

I once heard a story about

A burglar who broke into a house one night. He shined his flashlight around, looking for valuables when a voice in the dark said, “Jesus is watching you.”

He jumped in panic, clicked off his flashlight, and froze. When he heard nothing more, after a bit, he shook his head and continued. Just as he pulled the stereo out so he could disconnect the wires, he heard again, “Jesus is watching you.”

Freaked out, he shined his light around frantically, looking for the source of the voice. Finally, in the corner of the room, his flashlight beam came to rest on a parrot.

“Did you say that?” he hissed at the parrot.

“Yep,” the parrot confessed, then squawked, “I’m just trying to warn you that Jesus is watching you.”

The burglar relaxed. “Warn me, huh? Who in the world are you?”

“Moses,” replied the bird.

“Moses?” the burglar laughed. “What kind of people would name a bird Moses?”

“The kind of people that would name a big Rottweiler dog Jesus.”¹

Although we may find the story humorous, how many of you at some point in your life have heard

the phrase, “God is watching you”? For some, the words might instill a sense of guilt or fear, but for others the words may offer comfort.

The writer of Psalm 33 seemed to offer comfort when writing that God looks from heaven and sees everyone. Although we only heard a portion of the psalm read, it begins with singing and lots of music from harps, celebrating that the earth is filled with God’s love. The psalm praises God for the wonders of creation, from the sky to the waters, for which humanity stands in awe.

The psalm then shifts, suggesting that God confuses the nations and frustrates our plans, while blessing those who follow God. The writer proclaims that God looks from heaven and sees everyone, shaping us and giving us direction.

Then, we encounter a warning—that a king is not saved by a great army, nor a warrior by great strength. The powers that we often place our trust in, the psalm suggests, is not how God delivers us. We’re so used to trusting in the power of violence

2

and weapons that many may assume it's the normal way of getting protection.

This psalm, however, offers another perspective, one that the Disciples Peace Fellowship echoes as well. Founded in 1935 in San Antonio, Texas by 75 people, this group has grown over the years and reminds us Disciples how to live Jesus' imperative for peace and justice. Did you know it's the oldest Peace Fellowship of any denomination in the U.S., and that it's the largest organization of its kind? It grew from the nonviolent philosophy of the early leaders of our movement, Alexandar Campbell and Barton W. Stone.

Since 1975, more than 100 young adults have been trained as peace interns through the Disciples Peace Fellowship, who then serve in church camps, local congregations, and assemblies to model a peace-filled lifestyle. Peace Intern Marci tells about her experience this summer at a church camp in Nebraska:

I was asked to lead multiple meditation sessions where I helped campers and counselors practice meditation in ways that they may have

never tried before. I got to lead two workshop groups doing an activity that really engaged staff and youth to think about how the Israeli occupation in Palestine separates and labels Palestinians in the Holy Land. I also got the chance to collect signatures to support the Korean Peace Appeal and lead a vespers service on peace!! ²

I know it's tempting to use coercion or violence as the first response to feel secure, but Psalm 33 invites us to think another way, to trust that no matter what happens in this world, God still provides the ultimate security and protection.

One translation of verse 18 suggests that God protects from death and starvation those who *fear* God, though other translations offer other ways of understanding the word sometimes translated as "fear." The Hebrew word יָרֵא [yare' /yaw·ray] can also mean to revere, honor, respect.

The word doesn't mean to be afraid of God, but to respect and honor God, but we know that sometimes fear does fill the world, as many of us experienced during the pandemic. Listen to one

3

writer who reflected on this psalm and our response of fear during the pandemic.

For much of the first year of the COVID pandemic, when neither vaccines nor proven treatments were available, the world was at the mercy of an illness it did not understand. That kind of powerlessness evokes a variety of responses, all of which could be mapped onto the Kubler-Ross model of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance.

In the United States, denial and anger were the most recognizable; but rage with no place to go makes people susceptible to manipulation by bad actors. There were myriad stories in the news of individuals, goaded by conspiracy theorists, into acts of violence against first responders and public health officials. They were like those in Psalm 33, who thought that martial violence could save them. But Psalm 33 reminds God's people that even in times of great fear, our hope is in God's steadfast love.³

In the kin-ship of our community of faith, we met the challenge by drawing closer together even

though we could not be present in the same place. We somehow sensed another connection in place of gathering in a building. I suggest we felt our spiritual connection, bound together as God's Spirit moved among us, reminding us that even though we were not physically present in the same place, we were still family, still kin, part of God's kin-dom.

When we gather together now in celebration as family, we celebrate the kin-dom of God. In good times and bad, God remains among us, weaving together our hopes and dreams, hearing our laments and cries, trusting the words that come at the end of Psalm 33 that reflect a different kind of power than responding in violence:

²⁰ We put our hope in God.
our help and our shield.

²¹ Our heart rejoices in God
because we trust his holy name.

²² GOD, let your faithful love surround us
because we wait for you.

¹ Adapted from <http://christianfunnypictures.com/2016/09/jesus-watching-funny-joke.html>

² www.disciplespeace.org/follow-the-interns

³ *General Assembly Preaching Resource*