

Sermon for May 3rd, 2020

Holy Communion

Rev. Karin Kilpatric

(23rd Psalm, used as Call to Worship) The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul: He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me. Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Acts 2:42-47. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

Sermon

The 23rd Psalm is clearly the most familiar of all the Psalms and one of the most cherished of all Bible passages. It is traditionally attributed to David, who was, himself, a shepherd as a young man before being anointed by the Prophet Samuel as King over Israel. The Psalms were written as songs to be sung and accompanied by a harp. They are not stories or teachings as much as expressions of deep and raw emotion whether in praise or lament. I seldom turn to the King James Version when reading the passages for any given Sunday. The KJV sounds archaic and outdated. We don't use words like "maketh, and leadeth and restoreth or "Thou art. Some folks think that this version is the "original" Bible (not sure what they mean by that) and that all other versions are poor substitutes or even abominations. In the United Kingdom, this English version written in 1611 at the order of King James I, is referred to as "the authorized version." But several English versions have followed this one. In the U.S., 55% of folks surveyed said when they read the Bible, they read the King James. Yet, today, most biblical scholars use the New Revised Standard Version, as our own church does most Sundays. The Bible has also been written in 697 other languages. So there are many, many heartfelt, faithfully constructed, and always humanly interpretive, expressions of the "Holy Word" existing in our shared world. For a moment, I want to focus on the version of the 23rd Psalm many of us learned as children.

I will be honest. I had been dragging my feet about writing my message this week. Something about the over familiarity and ever-present use of this Psalm made it seem a bit "old hat." It's meaning as too obvious. I wasn't sure how to make it come alive in new ways for myself, much less for all of you. And then one evening this week the darkness of our current time washed over me in a big anxious wave, bringing a great deal of fear and confusion about how to live fully, hopefully, and justly in the time of Covid 19. I began reciting this Psalm in the Old English...The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want. He maketh me lie down in green pastures, he leadeth me beside still waters, He restoreth my soul. I have never been one to find it especially important to memorize Bible verses but, when I began speaking, just letting go into the rhythm and meter of these ancient words, they were all there for me, ready to help. As I spoke, they were speaking, and suddenly, I was listening.

It brought to my mind a time when I was called to a woman's deathbed. Her family was gathered around the bed and looking to me for support and spiritual sustenance. I deeply wanted to reflect the holiness of this moment of her passing. To be able to touch an eternal truth in the fleetingness of life. To touch the woundedness around me with peace. In my years of walking with others in their grief I have learned to first respect the silence and then to just begin. To trust what is needed and to offer prayer. But at that particular moment my own feeble attempt at articulating meaning and comfort seemed too limited, too menial. Then the ancient expression of this comforting Psalm came into my mind and heart and out of my lips and the family joined their voices with mine.

Remembering this, I suddenly felt like sitting down to write. Not to explore or examine the 23rd Psalm but to pay tribute to it. I wanted to offer thanks for it and for so many other familiar, wise and comforting passages of scripture that have been able to reach into the souls of suffering people throughout time. When these passages are seen as poetry of the heart, rather than as proof texts, or dictums about what others should believe or how others should live, they come alive with deep relevance.

The power of this Psalm is not, however, dependent on the ancient language. The 23rd Psalm has been the inspiration of poetry and song throughout time and will continue to be in the future. People have found it so helpful, so trustworthy, and comforting that they have rewritten it over and over again out of the circumstances and experiences of their own lives. It has not actually been "rewritten" as much as it has been taken into heart after heart and given new words and new life to, and through, those that have come toward it soulfully, and then waited for it to speak to them.

The following version, "Trusted Roads" is from a book of responsive prayers "Be Our Freedom Lord," compiled by Terry Falla.

O God, You sustain me and feed me: Like a shepherd You guide me.

You lead me to an oasis of green, to lie down by restful waters.

You refresh my soul for the journey and guide me along trusted roads.

The God of justice is Your name.

Though I must enter the darkness of death, I will fear no evil.

For You are with me, Your rod and staff comfort me.

You prepare a table before my very eyes, In the presence of those who trouble me.

