

PRESS 9 TO HEAR THESE OPTIONS AGAIN

I'm not a big fan of those automated answering services.
The choices can be very limited, and they don't always relate to what I'm calling about.

A couple of months ago, I discovered that the Spring runoff exposed the once underground telephone line that goes to my house. It was tightly stretched across the 15 foot gully, about a foot above the bottom, with branches and debris wrapped around it.

Believing it wouldn't endure another runoff, I called Sasktel.

After getting through the first 2 levels of selections, none of the other numerous choices included exposed wire with the service still working. I listened to the selection again, and decided on damaged equipment. Finally, I talked to a human, and another work order was arranged. When the Sasktel repairman examined the problem, he said he wasn't sure who to forward the work to because the line wasn't broken. The crews that put the line in the ground, who have the trenching equipment, only do new installations. My offer to cut the line would leave me out of service and I had have to pay the repair bill.

So,.....my choice is to wait until nature completes the process, and maybe then there will be an appropriate option to take care of it.

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Sometimes, choices and options are simpler and appropriate.

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When afraid or overwhelmed, Psalm 46 is the clear choice.

Verse one even states: when in trouble God is our refuge and strength.

When we need protection, then God is like a Mighty Fortress.

A fortress is a safe and secure shelter, yet let's hope we don't always need to hide out in a fortress, and it could be boring, too.

In addition, the declaration is general; it does Not specify the reason for use or who qualifies to receive sanctuary.

The Psalm simply reveals that God is powerful and is a peaceful, reliable place for refuge.

Your needs for protection and safety may be very different than mine.

It doesn't matter why someone seeks shelter in God, nor does it matter how long a person stays in the fortress.

I like that about the imagery in Psalm 46.

God provides powerful, trustworthy sanctuary for those in trouble.

It's an option, and using that option varies with each person and with the circumstances,..... and that's okay.

And,..... no one is excluded.

It's all pretty open ended and universal.

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To be sure, we humans seem to like details, refined definitions and regulations. It's easier to process categories and conformity.

That must be why a human doesn't answer the phone for Sasktel, until the caller is all sorted out.....or out of sorts.

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This past week, there were lots of media attention about the 50th anniversary of JFK's assassination. There still is a swirl of fog around his death, with lots of conspiracy theories, too.

It troubles us to not know exactly, for sure, without a doubt... what happened. The search for the "real" answer has mostly covered over the tragic loss of life and what that assassination did to a nation.

Thursday, the New York Times had an article about the mystery man who was holding an open umbrella, on that sunny day in Dallas.

He was standing right on the sidewalk, even with Kennedy's car when the first shot was fired.

Many speculated that he was a distance marker for Oswald; some thought he had a gun hidden under the umbrella.

The man finally came forward in 1978 to confess that he had the open umbrella as a sign of protest.

That's all. [NYC Times Nov. 21]

Maybe we'll never know the whole story, and maybe it's just not ours to know or own. A man was needlessly killed, yet we want to know how and why.

We like to have certainty. We like the details. We like it when the rules are followed.

But, maybe we get too hung up on the fine print.

What about the bigger picture, the broader issues, such as justice, equality, righteousness, peace and grace?

I think God is more concerned about those "immeasurable" values than the finite details.

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The Jeremiah text seems to indicate that perspective.

In that passage, God comes down pretty hard on those bureaucrats and civil servants; they're called shepherds in Jeremiah 23.

Shepherds are not the owners or stakeholders. They are the ones entrusted with the care of the flock--the citizens.

There is no mention that those civil servants were convicted of breaking the law, and I'm sure they apologized when accused.

And, God didn't point out the stupid little things, like drinking too much, smoking crack or being boorish.

The concern was about governing poorly, about justice.

They were Not caring for the people. In addition, they were causing derision. They were tearing their society apart.

And, God was not happy about that.

The passage continues with an inference to the King. Thoughtfully, the King's name was Not mentioned, but it was King Zedekiah. Zedekiah was a nice guy, but a lousy leader, and this bad leadership was a reoccurring problem in Israel. The whole King pattern needed to be changed, and God was going to offer a new King / a new way / a better choice.

And, this brings out a fascinating thing: why did the people go along with poor government? Why did they submit to less? Why didn't they demand justice and righteousness? ?????

Those civil servants and kings remained in power because people chose to go along. They chose to accept the standard / the pattern, instead of demanding a higher level / a divine value standard.

In spite of a pattern of poor choices, God was going to provide a better choice. God was going to create a righteous and just king. That new king could be there salvation.

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And, so it happened. God introduced humanity to the option of a saviour in the flesh. However, that King label would come to haunt Jesus.
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The Gospel lesson for the last Sunday of the church year is fittingly about the end of Jesus' life. Jesus was accused of claiming to be king, but Jesus never did claim to be king. It didn't matter, the masses selected Jesus to die.

The text opens with Jesus being crucified between two criminals.

