

I Wanna Hold Your Hand

Ah, love, let us be true
To one another!

That's Victorian poet Matthew Arnold in "Dover Beach," taking his best shot at transcendence after concluding that the tide of faith has ebbed for the last time. Since there is no God, his argument runs, and we're left with only the kelp and dead jellyfish of a doomed society, we can at least treat one another well.

Turns out he may have been on to something- not about God, but about acts of love in the face of unavoidable pain. Dr. James A Coan of the University of Virginia wired a bunch of women to electrodes and zapped them at random while reading their brainwaves. He discovered that holding their husbands' hands greatly reduced their levels of anxiety. Holding a stranger's hand did some good, but a spouse helped more and the better the marriage, the more the benefit.

Mates could not prevent, reduce, or participate in the pain, but could be present for it, and somehow that made things better.

In Psalm 139 King David, who himself had logged ample time wired up to the high-voltage jolts of unpredictable grief, bears witness to the same phenomenon. What seems to fascinate him is not so much the Lord's omnipresence – God is everywhere – as his presence – God is here. After pondering the possibility of an overnighiter at a bed-and-breakfast in Sheol followed up with a stint in the Marianas Trench, he marvels,

Even there Your hand will lead me,
And your right hand will lay hold of me.

The Lord, David had learned, would not necessarily keep him from going to dark and dangerous places, but would always go there with him, and that somehow made things better.

As the filaments of the New Year crackle and we cringe to ponder the unpredictable jolts wired into the unturned pages of our calendars, we can take comfort in knowing that our risen Lord never releases the anxious hand of his bride, the church. For reasons of his own he sometimes chooses not to prevent the pain, but he always chooses to be present in the midst of it, and that is the definition of peace.

Happy New Year!
Doug