



From the Pulpit: August 22, 2021

Twenty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time

The Reverend Christine V. Hides

Psalm 23:4b

How to Love the World Again, V: Pieces of Heaven

Last week Katie took us on a hike through the Valley of Shadows in our verse by verse journey through Psalm 23 which Bill, Katie and I pair with poetry and reflections from the recent book *How to Love the World: Poems of Gratitude and Hope*. Today we will explore the second half of verse four: “For thou art with me, thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me” alongside the theme, “Pieces of Heaven.”

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.

“the sky begins where
it meets the ground—
that we are always
walking in the sky”

the boats below were getting. They wondered how much farther. And then pausing to look out toward the horizon Marielle asked me, ‘Mom where does the sky start.’ I told her that the sky begins where it meets the ground—that we are always walking in the sky. My husband chuckled, not sure if this true but rather abstract explanation would satisfy her very practical preschool curiosity.

I don’t know what impression that answer made on her, but I do know that particular wondering did lodge in my own heart, right about the time I began to hear the call to ministry. As a teacher I had seen how young children draw the blue sky up above the heads of their family, the trees,

and the flowers. As someone who yearned to feel God as close as the summer breeze on my skin, walking in the sky became my guiding metaphor for imagining God’s presence: Invisible yet constant, tangible yet full of mystery.

Today, I’m inviting you to join me on another hike, a popular one up the bluff near Devil’s Lake in Wisconsin. The trail is short, just under a half mile, but steep, so we will find footholds in stone steps carved into the trail. The picturesque balanced rocks are the reward for the effort; their backdrop is a view of the lake below and miles of Wisconsin forests as far as the eye can see. I first hiked this trail with my girls when they were young—maybe 4 and 6. Marielle held my hand, using it to pull her tiny legs up the big steps. As we walked the girls noticed how small

Author and preacher Diana Butler Bass, devotes a whole chapter to “sky” in her book *Grounded: Finding God in the World—A Spiritual Revolution* in which she boldly explores the question, “where is God” in conversation with the soil, air, and water. She describes a societal and spiritual yearning in which large numbers of American Christians are shifting from a vertical, distant, and often strict perception of God toward one where God moves and dwells among us.

In this grounded paradigm, which is both new and ancient, heaven is a place where she writes, “dirt, water, and air all come together to feed us, to heal the earth, to produce the atmosphere we need to survive.”¹ Heaven, here and now.

“For thou art with me.” The second part of the fourth verse, is located at the exact center of the 23rd Psalm. This verse also shifts our understanding of God’s proximity. The psalmist begins by talking about what God the shepherd does: God leads, God makes, God restores. And now perhaps having made it through the valley of shadows, or at least to a point where it is not so raw and new, the psalmist speaks directly to God “you are with me.” The shepherds’ tools, the staff to guide, and the rod to protect from predators are tangible objects which bring comfort and assurance. The death of a loved one, the depths of addiction, the failed relationship, the loss of a job, the betrayal, the diagnosis, the bouts of depression—each of us will walk through the valley of shadows. In these hard places familiar to us, all this psalm becomes a lifeline to cling to, even as we need every bit of faith and trust we have to be able to whisper tentatively to our maker, “For you are with me.”

So many of us are exhausted from the emotional, physical, and spiritual toll of the ongoing pandemic and the daily headlines that pile up from Haiti and Afghanistan, New England, Texas, North Carolina, and California. “Where are you God?” we might dare to ask in the face of tragedy and injustice.

“For you are with me.” At the heart of Psalm 23 we find that life with God, or what some call heaven, isn’t a distant place in another life, but a relationship possible here and now.

One of the ways to deepen this relationship is to love—to love God is to love what God loves—to notice and appreciate the sacred interconnectedness divinely woven into all creation.

Heather Swan, today’s poet from our “How to Love the World Again Series” calls these deep connections “kinship.” Working with young adults at UW Madison—not too far from our Devil’s Lake hike—she reminds

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us that young people have grown up in an apocalyptic narrative.² Some of you like me, have 20 year olds who were born around 9/11, who were old enough to worry about the financial collapse of 2008, who have always lived in a country at war, who never knew school without lockdown drills, for whom environmental disaster is very real, and whose first years of college were interrupted by a global pandemic.

Amidst the doom and gloom, Swan sends her college students outside with phones off, to listen and write. It is outdoors where she knows her students will revel in the wonders of nature—falling in love with what they see. From that place of deep love she asserts, none of us can help

but begin to live more gently on this earth.³ Listen for the interconnected relationships she writes of in her poem, “Rabbit”:

² <https://www.wordwoman.com/stubborn-praise-october-12-2020-with-guest-heather-swan/>

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¹ Butler Bass, Diana. *Grounded: Finding God in the World—A Spiritual Revolution*. page 121.

