March 30, 2014

Psalm 23

*Renewal*

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Greenland Hills United Methodist Church

Psalm 23 King James Version

“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 for ever.”

There are those Bible verses that I think of immediately when life is hard or something horrible happens. Romans 8:38-39, “For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Philippians 4:13 “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.” Jeremiah 29:11 “For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.” Or the 23rd Psalm.

All of these verses remind me that God is with me. When I feel sad or alone or afraid or tired or frustrated or hopeless, God is with me. When I feel like this Christian life is too hard and I don’t want to love my neighbor as myself or be in prayer for the poor, the lonely, or the oppressed, God is with me. When I do not know what to do, God is with me. When I feel like the struggles in this life are too hard and I want to quit, God is with me. When I feel like our world will never treat lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer people as human beings created by God and made in God’s good image, when I am frustrated at how slow change comes and when I am frustrated at World Vision or at the United Methodist Church, God reminds me to never give up. God reminds me of the question that was asked of my parents at my baptism and was asked of me at my confirmation. From the United Methodist Hymnal page 34, “Do you accept the freedom and power God gives you to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves?” I do.

We have been on a Lenten journey to the cross as we prepare our hearts for the sadness of Good Friday. Lent is a journey into suffering when we are invited to stop, to listen, to pay attention, to consider who we are as dust apart from whose we are in our baptism. We are all God's precious children, forgiven, loved, held, and only from that identity are we gifted and called and sent to do God's work in the world. At the beginning of Lent I encouraged all of us to enter a quiet place of awe during these six weeks because in order to take up our cross we have to sit and rest and feel the embrace of our Creator God.

May we feel that embrace in Psalm 23. The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. And, yet, so often, I find that I do. I want, desperately, for a moment of silence beside the still waters. I want to walk along the paths of righteousness. I ache to sit in the open, green meadow and breath warm, fresh air.

God is the good shepherd who guides us. God cares for, provides for, and protects us. In Psalm 23, the shepherd provides green pastures for grazing, still waters for drinking, and right paths for travel from one grazing place to another. In troubled areas, the protection of the shepherd provides safe passage for the flock. And even when trouble is nearby, the shepherd makes sure that the flock can feed and water in safety and can lie down for a night's rest. Therefore, the flock can count on continued existence because of the faithfulness of the shepherd.

Psalm 23 is a prayer that hopes for a deep, inner wellspring of God-given peace that overflows even when we stride into the darkest corners of the earth. When we find ourselves in those dark valleys, and we are completely spent, emotionally, spiritually and physically, and we reach back to grasp for the green pasture and manage only a blade or two of grass. We seek hope but find we have strayed among the rocks while the shepherd was calling us to pasture.

Some of you may be familiar with the name Catherine Marshall. She was a Christian author who wrote such classics as *Christy*, which became a television series.   There was a time in her life when she felt as if the flame of God’s love had gone out. The dark night of her soul began with the sudden death of her infant grandchild.

In her journal, which she later published under the title *Light in My Darkness*, she shared her pain, “Inside I am dry and lonely, unable to accomplish anything, really, just going through the motions of life, barely able to do that. It is more than a dry period. I’ve been through those before and did not lose the presence of God. This is darkness. Deadness. Awful in the way it numbs you, makes you cold and indifferent. You do the very things, say the very word, you know you should not. Frightening!" (p. 176.)  But she did not give up. She kept praying. She kept doing everything she could to stir up the fire.

Later in her journal she wrote the following, "A feeling rises up inside me that little trickles of praise are now running together, merging, beginning to form a small river of praise. It began mechanically, yet now has increasingly the feel of spontaneous emotion. Slowly but surely my mind is being cleansed. Rich, beautiful, positive words are taking over, chasing away the negative ones. I am being filled with Your light.  Lord Jesus, how radiant and glorious is the light of Yours!.... Suddenly I felt the living presence of Jesus. What joy to have this again in my life!" (*Light in My Darkness*, p. 221).

Did you notice that she said, it began mechanically? We think we must begin in glory but she began mechanically... You know that line, just do it. Well she did.

Life is so fast it seems like there is never a moment to pause and restore our souls among fields of bluebonnets and babbling streams of water. Perhaps that is why, despite its beauty, the Psalmist says they were *made* to lie down in green pastures. Maybe it is simply not our natural state to be still, so we must be made to stop. Perhaps we cannot find the green pastures without the shepherd’s staff beside us. So we are, at various times in our lives, made to be still, forced by circumstances beyond our control to stop because we simply can go no farther. We are lying there in the grass with the sun warming our face and the mosquitos find us. We were happily resting in the presence of God when trouble comes. And we realize then that there is no difference between those still waters that we long for and the dry death valleys we have stumbled through. In the stillness we realize that in both the still waters and the death valleys God’s presence is there.

As I was thinking about this sermon Union, the new church start and coffee shop that Greenland Hills is a partner church with, posted this dialogue on its facebook page. Written by JRR Tolkein this is the conversation between Sam and Frodo in the second movie of the Lord of the Rings trilogy.

Sam says, “By rights we shouldn’t even be here. But we are. It’s like in the great stories, Mr. Frodo. The ones that really mattered. Full of darkness and danger, they were. And sometimes you didn’t want to know the end. Because how could the end be happy? How could the world go back to the way it was when so much bad had happened? But in the end, it’s only a passing thing, this shadow. Even darkness must pass. A new day will come. And when the sun shines it will shine out the clearer. Those were the stories that stayed with you. That meant something, even if you were too small to understand why. But I think, Mr. Frodo, I do understand. I know now. Folk in those stories had lots of chances of turning back, only they didn’t. They kept going. Because they were holding on to something.

Frodo asks, “What are we holding onto, Sam?

Sam responds, “That there’s some good in this world, Mr. Frodo… and it’s worth fighting for.”

We are all working to make the world better, that is what Methodist Christians are all about. John Wesley, the first Methodist, was focused on holy living, righteous works and social justice.  He was more interested in being a disciple of Jesus in the here and now. May the words of Psalm 23 encourage us and renew us today so we can be a disciple of Jesus in the here and now.