

Sunday, March 22, 2020

Although we cannot meet at church on Sunday's right now, we can share a time of sharing Scripture, music, and art. For the next weeks until we can safely meet again, I will send some articles and quotes that follow the reading I was planning to use.

I will also suggest a hymn or two for you to find on Youtube. Becky Milhollin will provide some art to share.

In this way we will all be a community sharing around the Word for each Sunday. While we must maintain "social distancing: we maintain our engagement with each other as a community of faith.

Therefore, for Sunday March 22 I will Use Psalm 23 as I had planned. I would suggest finding the hymns "Savior Like a Shepherd Lead Us" and "The King of Love My Shepherd Is." Becky also suggests the "Songs of Comfort" that Yoyo Ma has put on Youtube.

OK. Here are the thoughts and quotes I have collected:

We've read and perhaps memorized Psalm 23. We know about still waters and green pastures. This text narrows our vision to the "dark valley" and offers an explanation for how these words might have meaning for us today.

In the ancient world, as in ours today, shepherds were herders and tenders of sheep, but back then, "shepherd" was also a metaphor for the role kings were to play. They were to tend their subjects, providing for them and protecting them. Problem was, many of the kings were lousy shepherds of their people, either inept or more concerned with their own aggrandizement.

Thus, for someone in that culture to say, "The Lord is my shepherd" was similar to saying, "The Lord is my king," and the point was that God does what a king/shepherd is supposed to do. The person was declaring an intention to live under God's rule, and the rest of the Psalm then

becomes a description of the good things that come to that person as a subject of this king.

Thus, because the Lord is a good shepherd and I am a member of his flock, I shall not be in want. I will have what I need. The references to lying down in green pastures, being led beside still waters and fearing no evil in the valley of the shadow of death are poetic ways of saying the Shepherd-King provides what I need to stay alive.

Although we're used to hearing verse 4 in the KJV as "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death ...," the underlying Hebrew can also mean simply "place of deep darkness." Thus, the NRSV renders this verse as "Even though I walk through the darkest valley. ... " In that reading, the Psalm becomes a statement of God's shepherding us in the difficult, troubled and hard stretches we go through in life itself.

The Psalm continues in that mode, talking about life, and it concludes, "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life" That's because the Lord is my shepherd.

The psalmist takes comfort that the Shepherd has a rod and staff at the ready to protect him, but another fear-reducing factor was likely that the Shepherd had been through this valley before. Only a foolhardy shepherd would take his flock into a dark valley he'd never been in before. The only reason for leading sheep into or through a valley where there might be risk to the sheep is because the shepherd knows there's something the flock needs - grass or water or shelter - in the valley or at the other end of it and that he can handle whatever threats to the sheep might occur there. We could say the shepherd has first taken a "test drive" in the valley and knows that the rod and staff will be sufficient to handle the threats therein. Thus, this Psalm becomes a statement of confidence in God. Whether our dark valleys are times of trouble or the

actual passage through death itself, we believe God is not only with us but is more than equal to whatever threats to our spiritual well-being may lurk within that darkness.

But, of course, that isn't the kind of thing you can prove ahead of time. The matters that religion, in general, and Christianity, in particular, are most interested in aren't of the sort that lend themselves to the kinds of proof skeptics seek. That's why Psalm 23 is a song of confidence, not a treatise on proof.

In writing to the Romans, Paul talks about confidence in God, using Abraham as a model. Paul tells of God's promise to Abraham that a nation would descend from him and the story of how Abraham, despite being old and despite being married to a childless woman well past child-bearing years, believed God. Paul states it like this:

[Abraham] did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was already as good as dead (for he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb. No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, being fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised (Romans 4:19-21).

Paul actually overstates the case a bit, for Genesis itself tells of Abraham being troubled by some doubts when years passed and no child was born to Sarah (see Genesis 15:1-8 and 17:17-18). Yet Paul is essentially correct. For despite Abraham's doubts, he kept coming back to God's promise. And, as we know, eventually a son, Isaac, was born to the couple, and God's promise to Abraham was fulfilled through him and his descendants.

And isn't that the way faith functions for us, as well? We have nothing resembling proof that God will be with us in the dark places of life, but we do have the testimony of Scripture and of other Christians that God has been there before us and knows the way through it. The depth of the

darkness sometimes shakes our confidence, but the testimony of people of faith and of the Scripture is that God doesn't leave us alone in the dark valleys.

