

“A Conversation with a Wall”
Text: Psalm 23; Deuteronomy 6:4-9

Dr. Geordie Campbell

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A week ago this morning I found myself talking to a wall. Not to misunderstand or lest you think I am still suffering from jet-lag, this was not just any wall. No, this was the Western Wall of the once-great temple in Jerusalem, conceived in ancient days by David and built by Solomon. It's more commonly known as the Wailing Wall and those of the Jewish faith revere it as the dearest site on the face of the earth.

I confess to have felt a strange reverence as I approached. The massive stones were amazing - huge rectangles and squares puzzled together and rising fifty two feet from a marble floor. Rulers and peasants have been right in the place I was standing: men and women from across the ages; old and young; all colors and variety and shapes of humankind – pilgrims, each seeking something of the presence of God. .

I reached my hands up and out and pressed them flat against the wall. I stood in silence wondering about many words and prayers that have been uttered there. It was just then that I began my conversation as these words simply exuded from deep in my soul. The 23rd Psalm, and please, say it with me . . .

“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 the paths of righteousness for his namesake. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil. For thou art with me. Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me. Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of my enemies. Thou annointest 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 forever.”

Those have always been words of life to me. They are among the earliest testimonies of faith that we have. They are attributed to David but the guiding image he put to lyric cadence was not his alone. In fact God is referred to as a “Shepherd” more than eighty times in the scriptures; and, as you may recall Jesus was referred to as the Good Shepherd, too. That Psalm, words of the great King David who first dreamt of the Temple, filled my whispering breath as my hands felt at one with a stone wall that was old when Jesus was there.

And then something else came to me. I remembered words from another page in the Bible, also dear to our Jewish neighbors and foundational to us - no longer those of David, but earlier yet, of Moses. They became a cornerstone of the Judeo-Christian faith and also formed the heart of the great commandment. These were not a poem, as in the Shepherd, but an instructive statute for faithful life. The Shema, if you know it, say it with me . . .

“Hear O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.”

Not far from me at that same moment were clusters of Jewish men with what are called phylacteries – little black boxes affixed to their foreheads. In those boxes are scriptures that are to be held near to their minds. Those words, the Shema, are among them and they begin and end everyday for millions of people. They hold the affirmation that God is One and that our love for God should demand our whole being.

I once heard of a radio show that was running with a special attention-getter for their anniversary year. It was 106 FM and you could win \$106 if you called into their morning show. All you had to do was to be the third caller that day and be able to report the first words that you spoke that morning. The first day the disc jockey answered, “Caller number three, what did you say when you rolled out of bed this morning?” Came the reply, “Where’s my coffee?” Another day the third caller said, “Whoaaaa! I overslept!” The fun continued and another day the third caller said, “Honey, did you let the dog back in last night?” And then there was this one. The DJ said, “This is 106 FM and you are the lucky third caller. What were your first words this morning?” A voice from Brooklyn spoke back, “The same words I say every morning: ‘Hear O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord. And you shall love the Lord your God with all you heart, and with all you soul, and with all your might.’” The DJ was at a total loss for words. And oddly, with that caller, 106 FM stopped asking the question!

But what a way to start the day, *any* day, *any* where, and what a conversation to have with a wall of such sacred witness and strength!

One more thing came to me at that wall. This time I did not speak rather I did something. Since the ancient days has been the belief that if you write a prayer on a tiny slip of paper; and then you tuck that paper into one of the cracks and crevices between the stones; and then you leave it there, the Ruach Yahweh, the Spirit and breath of God will come and take that prayer away. “The wind blows where it wills,” as the scriptures tell us. And the wind receives all of the prayers ever tucked into that wall.

You may remember that before becoming our president, Barack Obama visited that wall. He did as the practice suggests and there was no small amount of banter among the media wondering what his prayer asked. Some even thought of going to try to find it – which, of course, is irreverent from the start.

But place yourself there now and imagine. What would you write, what would you tuck in for the Spirit to find, what would you pray? I tucked in two. One was of the personal variety that will remain so. The other was for all of us, simply these words: “Dear God, May your peace finally hold us all.”

Please: as we come to the table today may we carry the assurance of the Shepherd’s care, our affirmation of the Oneness of God, and a prayer for peace – most especially, a prayer for peace. Amen.