

**The House of the Lord
Psalm 23
Jon Frost**

At the 200th anniversary celebration of the Congregational Church of Rupert, Vermont, pastor and writer Frederick Buechner preached a sermon on Psalm 23. In the sermon, he mentions some highlights from the church's past, 2 of which especially peaked my curiosity. The first is that the church began in 1786 with seven members and their first pastor who was named Reverend...wait for it...Increase Graves. His name was Increase Graves. You can't make this stuff up!

The second was a brief episode from a time when a new steeple and bell tower were being constructed and according to local sources church member Lyman Woodard exhibited his agility by standing on his head in the belfry with his feet toward heaven. And that's pretty much all that is said about that. You can google it later.

What an odd thing to do. It's not the sort of thing you expect to see in a church, especially in 1831! There's a certain way to be the church and standing on your head in the new bell tower is certainly not that. You can imagine other members of the congregation shocked at the impropriety, the lack of decorum.

This image has stuck with me because it seems like in a very short amount of time, the way of being the Church has been turned upside down. Suddenly, the only way we are gathering is through means of technology, which one week in feels about as normal and natural as standing on your head in a bell tower.

Which is why I was so relieved, when looking at the lectionary, to see Psalm 23 waiting there. In the midst of a chaotic and anxious week, when I discovered that along with two others I had returned from Honduras just days before that country closed its borders entirely, the opening words "The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want" washed over me and silenced all the noise except the comforting voice of God's Spirit.

So I suppose in some sense I was drawn to focusing on Psalm 23 in worship because I figured it would do us all some good to simply dwell in the richness of the words. But I had also already been dwelling in the Psalms the last couple of months because the worship in our Lenten Vespers services, of which we had only two unfortunately, was almost entirely comprised of Psalms.

There are undoubtedly many reasons why Psalm 23 is such a beloved Psalm. But one of the things I believe that makes it so powerful, so timeless, is that it perfectly captures in 6 verses what the entire book of Psalms does in 150 unique Psalms. The 4th century church father Athanasius wrote that the book of Psalms "has this peculiar marvel of its

own, that within it are represented and portrayed in all their great variety the movements of the human soul.”

Contemporary scholar Walter Brueggemann, in what for me has been an immensely helpful framework for reading and praying the Psalms, suggests that the Psalms show us a life of faith in which we move with God in terms of being “securely oriented, painfully disoriented, and surprisingly reoriented.” With the utmost brevity and beauty, Psalm 23 captures the richness and depth of life with God in just 6 verses.

A securely oriented faith is safe and settled, confident that God is God and that’s God’s promises are sure. You can hear this in the first three verses and the confident assurance that comes from the provision and protection of a loving shepherd. It’s a “watch the sunrise with a delicious cup of coffee where everything is beautiful” kind of faith.

A painfully disoriented faith is situated in moments where, as we say, life happens. It is life in the darkest valley where evil lurks; or as in perhaps a more familiar version “the valley of the shadow of death.” The shift to addressing God in the 2nd person in verses 4-5 makes it more personal. The confidence of an oriented faith seems like a distant memory. I don’t know about you, but I am really resonating with the idea of disorientation right now.

Fear and anxiety surround us as the effects of the coronavirus pandemic reach deep into our lives and livelihoods.

We long to connect with others, which is the main thing we cannot do, at least in person. These days have also brought tremendous loss and disappointment as we all have had to let things go; events we had worked so hard to plan, music we couldn’t wait to share with others, countless gatherings with friends, family, co-workers. It has been a lot to take in. For many, the global disorientation is layered upon an already disoriented personal life because of a difficult diagnosis, the struggle to grow a family, the already present stress and anxiety of life in a world without a pandemic. It is a lot to carry.

We know from experience that orientation isn’t the full picture. Neither is disorientation. What the Psalms do so well, and in particular Psalm 23, is speak so honestly and vulnerably about the valley while maintaining hope that God will show up, bringing us into a surprising new orientation. Brueggemann describes it so beautifully: “This is not an automatic movement that can be presumed upon or predicted. Nor is it a return to the old form, a return to normalcy as though nothing had happened. It is rather all things new. And when it happens, it is always a surprise, always a gift of graciousness, and always an experience that evokes gratitude.”

I read the second half of this Psalm very differently this week. Because of how the verses are separated, I’d always read verses 5-6 as though there were a scene change from verse 4, when we were in the darkest valley but then whisked away to a new scene. But the table that is prepared in verse 5 has this pesky line about “in the presence of my enemies.” Why are they there if we’re out of the darkest valley? What if

there is no scene change and the amazing imagery and metaphor of verses 5-6, the amazing fresh arrival of God's compassion and mercy occurs precisely when we are in the darkest valley and not once we are out of it? What if the table is set and the oil is poured precisely in those places and moments when it is the hardest not to fear the evil that surrounds?

What if it is in the wilderness that we will find the most fertile soil for God to grow our faith?

Friends, we are all living into a new reality the duration of which we can't be entirely certain. But what I am certain of is that this is an opportunity to see fresh movements of God's Spirit as we learn and dream, collaborate and conspire about what it means to be the Church together in this time, which honestly feels right now like a valley. But in this valley, in this time of disorientation, I believe that God will move among us in ways we couldn't have imagined or thought possible and lead us into a new future together.

Amen.

Resources

Opening illustration found on the following blog:

https://day1.org/articles/5d9b820ef71918cdf200392a/weekly_sermon_illustration_the_own_in_the_belfry_

Brueggemann, Walter. Praying the Psalms: Engaging Scripture and the Life of the Spirit. Paternoster, 2007.

Witvliet, John D. The Biblical Psalms in Christian Worship: a Brief Introduction and Guide to Resources. William B. Eerdmans Pub., 2007.