You anoint my head with oil, And You fill my cup to the brim.

Your loving kindness and mercy will meet me Every day of my life,

And I will dwell in the house of my God forever.

According to author, Carol Rumens, in her 2011 piece in *The Guardian*, "The Book of Psalms is the English great-grandmother of American free verse". It has influenced people like Walt Whitman, Stephen Crane, Herman Melville, Carl Sandburg, Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot. In the mid 16th Century, Thomas Sternhold wrote his inspired lyrics expressing his intimate and unique experience of the Psalm in "My Shepherd Is the Living God," which was later put to music by Issac Watts, and has become familiar. Jason and Kathy Hine will sing this for us at the close of the service.

Author, speaker and mythologist, Michael Meade, spoke recently about the importance of this difficult time in which we are living. He emphasized the necessity of moving from ego to soul and to what the soul needs to learn through this crisis in order to transform the world. One of his most memorable lines for me was this. "Each of us can go only as far as we can go and then the unseen comes toward us." Isn't that a wonderful promise? When we slow down to approach things soulfully the unseen will come to our aid. We will be in-spired. The United Church of Christ approaches scripture with this simple declaration, "God is Still Speaking." The ancient Psalms will never be abandoned for they hold eternal truth about human emotion, but they will be transformed over and over again into what soul needs in these times and in times to come. As we go forward, we must shed old forms that have been built on egotism. But we can't just proceed with new ideas and plans, they must emerge from

what the soul is seeking to teach us. Meade says that we each have a bigger self, deep inside, that can bring healing if we recognize it and understand that it knows better than we do where we go from here. So we must listen, wait, and go through the necessary ordeals. We cannot return to “normal” as what we have known is already breaking apart. We must seek the inner light inside the darkness. Soul is here with a purpose to bring us closer to our purpose in life and, as Meade says we will come through this crisis “either as smaller persons or as a greater soul.”

In the early years of the 20th Century, when the English poet and playwright (and some say, mystic), D.H.Lawrence, sought to express what it felt like for his soul to be at peace, he imagined not sheep, but a cat peacefully at rest before a glowing hearth. Lawrence understood that the divine energy we call God is also the essence of each of us, of our very being. As he was dying of tuberculosis at the age of 44 he was inspired by the 23rd Psalm’s sense of peace in mystical union with God. He imagined this peace as a sense of home, existing in the dwelling of the living God and he wrote the poem, “Pax.”

Pax By D. H. Lawrence

All that matters is to be at one with You, the living God;
to be a creature in Your house, O God of Life!
Like a cat asleep on a chair
at peace, in peace
at home, at home in the house of the living,
sleeping on the hearth, and yawning before the fire.
Sleeping on the hearth of the living world,
yawning at home before the fire of life
feeling the presence of You, the living God
like a great reassurance
a deep calm in the heart
a presence
as of a master, a mistress sitting on the board
in their own and greater being,
in the house of life

Finally, our second scripture passage for the day which comes from the book of Acts is also one of my favorites. It describes the blissful beginning of the new Christian Community. After Jesus’ death, they gathered. Having been baptized into the newness of life by the disciples, they felt deep connection to each other, coming together in a oneness of spirit. They broke bread and shared all things in common. They had generous hearts and were filled with goodwill. The skeptic in us says, Yeah, that didn’t last, soon enough the quarrelling and warring would begin. After 300 years or so of persecution, when Christianity under Constantine became the official religion, many Christians would now all too often become the persecutors. That is true, power and mystical union with God, have never existed in comfortable complementarity. But the moment of union has been. It came, in the spirit of God, as wholeness in a difficult time. It is a possibility which is “not yet” but still can be.

“If there is no change at the level of the soul, there is no change to the world” Michael Mead told his listeners. It seems that the healing of the soul of the individual being and the healing of the soul of the world cannot be separated if they are to remain true and unsullied. Healing comes from a root word meaning “to become whole.” The 23rd Psalm is an intimate invitation to our healing, to our becoming whole. It intimately speaks to *each* of us, it calls *all* of us together, and it promises us the only real peace we will ever know.