

Barbara Kingsolver, in her novel *Poisonwood Bible*, tells of the missionary family of Nathan and Orleanna Price in the jungles of Africa, and the day that their daughters Rachel and Leah and Adah chased a green mamba snake out of the chicken coop.

Their baby sister, Ruth May, had followed, but far enough behind to come across the snake just as it came out of the coop. The snake struck, she cried out, but cut short, death was almost instantaneous.

Rachel said later, “The whole world would change then, and nothing would be all right again. Not for our family. All the other people in the whole wide world might go on about their business, but for us it would never be normal again.”

That was the world of that boat caught in that storm on the Mediterranean, and the crew anxiously, fearfully facing the awful possibilities of the terror they faced.

The threat was real. There seemed to be no way out. They were apparently powerless to do anything about their situation. They were simply caught in a situation which offered no hope, no future.

We all have our dreams, our hopes, our plans for life.

But we also have to deal with what is. We start out with Plan A, but something happens, and we find ourselves in Plan B or maybe C or D or double-Z!

They say you need to make lemonade out of lemons, but sometimes the lemonade gets to be very sour.

For many of my high school classmates, Plan A was college or a job, but they got a low draft number, Plan B was Viet Nam.

Plan A is retirement, travel, time with grandkids; then a spouse dies, the kids want you near them in that retirement village far from your home, never normal again.

Your senior year has started great, plans for college made, your car and job, friends, sports, activities, Plan A.

Then your parents tell you they’re separating, and you have to choose whom you’re going to live with, and they’re both moving out of town, a shipwrecked life.

A neighborhood, serene and settled, then a devastating marauder named Michael, never normal again.

My father died of cancer when he was 58, a terrible move from Plan A retirement to Plan “B” Bad-beyond-Bad radiation and chemotherapy, by no stretch of anything that scripture says was it good nor desirable nor God’s will.

Moving from Plan A to Plan B where it’s never normal again; trying to find God when it seems God has turned the divine back on our misery and pain and hurt.

Just because we are human beings, and not animals, we can step outside of ourselves and see ourselves in a dangerous situation and raise anxious questions:

- What in the world am I doing here?
- What about all these changes in my world?
- What does it all mean?
- What’s going to happen to my children?
- Or to me as I grow old?

And all of this is neither good nor bad; it’s just the fact that we are creatures in a world where we know we are creatures not really in control of the world.

Our scientific and technological worldview expects instant solutions to every problem we face.

So, if Christ has won the battle over evil and suffering and I still suffer, then maybe we begin to think that his victory was not real, or maybe God and the spiritual world are irrelevant to my daily life.

Henri Nouwen wrote, “The issue is whether there is anything in our world we can call sacred... Is there among the things we do, the people we know, the events we read about in the newspapers or watch on TV, someone or something that transcends it all and has the inner quality of sacredness, of being holy, worthy of adoration and worship?”

It's not easy, is it, to find God in Plan B, to sense the sacred working in a world which sometimes, maybe often times, doesn't make sense.

And you and me, ordinary people living our ordinary lives, feel caught, overwhelmed, powerless to do anything about our life being tossed to and fro, or about the lives of those we love who are in harm's way being battered and bruised by life's tragic tsunamis.

Whether we're on board that storm-tossed ship with Paul and Luke or on board this ship of the 21st century, the Bible gives us words to voice our fear: *Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD. Lord, hear my voice! Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications!*

You have to wonder, on that sinking ship, if Paul would believe his own words from his letter to the Romans, “Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

His faith put to the test: “Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?”

I have a sneaking suspicion that Paul's words to the Romans were rooted in Paul's understanding of the 23rd Psalm, what it means to “walk

through the valley of the shadow of death; I fear no evil, for you are with me.”

God's presence, God's promise when nothing is ever normal again.

Our story in Acts says that an angel of the Lord appeared to Paul on that ship and said what it seems every angel always says first, “Do not be afraid”

That is the biblical word to those of a fearful heart; that is God's word to Paul, not some magic wrap that protects us from every evil, but faith as a matter of choosing how to respond.

Look at what Paul did. He lived out the words of the Psalmist.

He was one who was waiting for the Lord and, just before daybreak, like those who watch for the morning, Paul proclaimed God's forgiveness and steadfast love...

The source of our hope in the midst of our hell, God's saving grace for all, for all those on the ship, Paul took bread and gave thanks.

In other words, he celebrated communion, but even more, in the midst of the fear and the unknown, he brought them into community as they took care of each other.

“...so that you will survive,” he says.

Remember that after the resurrection, Jesus met his disciples as they came to shore from fishing, built a fire by the side of the lake and invited the disciples to eat with him.

In the smoldering ashes of life, God gives us community, a new beginning.

For any and all whose normal is never again, it's not a question as to if God is doing this to me, but with each other you find the comfort and promise of God for survival.

That's why the angels said, “Do not be afraid;” not because the world is not a scary place, but

because loving, choosing to love one another,
casts out our fear.

God's love is let loose in the world, and God's
love will never let us go.

As the theologian Eberhard Arnold says, "The
love of God does not acknowledge any border or
stop at any barrier."

That is the promise we live by.

Maybe it was Paul's prayer, as it can also be our
prayer: *LORD, my heart is not lifted up, my eyes
are not raised too high; I do not occupy myself
with things too great and too marvelous for me.
But I have calmed and quieted my soul...my hope
is in the LORD from this time on and
forevermore.*

Paul knew that at the heart of the terror that
swirled around him and swirls around us, there is
the final calm that comes from faith in God in
the real action of caring for one another, with
them in that community, with us as we live the
community of faith.

We wait for deliverance because God is faithful.

What Martina McBride sings is true:
*"God is great, but sometimes life ain't good
When I pray it doesn't always
turn out like I think it should.
This world's gone crazy and it's hard to believe
That tomorrow will be better than today.
Believe it anyway."*

We live and hope, hope and wait, and wait and
love because we trust God's love and
faithfulness, anyway.

Can we see God, what God is doing when
nothing is ever normal again?

We have to be looking, we have to be looking...

Maybe like that night, the first football game in a
small town in Alabama.

One of the majorettes, her second year on the
squad, had lost her right arm in an accident, but
she had practiced hard all summer to twirl with
only her left hand.

There she was with all the other majorettes as the
band marched onto the field.

And lined up alongside her was God, if you were
looking, because God looked a lot like the other
majorettes who had practiced hard all summer,
too, right arm tied behind their back, twirling
with just their left hand.

TO GOD BE THE GLORY.