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Texts: Exodus 14 (selected verses); Deuteronomy 33: 27a; I Thessalonians 5: 12-22

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### Everlasting Arms

Some years ago I had the experience of trying to finish a long trail hike after the sun had gone down. I was with a friend, and we had been out all day. But we still wanted to cover about ten more miles before we were through. As the shadows lengthened, we decided to run, reasoning that on ordinary terrain we could cover that distance in an hour and a half. It was about 8:00, and we let ourselves imagine that, allowing for the rugged terrain and the coming darkness, if all went well, we might even finish up by 10. It wasn't to be. That night march was an ordeal I'll never forget. Within about ten minutes, it was too dark to see in the woods. Even with headlamps we were forced to slow first to a light jog, and then a fast walk. It wasn't long before we were reduced to a steady plodding. At one point, a large bird took flight immediately above us, startling and unnerving us as it broke the stillness of the night. Then there was the firing range. Whoever cut the trail had it running immediately adjacent to a place locals went to fire their guns. The crack of rifle shots could be heard through the woods, and while I trust the weapons were aimed away from the trail, it was too close to make either of us comfortable. And so naturally we picked up our pace as we moved through the darkness. But then came the climbs, and in that thick darkness, with a ray of light that only extended across several feet, the hills just felt merciless. But that wasn't the worst of it.

The worst of it came two hours later, when we thought we might be done, but it was clear we were going to be out there for some time to come. That's when the wheels started to come off, at least for me. Though I didn't know it at the time, I was steadily growing dehydrated. Even so, I have an enormous capacity to push through discomfort, and so my friend and I ceased trying to talk, and just walked through the darkness, every step becoming heavier.

As if that wasn't hard enough, suddenly the trail became not a trail at all, but a long boulder field. Our progress was slowed to a crawl as we picked our way from rock to rock, our feet now hammered and aching.

But even that wasn't the worst of it. The worst came when it became hard to find the trail markings through those boulder fields. Ordinarily, white blazes show the way, but frequently, the darkness hid them from view, and we were left to guess which way might be the correct route. When we couldn't see a blaze, we would retrace our steps to the last one we had seen, and then start over again, this time in a new direction. That might put us on the right course, but then it would happen all over again – we'd forge ahead, only to realize that we had no idea where we actually were in relation to the trail. We'd use our headlamps to scan the landscape, looking for any sign of a white blaze, any sign of a marker that would reveal which way to go. Our progress was haltingly slow, filled with stops and starts. Our exhaustion, and my increasing dehydration, didn't help. Still, with patient and methodical searching, and by moving steadily from marker to marker, from blaze to blaze, we did find our way. Shortly after midnight, we stumbled out of the woods, relieved to have it behind us, glad to spend time recovering in comfort.

I share that story because it represents the way many of us are feeling just now: pretty well exhausted, fumbling through the dark, disoriented and a little unnerved. Back in late August, I tried to remind us all of the capacities we each of us possess to do hard things. We had

already come through some six months of lockdowns and quarantines, and many of us were at that point entering into an unknown situation, returning to workplaces or schools that felt precarious at best. We were already tired, but we took a deep breath and we forged ahead, deeper into the woods. Eight weeks later, I'm so grateful that, at least for now, our schools remain open, our church remains vital, and our families have stayed healthy. Still, I can't say for all of you, but I know that in our house, we're all feeling pretty maxed out. There are more things to stay on top of as parents, more things clamoring for our attention, and less time for one another. There's a growing apprehension about what winter will bring, and a deep uneasiness about what may occur in the coming weeks as a result of the election. Many people, I know, carry deep worries about the possibility of violence and social chaos. There are apprehensions about the unhinged conspiracy theories gaining mainstream acceptance. There are apprehensions about the virus, and there are apprehensions about a vaccine. Over the last few weeks I've had conversations with a variety of people, all suggesting the tension we're all experiencing at the moment. Right now, I'd say we're deep in the woods, picking our way across a field of boulders, unsure of our direction, searching out the next trail marker to guide us along.

What I wish to remind you of today is that, however limited the beam, we do have light enough to illumine the way before us. What I wish to convey to you is that if we can remain patient, there are blazes to show us the way through this forest, through this dark tension and apprehension. I'll offer three such markers: one drawn from Scripture, one from contemporary culture, and one from history. There are others out there, beyond these three, but my hope is that these three will be enough to keep us moving. If we can but follow the blazes, step by step, I believe they'll lead eventually toward the relief we so desperately need right now.