The Psalms, in general, recount all sorts of human troubles, despair and fears, but like a compass needle that keeps swinging back to the north, they keep coming back to the confidence that God is with us in the darkness. So when Psalm 23 talks about God's rod and staff being a source of comfort in the frightening valleys we go through, it is stating the main point of the whole book of Psalms.

One of the other Psalms, 139, can even be read as evidence that God has test-driven the dark valleys ahead of us. The author of that Psalm says:

Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast. If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night," even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you (Psalm 139:7-12).

That's a testimony from someone who's been in a dark valley, and that person invites us to believe that our experience in the valley will be similar, if we trust God. To trust God doesn't mean we have to muster up belief or desperately try to shore up shaky hope. It does mean we rely on more than just what our fears tell us. Confidence in God doesn't change the facts about the world, but it does change the conclusions we draw about those facts.

For example, two people can look at the same facts and arrive at opposite conclusions. One man might look at the dark valleys in life and conclude, "There is no God. If there were, he'd have never let us go through such troubles."

Another can look at those dark valleys and say, "It's so comforting that God has gone through them first so we can trust him to shepherd us while we're in them." That allows us to trust that God is never overcome by the darkness. It gives us the confidence that when we're in a dark valley, we'll find God there with us, and he will help us.

And a few quotes that may apply...

Suffering is a wonderful fertilizer for the roots of character.

The great objective of this life is character, for it is the only thing we can carry with us into eternity. And gaining as much of the highest character possible is the purpose of our trials.

-Austin Phelps.

You will come to know that what appears today to be a sacrifice will prove instead to be the greatest investment that you will ever make.

Gordon B. Hinkley.

Some thoughts on perseverance:

Walter Elliott said in *The Spiritual Life*, "*Perseverance is not a long race; it is many short races one after another.*"

If you are going through hell, keep going.

-Winston Churchill.

Defeat is simply a signal to press onward.

-Helen Keller.

A difficult time can be more readily endured if we retain the conviction that our existence holds a purpose - a cause to pursue, a person to love, a goal to achieve.

-John Maxwell.

The line between failure and success is so fine that we scarcely know when we pass it - so fine that we often are on the line and do not know it.

-Ralph Waldo Emerson.

Prayer:

Gracious and loving Lord, we might walk through the deepest and darkest valleys of our lives: sickness, job loss, broken marriages, children who've lost their way and, yes, even death. We know these valleys are a part of life that humanity has had to travel since Adam and Eve. But we know that the valley is not the destination. We know the One who has faithfully led his followers through this valley countless times before. For, you, O Lord, are our Shepherd; we shall not want. You, O Lord, lead us beside the still waters. You lead us in the paths of righteousness. We will fear no evil; we will fear nothing in this valley of darkness for you, O Lord, are our Shepherd. Amen.

