied through the symbol of the empty tomb. Just when it feels like we are on the brink of defeat and disaster, Jesus teaches us that the impossible is possible. And though the nightly news will always show us that there are still many mountains to climb and valleys to cross, what's important now is to recognize the possibilities and opportunities offered by the present moment, and to embrace them with courage, faith, and hope.

Amen.