



From the Pulpit: August 15, 2021

Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time

The Reverend Dr. Katie Snipes Lancaster

Psalm 23:4a

Psalm 23 by Robert Alter

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.
In grass meadows He makes me lie down,
by quiet waters guides me.
My life he brings back.
He leads me on pathways of justice
for his name's sake.
Though I walk in the vale of
death's shadow,
I fear no harm, for you are
with me.
Your rod and your staff—
it is they that console me.
You set out a table before me
in the face of my foes.
You moisten my head with oil,
my cup overflows.
Let but goodness and kindness
pursue me
all the days of my life.
And I shall dwell in the house of the Lord
for many long days.

"Praise of Darkness"

by Francine Marie Tolf

*How to Love the World, Poems of
Gratitude and Hope*

We touch one another
with defter fingers
at night.
Rain sounds different,
its steady falling
a remembered wisdom.
What if the dark waters
waiting to carry us home
slept inside every one of us?
We were loved
before stars existed.
We are older than light

How to Love the World Again, IV: Small Victories

There may not be anything easy about a sermon that looks at verse 4 of Psalm 23. The ancient words get recycled year after year, millennia after millennia because we instinctively know something about the "Valley of the Shadow of Death." On the most personal, intimate level, we come face to face, in our own way, the un/spoken, un/disclosed, deep-seated experience of unending ache, ceaseless grief, relentless worry, boundless exhaustion. Part of what gives Psalm 23 power is its acknowledgment of such a valley. We cannot admit and accept this kind of reality except sideways through the poetry of the Psalms that were given to us as a gift before we were born.

"How do you put into
words the part of the
valley where your pain
is so great"

When I hear Psalm 23 read aloud,
all the valleys intermingle: mine,

yours, the cavernous ones of those who have long succumbed to the press of mortality. And I see a collective ravine too, a well-established, earthy canyon that seems to dip and twist in ways yet unexpected. Today just the words Afghanistan, Haiti, Delta evoke exactly what Psalm 23 envisions.

How do we walk that way without fear? How do we let loose our grip on what keeps us up at night? How do we release worry? Abandon the butterflies in our bellies? How do we do what the Psalmist hopes, fear none of it?

There is a place in India called "The Valley of Shadows." It is dwarfed by mile-high mountain peaks, and from high above it looks like a crack in the sidewalk. Just step over it, Google images seem to beg.

But down in the Valley of Shadows the walls extend straight up 200 feet on either side, and at some points you can touch both valley walls, left hand here, right hand there. You have to fly to Mumbai to get there, take a train, hop in a jeep, spend the night in a little adjacent village where tourists, at least tourists in another mythic non-COVID time, congregate to begin their hike to the valley.

In the rainy season you can't walk through the Valley of Shadows, it becomes an impassable river, rocks slick, and, overhead the possibility of falling boulders destabilized by the constant rain. Go in October or November maybe. You can hike the mile-long valley in less than five hours, with minimal cave crawling, rappelling, and just a short length of rope ladder to get you across. The path is littered with boulders. There is just one way in and one way out. Almost no plants grow in the Valley of Shadows. It is almost always in shadow. The sun at high noon might peek in momentarily but otherwise it is shrouded in shadow. Mosquitoes breed in the little pools of water. Snakes too. No other animals to speak of. Just you and the valley.

Of course there are stunning photos from the vista at the end of the valley. People want a triumphant pose, arms akimbo or raised in celebration. They made it. They cleared the valley. They completed the hike. There is color. Sunlight. Beauty. But what about the photos from mid-hike? As the name suggests, it is a valley of shadow. The colors are muted. Earth-tones, muffled. Hikers, weary. Boulders, not entirely unsurmountable, but sizable nonetheless. The view is dampened by the valley walls. You can hardly even take a photo from mid-hike without being framed by the steep valley walls, a reminder that there's no way out but through.

Maybe we're the same about our own valleys. We want to tell the end of the story. We want to share the photo with the triumphant pose, arms akimbo, raised in celebration. The photos mid-valley aren't as picturesque. Those stories are harder to tell. How do you put into words the part of the valley where your pain is so great "you can't think about or pay attention to anything but your own pain, the rest of the world and all other life don't matter."¹

*"This is no view
from the top or
the triumphant
pose from the
end. Psalm 23 and
Jesus' subsequent
evocative allegory
mean relinquishing
fear in the middle
of the valley where
harm is
possible and evil
is a pervasive
possibility, knowing
that there is no
other way out..."*

In that kind of valley, we walk "between mountains that look older than memory" but we can't enjoy the view.² There is no view to speak of. There is only valley. Boulder. Obstacle. From above, the Valley of Shadow disappears. The crack in the landscape seems miniscule. You might not even notice the valley at first glance. If you were hiking toward it, you might not know it was ahead. You wouldn't see it coming.