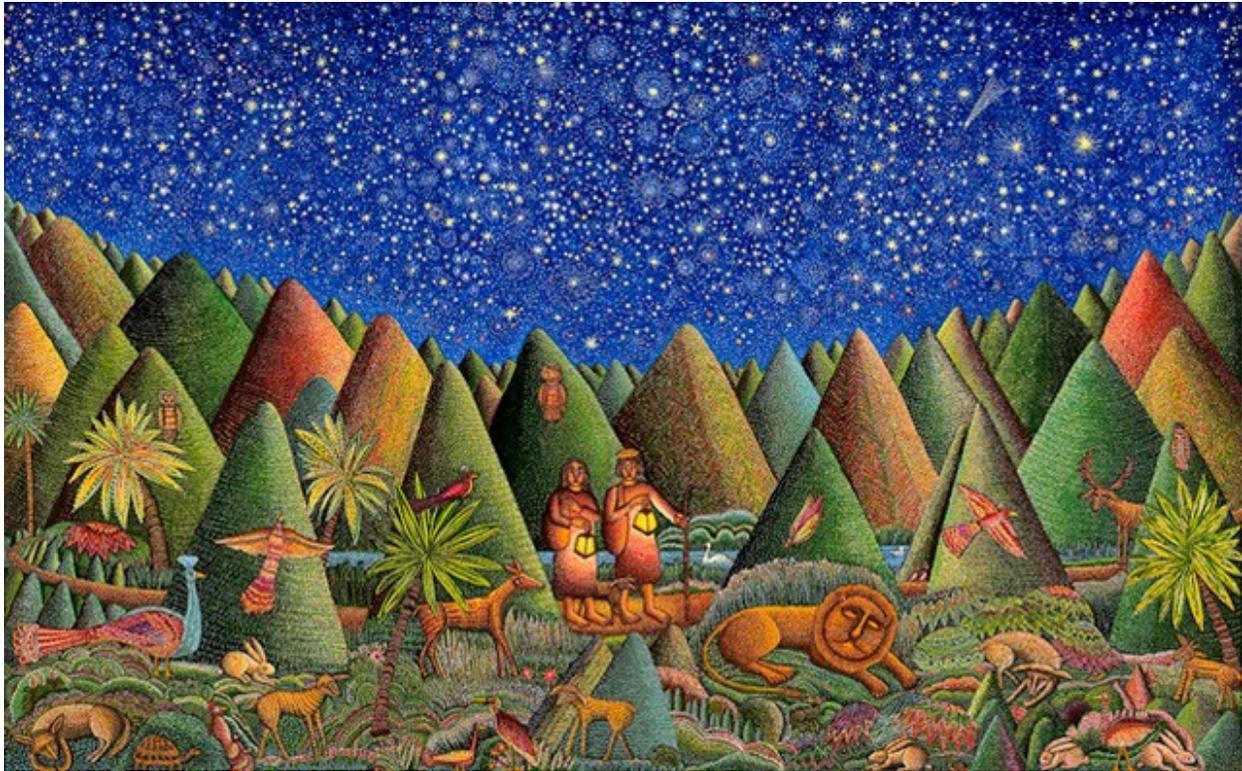
(Thanks to my usual sources – Christian Century, Christianity Today, the Homiletics publications to which I subscribe, The PCUSA website...,etc.

Grace and Peace

Henry

In addition to YoYo Ma's *Songs of Comfort* available online, the following are the two things I found with from the arts for this Sunday. One is a link to visual art that depicts Psalm 23, as a visual narrative by John August Swanson.

https://www.eyekons.com/john_swanson_serigraphs/john_swanson_psalms_23_s



The second is a Lenten poem by Ann Weems that has an especially pertinent final verse, from her book [Kneeling In Jerusalem](#)

THE NUMBERS GAME

Number 1 On Forgiving Each Other

70 times 7...

a bit excessive, don't you think?

We're supposed to forgive each other 70 times 7.

Let's see: 70 times 7 is 490,

but who's counting?

490 for you and for him and for her and for them....

We'd need accountants!

How could we ever keep track?

Or is that the point?

Number 2: The Pastor's Priorities

99 percent of the congregation complains
(or at least frowns)
because the pastor is out of the office
(so much of the time).
Where, pray tell, is he?
Finding one lost sheep.
99 percent of the congregation complains.
Meanwhile, in heaven, the angels are rejoicing.

Number 3: 30 Pieces of Silver

30 pieces of silver
pass down the centuries
from hand to hand
burning into hearts
too cold
to have the eyes to see.

Number 4: Wherever 2 or 3

2 or 3...
It doesn't even have to be
Sunday morning.
It doesn't have to be
in the sanctuary.
We don't have to have
flowers or even music—
not even the clergy.
Just 2 or 3 gathering in his name...
and the Crucified and Risen One
will be here with us.

Weems, Ann. *Kneeling in Jerusalem* (p. 49). Presbyterian Publishing Corporation. Kindle Edition.

During this time, please send an email to judy2hanson@gmail.com, or text 909-519-5930, with Joys & Concerns requests

Joys & Concerns

Marilyn - friend's son, Jeff, finally got a job; friend, Kelly, in Phoenix finally had spinal fusion surgery. After almost 3 weeks in hospital and rehab, she is now recovering at home. Joyce - prayers for Julio and Delia; Julio going through pain; will need stent removed April 8; continued prayers for Rochelle. Delia - grand-nephew passed away; funeral will be Friday. Ako - Egbe ran yesterday but was in pain. Kathy S. - husband is diabetic; had wound that wouldn't heal & went to hospital; friend, Sara, is a cook; having pain and can't move her hands.

Continuing Prayers

Prayers for our country and elected ones. All people, law enforcement & civilians, affected by current violence in this country. Lynn Rodisch - healing. Pete - healing. Kofi - prayer. Loren Nelson - continued prayer.

Please Pray During Week of March 22, 2020 for the families of:

- ◆ Richard Bane
- ◆ Rudy & Terrie Burbank