*After a long numbness, I wake
and suddenly I'm noticing everything,
all of it piercing me with its beautiful,
radical trust: the carpenter bee tonguing
the needles of the echinacea believing
in their sweetness, the exuberance
of an orange day lily unfolding itself
at the edge of the street, and the way
the moss knows the stone, and the stone
accepts its trespass, and the way
the dog
on his leash turns to see if I'm
holding on,
certain I know where to go. And
the way
the baby rabbit—whose
trembling ears
are the most delicate cups,
—trusts me,
because I pried the same dog's jaws
off his hips, and then allows me to
feed him
clover when his back legs no
longer work,
forcing me to think about forgiveness
and those I need to forgive,
and to hope
I am forgiven, and that just maybe
I can forgive myself.
This unstoppable, excruciating
tenderness everywhere inviting
us, always inviting.
And then later, the firefly
illuminating the lantern of its body,
like us each time we laugh.*

Perhaps God's presence feels like moss trying to cling to slick stone, or perhaps it feels as sure as the leash tethering us to our pandemic puppies. It might feel as vulnerable as the coneflower trusting the honeybee. Perhaps it feels like engaging in the tender work of forgiving and being forgiven for wounds caused in well-intentioned, yet divisive conversations. Perhaps it looks like staring into the eyes of another living creature, becoming newly aware of their beauty and value—just as Jenny Kendler invites us to do in her art piece, *Birds Watching* located at the Spaulding entrance of Chicago's 606

trailway—where 100 intricate painted bird eyes are mounted on aluminum. Even in the midst of war and conflict, environmental catastrophe, glaring injustice, and pandemic fatigue, artists and poets—and hopefully preachers too—point us toward heaven in our midst, if we pause, find a corner of nature—even if just a blade of grass in a sidewalk crack or a park fashioned from an abandoned railway. Listen. Stare into the mystery and wonder of nature's soul.

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Jesus who proclaimed the kingdom of heaven is at hand was a master at using everyday objects to bring us into awareness of God. In Matthew 13:33 he needs just one verse about yeast to bring heaven near: “The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.”

Perhaps you took up sourdough baking recently? I dabbled. The only pet in our house is our sourdough starter, Simone. She is named for St. Simons Island Georgia, where the daughter of my mom's friend worked in a restaurant that divided up their starter among their employees to keep it alive when they shut down in March 2020. Or so I've been told.

Baking sourdough is the process of tending to the invisible, yet transformative power of the yeast—or

leaven, that permeates the entirety of the dough. Simone, I've learned is quite resilient, but needs to be fed a regular diet of flour and water. And if I want to bake a crusty loaf of bread I must start the process at least 48 hours in advance, ripening the starter until the yeast is bursting with life—bubbles fast enough to fill the jar in 8 hours. Then it can be kneaded with flour, left to rest overnight, and baked in a heavy pot. The end result is a taste of heaven—warm, crusty bread fresh from the oven.

—Prayers of the People—

By The Reverend Dr. Katie Snipes Lancaster

In the incarnation, we know God is with us, kneading goodness and life, the leaven into every corner of the world. In the parable's narrative there is room for us to join the woman in her creation—tending the soil to nourish the grain, protecting the water needed for growth, breathing the clean air in and out with kindred plant life, sharing the warm loaves with neighbors—all earthy ways we participate in the flourishing of life. As we awaken to God's permeating presence even in the most unlikely and invisible places, our hearts become the ground where deep peace, joy, and loving action grow. Earth ever transforming into heaven.

Like many of you, I am tired of this pandemic and the constant pivoting, and the unrelenting polarization of it. And yet even in COVID..., and even because of it, we are reminded of the deep interconnectedness of all creation. Children, youth, and yes adults too—are asking the timeless questions about God's marvelous and mysterious nature, and just where God might be in the midst of this tender, messy, and sometimes hard life. As we prepare for a new program year, let me, the children's minister, and us this faithful congregation never tire of wandering and wondering in the sky with those who ask big questions.

For you are with me. The rod and the staff, the leash and the stone, the earth and the sky, the rabbit and the firefly, the yeast and the loaf—so many tangible signs of God's presence and grace, pieces of heaven everywhere. Let us awaken from numbness, let all of it pierce us with "beautiful, radical trust." In everyday beauty, in the metaphors of the Psalms, in the incarnation of Christ, may our lives become what others have eloquently described as sacramental lives, ones in which everything, **every thing** and person mediates God."⁴

In the name of the father, son, and holy spirit, Amen.

As the mystery of summer engulfs us, we remember how fleeting each season of our lives can be, and we are reengaged to be people of gratitude.

Thank you God for this fine day.

For the gift of warm sun.

For the rain, when it arrives soft upon thirsty ground.

For the person sitting to our left, our right.

For the friends and neighbors who oil the hinges of our heart's door with love.

For the stranger in our midst, who reminds us that we are all united in the gift of life through breath and heartbeat and common need.

Let us see you in the gift of life, in our waking, in our body's rhythms, in our growing up and aging, in the great cloud of witnesses who accompany us all the days of our life.

For this and so much more we are grateful, O God. Do not let our gratitude be platitudes, but instead help us to notice with authenticity the small things that add up to great joy, the moments that resonate, and the connections that make up the song of life.

Be with those who grieve.

Those who are sick.

Those who are enduring treatments.

Those who dwell in uncertain futures.

Be with those we love who are worried, anxious, unable to shake their troubles.

Be especially in Afghanistan. Haiti. The Hospitalized.

Do not let us live unconcerned, dismissive, deaf to the sorrows of the world. Help us to hear, help us to respond, help us to be balm and hope and love embodied.

Sing to us deep within the resonant chambers of our body, where we know your presence, everlasting, ever-known. Let our lives give testimony to the melody of love that you hope to string between us. Change us. Let us be transformed.

And hear us as we unite our voices praying the prayer Jesus teaches us saying.... Our Father....

⁴ Peterson, Eugene. *Answering God*. page 79.