**4 Easter, April 21,2013**

**Acts 9:36-43;Psalm 23; Rev 7:9-17;John 10:22-30**

**The Rev Mary S. Trainor**

This past week has been one of drama for the entire nation. It was difficult not to be glued to the TV news, watching events unfold in Boston and then on Wednesday we heard that a blast in a Texas fertilizer plant killed many, most of whom were first responders, and many are still missing. I just read that apparently this was the same week when the Oklahoma City Bombing occurred 18 years ago. These are horrific tragedies. We can allow these dark events to overshadow our lives. If we do, it leads us to become fearful and insecure. This can then cause many physical symptoms like insomnia and depression. My brother, Fred, is a PTSD psychiatrist at Massachusetts General Hospital; he cares for people who suffer from these symptoms after trauma. He is caring for this week's victims in Boston. Please include Fred, and others who are ministering to the victims from these tragedies in your prayers.

God's way is not to allow these tragic events to overshadow our lives. Our Scripture readings today help us to here. Each of these readings took place in times of darkness. The first reading from the Acts of the Apostles relates a sad story of when a much loved pillar of the church named Tabitha died, and everyone was full of grief. God was in this midst of this situation by sending Peter to her, and she was raised. This was when the church was just starting up, and we are told that as a result "***many believed in the Lord."*** In the Revelation reading we are told that ***"there are many who have come out of the great ordeal:"*** in other words, a tragic, dark time. And what happens? They were ***"made white in the blood of the Lamb:"*** they were given new beginnings and hope through Jesus.

The most famous of the readings we heard today was Psalm 23. This Psalm is so very familiar, and one reason for this is that it is read at most funerals: dark times. It was written by King David at a dark time in his life, but oh my, was God ever there with him! And we know it, just by reading this Psalm: God becomes present with us as we read it. It is a Psalm of deliverance, comfort, security. It begins with, "***The Lord is my shepherd."*** From a practical standpoint, what does it mean that “***The Lord is my shepherd”***? This is a metaphor; a shepherd knows all of his sheep by name, protects them with his life, guides them, finds them when they are lost. God does this for us. Psalm 23 gives us examples of how God meets us and leads us to: "***lie down in green pastures,"*** and go,"***beside still waters,"*** safe places of rest and refreshment. The Shepherd: "***revives my soul and guides me along right pathways"*** and then comes the big one: even ***"though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall not fear!"*** Yes, we will go through scary, dark times, but the Lord will be there as our source of deliverance and hope. And, because of this there is no fear; in its place is abundant life: "***my cup is running over***" and ***"I will dwell in the house forever."***

Our Gospel today tells us more what the Good Shepherd does for us. Jesus said, "***No one will snatch them out of my hand***." His love will never let us go, no matter no matter what happens. Here Jesus teaches more about the nature of the relationship between the shepherd (Him) and the sheep (us) -- it is close! He says "***My sheep hear my voice, I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life.***" We, like sheep, are vulnerable and we need a shepherd - a leader, a guide, a redeemer. The Lord, the Shepherd not only knows us and never ever lets us go--but communicates with us. Do we recognize His voice as someone we have a close relationship with**?** It is kind of like friends whose voices you recognize right away on the phone, even without caller ID -- you know them so well! We live in a noisy world, we hear lots of voices. In troubled times, those voices get more numerous and confusing. Do we hear and follow the right voice, Jesus' voice? It is about relationship.

True story: A man named David had a big shepherd dog named Teddy as a pet when he was growing up on a farm. Teddy would wait for him at the bus stop every day, slept at the foot of his bed and came whenever David whistled. The boy and his dog were inseparable.  Then World War II came and David went to war. He told his family good-bye and was shipped overseas for three years. Finally, the day came when he could go home. The bus stop was 14 miles from the farm and his parents didn’t have a phone. He threw his duffle bag over his shoulder and started walking.  He finally approached his home in the middle of the night, and the dog began to bark. David said, **"I whistled only once and Teddy stopped barking. There was a yelp of recognition, and Teddy ran toward me in the darkness. Even after three years, he recognized me and loved me."**This recognition survived the test of time; the relationship was close.

Your ability to hear God's voice is about your relationship with Him. When King David said, "***the Lord is my shepherd, I shall not be in want"*** he had heard God, and later wrote about the sense he had from God! They were close.

Jesus delights in you, wants to be close to you, and is communicating with you all the time. Jesus communicates through: other people, situations, coincidences, written words, creation, inner nudges, your conscience. You can recognize God's communications better if you do certain things. Here are four things you can do, and I have given them an acronym to help you remember and observe them. Acronym= LOOK:

**L** = **L**ove God, tell Him you love Him, look for Him everywhere

**O** = **O**ffer quiet time to God every day, even if it is just a few minutes, when you can listen

**O** = **O**bserve, watching for signs, leadings, messages from God; they come in unexpected ways, but when they come you know they are from God. Pay attention to names that pop into your head, ideas that float by as you study the bible or pray, pictures that emerge in your imagination. They may be God nudging you, leading you, guiding you. Observe.

**K** = **K**eep a journal or notebook in which you write or type your thoughts and allow God to guide your words as they emerge. You will find prayers and insights appear on your paper. King David did it, you can too.

Today's Scriptures reassure us of God's continuing presence, no matter what is happening to our bodies, our relationships, our community, or our world. Doctors, terrorists, leaders do not hold everything in their hands; God does.

God is in the midst of the dark times in our lives, as well as the good times. Through it all, God and God alone is our true safety. God will never let you go. The Lord is your shepherd, you shall not want. Amen.