People are observing the show as if watching TV. They are seeing the horror, but doing nothing to stop it.

Soldiers are mocking and taunting Jesus. Repeatedly, they assert that Jesus, this "saviour of others", is NO saviour because he can't even save himself. They don't understand. They don't grasp that "self saving" is incompatible / counter to the principle of saving others.

But, their reasoning makes sense to them: they thought all kings were selfish and power hungry. Maybe that standard / that expectation was very revealing of their own nature?

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Interestingly, facing death reveals the soul, and this affect includes witnesses and survivors. We remember / we grieve from the heart, not the mind. We remember the loss of love and expectation, from the heart.
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At the crucifixion, all were facing death. Three were facing and feeling death. Two on their crosses, were criminals. Their lives appears to be a waste, and death is the consequence of bad choices. In the middle was God's chosen one--the saviour for the world.

One criminal rises above the popular culture. He doesn't go along with the soldiers and the crowd. Instead, he asks Jesus to remember him on the other side.

There is no logic to this. Jesus grants a simple trusting/believing request, without questions. That criminal likely didn't know Jesus. What he knew was what the crowd was saying; however, he chose to Not judge. He chose to befriend another dying man, who may have seemed more than a man. He chose a higher plain.

Moreover, this convicted criminal, with little merit, gets to see Jesus in paradise. Those deathbed confessions don't seem far.

\*The death of Jesus wasn't fair either!

Regardless, this was his moment. This no-name criminal, it was his moment to decide "How to be as a person", how to live and he chose well.

Life is full of such moments.

The other criminal, well,..... it was his moment with Jesus, too. He likely didn't understand who was next to him, either. Still, he chose to be nasty and judgmental. His life was at the cusp of death, and he chose poorly. Truth be told: all of life is at the cusp of death, yet most moments are not so obvious.

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Here we have the ultimate lesson--the definitive answer. From now on the clear choice is believing / is choosing Jesus. It's settled.

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A couple months ago, Katherine introduced Leslie and I to the TV show "Once upon a time." When we can, we've been catching up on past episodes by watching them on Netflix.

The TV series is creatively written. It is based on fairy tale characters, and sets them into everyday situations, and many challenging conditions, too.

Most of the characters carry past personal issues, full of painful, rejection. Sometimes, they rise above their need for revenge and power, but other times they don't. Sometimes, they choose love, but sometimes they don't.

This see saw behaviour has become a pattern, and after one recent episode, I was left thinking, "Good grief, they keep making the same stupid mistakes. When will they learn and start making consistently good choices? When will they finally learn?"

Then I realized, "When will **we** / when will I finally learn?"

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If we were hanging on a cross next to Jesus, we'd likely make the right decision, but life isn't so simple and predictable.

There is randomness, fog of perception and surprises.

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The number 9 in the sermon title is not a reference to a Beatles song. It is just a random number,... for no apparent reason.

Life can happen that way. Relationships are messy.  
Moreover, one size doesn't fit all. We do Not walk down the same path in unison and uniformity.  
We respond differently to situations. We think and feel differently,. and I dare say,..... our circumstances / our walk with God can be very different, too.

The key is we must Not judge others.  
We must Not expect others to be like us / to act like us / to think like us.  
What matters is how we,...as individuals, respond to life / to each moment / to each other.

For some, they may need to frequently seek shelter in God's refuge.  
They walk may be a daily, intimate cadence with the Gospel's messiah.  
Others, may engage God like a child who is sent out to play and told to be home for supper.

Their life dance could be radically different than our own standards and expectations,..... and that is okay because honesty is essential.  
And, we don't judge.  
We are not called to control others, either.

Nevertheless, we are called / required to do justice, to be righteous and gracious.

The reason the one criminal shared paradise with Jesus was because he chose to be righteous and gracious.  
He had it right. He probably didn't know or believe a thing about Jesus. He chose God's way,..... and not merely the fine print of the rules and regulations.

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There will be times when the options before us don't fit the mould, when they are vague and obscure.
Life generally does Not lay out precise and clear options.
The bad guys don't always wear black, nor the good guys white.

There will be decision that must be made in the fog of confusion.

Those times.....ARE YOUR AND MY MOMENTS.

Those moments test the soul, the true nature of the soul.
They may happen often,..... and I dare say, they happen more often than we realize.
Will we chose justice, righteousness, peace and grace..... or follow old, established patterns?

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And finally, when there is No clear chose, when the number selection doesn't apply, even when the options are heard again, ....there is verse 10 of Psalm 46:  
"Be still and know that I am God."

Be still--invest in God / trust God by waiting and listening for God.

If in doubt, let go of control and trust God.

This is the path to wholeness / to Good choices,..... and it is the healthy journey through death and grief.

Sometimes, we just need to feel God tugging on our heart.

Call it a fortress or call it grace.

Life is a series of moments..... that we decide how to get through.

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