Here's the first blaze I would have us discern on our night march. It's the old story of Moses and the Hebrew people, fleeing their captivity in Egypt while the Pharaoh and his army are in pursuit. The Hebrews are trapped, caught between the approaching Egyptians on one side and a vast body of water, the Red Sea, on the other. There's no way forward. And yet, the story tells us, because of their trust in God, Moses is able to part the sea for the people, and they move across it on dry ground, leaving their pursuers behind. I don't take that story literally, but I do take it very seriously. It's allowed countless generations of people to understand that God makes a way out of no way. It's allowed readers who found themselves trapped by the circumstances of their own lives to understand that even when there doesn't seem to be a path forward, those who live under the guidance of faith know that sometimes, step by step, a way is cleared through and across the impossible. That's why the Jewish people have returned to this story so often. It's why black Americans have returned to the story over and over again. And it's why individuals who are at wit's end have returned to this story. When there is no place to go and no way to move, people of faith trust that the waters do part.

I think we can each reflect back on periods within our lives when we felt cornered by life. I think we can all recall moments when we simply didn't know how we would go on. Maybe it was a relationship that came to an end, a marriage, say. Maybe it was watching helplessly, as your child struggled against an internal set of demons you couldn't understand. Maybe it was struggling against those internal demons in your own life, or finding that your own economic situation simply wasn't adding up. Maybe it's getting through these days of pestilence and politics, and all the precarity that we're experiencing right now. I don't know if it's God or some sort of principle built into the world, but people of faith know that if we but hold on, the Red Sea does part, maybe not all at once, but step by step, little by little, day by day.

I would have us cling to that story as the first of our markers on this night journey through the dark forest. Whenever we get discouraged or fearful, anxious or disoriented, I would have us remember that the Red Sea does part, and that a way does emerge when there is no way. In fact, I would have you realize that the sea has already parted. We're in the impossible already. And we're walking across it. Every day is another part within the sea. Our task is to keep marching across the dry ground provided for us.

The second blaze comes from the culture around us. Paul Tillich told us years ago that there's always a theology embedded within cultural expressions of art and architecture, film and music. He instructed us that we do ourselves a disservice when we fail to notice or appreciate it. One of the things I've learned about myself during the pandemic is that my spirit can stay pretty well aloft as long as I encounter some kind of artistic and cultural creativity at least once a day. A song, an article, a chapter from a book, a piece of great storytelling, some display of human excellence helps me to see a way through the darkness. "Culture is what keeps us from killing ourselves," Cornel West says. It's that which demonstrates that we're more than brute facts of nature, that we're creatures not of determinism but of a deeper impulse toward freedom and creativity, of activities that elevate us beyond the cold realities of the world. Now more than ever, we need cultural expressions to guide and elevate us, and to help us find our way through the forest. With or without the name of God, there are some shining spiritual examples of artistic achievement out there that can help illuminate the way.

One of those achievements is a hip hop album from Kendrick Lamar, called *To Pimp a Butterfly*. Kendrick received a Pulitzer Prize for his writing on the album, and it's clear it's the kind of artistic statement that we'll be reckoning with 50 years hence. Now listen, I know that it might feel incongruous to recommend such an album in a Congregational Church in Old Lyme, Connecticut. For many of us, the sounds will feel unfamiliar, the rhymes will come too fast, and the lyric content will feel more raw than we'd wish. But if you want to understand what's happening around you right now, this is something akin to a sacred text, worthy of being pored over.

One track in particular stands out. It's called "Alright," and it was one of the go-to anthems that many people played over and over again this past summer. As black and brown folks confronted their own precariousness in America, Kendrick's song was a public affirmation that even amidst the turbulence and danger, even amidst the persecution and fear, they would be alright. The song is, in fact, a kind of latter day spiritual, striking what is in essence a pastoral tone (Kendrick does in fact publicly align himself with Christian faith), especially toward those who had experienced violence or threats at the hands of the police. Here's what he says: "We been hurt, been down before...When our pride was low, Lookin' at the world like, Where do we go...Po Po wanna kill us dead in the street for sure, But we gon' be alright, we gon' be alright, we gon' be alright." Assailed on all sides by trouble, the singer has the confidence to assert, like that old hymn, it is well with his soul, and that despite everything, it will be well with the souls of those who listen. Drawing from deep spiritual wells, Kendrick assures his audience: "we gon' be alright."

So look, I know for many of you that song, that particular piece of cultural expression, will sound like it's coming from another galaxy. It's written from, and for, those who experience incredibly different life conditions than those most of us are familiar with. But still, it contains a broad affirmation of life that we can all use right now. It's another blaze in the dark, a sign to point the way in a moment when we all feel a little lost, and a little anxious: no matter what comes, "we gon' be alright."

The final blaze I wish to share with you comes from an historical moment that I found myself revisiting this summer: the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Four years ago, a number of us visited Montgomery together on our Wheels of Justice journey, an experience I hope to revisit at some point in the future. There's so much to learn from Montgomery, especially from that transformative year stretching from December 5th, 1955, to December 16th, 1956. There's the story of MLK, newly arrived in the city, all of 26 years old, elected on a Monday afternoon to lead the boycott. He's given 20 minutes to gather his thoughts before the first public meeting, and in that short span of time he's somehow transformed from a second-string local pastor to a towering world historical figure. It happens that quickly. There are the continual bombings throughout the city, making Montgomery sound closer to Belfast or Algiers than a city within the United States. There are the tales of remarkable ingenuity among the boycotters, flouting the authority of the white citizens' council to form an intricate system of ride sharing by those who owned cars. There's the intimidation and harassment from those white citizens and there's the story of courageous Mother Pollard, a courageous elder in the Dexter Ave. congregation where MLK held forth. When someone driving by saw her hobbling to work on a cold morning, they stopped and asked if she needed a ride. She declined, using these immortal words: "My feet is tired, but my soul is rested." Later, when MLK was feeling the weight of his responsibilities, Mother Pollard discerned how burdened he felt. After his address one night, she rose from her pew and in front of the whole crowd, approached the pulpit. She asked if King was alright, and when he said he was, she countered. "I knows something is wrong. You can't fool me," she told the young preacher. Then she said loudly, "I done told you that we is with you all the way. But even if we ain't, God's gonna take care of you." King later said that those consoling words brought him a confidence and fearlessness he desperately needed. I could spend the rest of my life reading the stories from that remarkable year, about those incredible and spirited people who changed the course of history.

But my favorite story of all occurred on the very first night of the boycott. No one knew what was coming. No one knew how long it would take to achieve their goal of desegregating the buses. No one knew of the bombs, of the threats, of the harassment, of the jailings that would follow. They simply knew that they had committed to a pathway of nonviolent social transformation, and they knew they had to keep following it. A mass meeting was scheduled at the Holt St. Baptist Church at 7:30 that evening. It was the largest of the black churches in town, and people began to show up as soon as they got off work – at 4, at 4:30, at 5. By the time the meeting began, the church was filled to overflowing. Crowds formed outside the church, straining to hear what was happening inside.

Ralph Abernathy spoke about that moment. He said that even before the speakers were assembled the meeting began. And he said that they began with a hymn. Do you know what it was? That most remarkable night, that holy night, which set not only the Montgomery Bus Boycott, but the entire civil rights movement on its course through many dangers, toils and snares, that night began with that vast assembly singing the old gospel hymn, "Leaning on the Everlasting Arms." "What a fellowship, what a joy divine," they sang, "leaning on the everlasting arms of God. What a blessedness, what a peace is mine, leaning on the everlasting arms. Leaning, leaning, safe and secure from all alarm. Leaning, leaning, leaning on the everlasting arms."

All those maids and shop clerks, all those farm hands and factory laborers, all those seamstresses and grade school teachers knew something about the world that most of us have forgotten, if we ever knew it at all. They lived under what should be understood as a fascist

regime, a social system more akin to East Germany than to what any of us imagine as the United States, and yet they knew something that could sustain them through terrible storms, through bitter defeats, through years of casting about, searching for blazes to show them the way. They knew that, like Moses and the Israelites standing at the Red Sea, God makes a way out of no way. They knew that, no matter what they might face in the struggles ahead, that they were gonna be alright. They knew that even though the way before them was treacherous, the everlasting arms were there for them all to lean on.

So it is for us. That assurance at the Red Sea is available to us. That affirmation that despite the darkness and disorientation, “we gon’ be alright,” is there for us. That trust that beneath the clamor and the strife, a pair of everlasting arms hold us close in the night, keeping us safe and secure from all alarm – that’s available to us.

And so keep stepping through the forest. Keep moving across the boulders. Keep searching for those blazes in the night. They’ll guide us along the way, keep us on the path, and draw us ever onward toward the humane and hopeful future toward which we move.

Leaning, leaning, leaning on the everlasting arms.