For those of us outside the valley, it's hard to imagine life 200 feet below. I'm not in Haiti this morning. I'm not in Kabul. I'm not an emergency room doctor or a patient in Florida that will see 15,000 COVID hospitalizations today. I'm not in those valleys. And yet if we press our ear to the gospel, if we draw near to Jesus, we will hear the echo of Psalm 23. Reverberating. Giving us a new valley-orientation.

In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus recapitulates the formidable danger and real-life peril of the "valley" when he tells the parable of the Good Samaritan. We get just one verse of context, but it says everything: a man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho. He encountered thieves, who stripped him naked, beat him up, and left him near death.

¹ Budbill, David. "A Poem about Pain." *Tumbling toward the End*. (Copper Canyon Press, 2017).

² Milosz, Czeslaw. "On Pilgrimage." *New and Collected Poems: 1931–2001*. (Ecco, 2003).

Any first century listener would have known the Judaea countryside between Jerusalem and Jericho is a steep valley with a harrowing public path. “Down” from Jerusalem to Jericho is no joke, a half-mile difference in elevation over a mere 15 miles. There you walk all day in the valley, hidden from the sun, and the perpetual shadow makes a great place for bandits to hide. The valley is not just some metaphor when you’re on foot without cell-signal in the ancient near eastern desert.

We should have known that Jesus’ parable would end with someone enduring the many fears of rescuing someone left for dead in this ancient valley. Everyone else turned away. Even the ones who shouldn’t have. The Good Samaritan stays in the valley, becomes accompaniment, rescue, transport, a way through. Jesus is intimately familiar with the Psalms. Jesus is opening us up to the “valley of the shadow of death” where we are invited to “fear no evil.”

This is no view from the top or the triumphant pose from the end. Psalm 23 and Jesus’ subsequent evocative allegory mean relinquishing fear in the middle of the valley where harm is possible and evil is a pervasive possibility, knowing that there is no other way out, no sign of rescue, no elevator or helicopter to ferry you up and out.

“Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil.” My constant companion in Psalm study these days is Robert Alter and of course, he has new insight into these 17 words. He translates it differently no surprise, trying as much as possible to spotlight the terse thumbnail sketch of the Hebrew Poetry. He says that the King James Version takes 17 words to translate 8, and 20 syllables to translate 11. Too wordy. Hebrew poetry rejects rambling and condenses endless hours in the valley into 11 short syllables.

So, Robert Alter suggests we hear it this way: “Though I walk in the vale of death’s shadow, I fear no harm.” His translator-friend thought maybe he was trying too hard, annoyingly innovative, trying to abstain from any King James vocabulary. “Though I walk in the vale of death’s

shadow, I fear no harm.” He’s trying to protect the “concise cadence” and “cinched effect” of Hebrew poetry that transports us to that stark place where sunlight ceases and life-as-we-know-it withers.³ This is Nike’s “Just do it” or Shakespeare’s “to be or not to be” that only sounds good in the original. It cannot be wordily translated into another language (though apparently Nike couldn’t translate “Just do it” into Chinese, and had to go with something akin to “use sports” to get their point across, or just leave their slogan untranslated).

*“I must relinquish
my fear and hand
it over to the
Shepherd-God.
Maybe I can release
my fear because
I know that
the Lord is my
Shepherd, who does
carry me ‘through.’”*

Some translators veer one step further and instead of translating the Hebrew tsel/mawet as tsel “shadow” and mawet “death,” seek a more poetic “deep shadow” or “deep darkness.”⁴ Which brings us in tune with those persistent Advent verses, “The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned.” We get a glimmer of hope, that light and darkness oscillate, that valley and rescue might coexist.

That is not to say that there is gift in the valley of shadow. There may be blessing. Kinship. Transcendence. Glimmers of beauty and hope. But we should not confuse this with gift.

One of you has mentioned to me that the most important word for you in

Psalm 23 is the word “through.” That you trust again and again, that the Lord your Shepherd, carries you through. I want to live there, within the word “through.” The only way I can do it is to remember the word “fear,” and remember that in every valley, I must relinquish my fear and hand it over to the Shepherd-God. Maybe I can release my fear because I know that the Lord is my Shepherd, who does carry me “through.” But maybe I only make it through because I hand over to God all of my fear, my fear of harm, my fear of evil, my fear of pain, my fear of letting go.

³ Alter, Robert. *The Book of Psalms: A Translation with Commentary*. (W. W. Norton: New York, 2007), xxx.

⁴ DeClausse-Walford, Nancy. *Introduction to the Psalms: A Song from Ancient Israel*. (Chalice Press, Nashville:1966), 39.

—Prayers of the People— By The Reverend Christine V. Hides

Today's poet Francine Marie Tolf says, "we touch one another with defter fingers at night"⁵ as if the valley accentuates the need for nimble-fingered attentiveness, expert navigation, keen, resourceful, expressions of love. We do not busy ourselves with unimportant things when we are in the Valley of Shadow. It is all survival. Persistence. Endurance. Even the hardest work of "Thank you. I love you. Goodbye," there on the cusp of death is its own kind of labor, the labor of release, of letting go. It's all new. Something we've never done before.

If Francine Marie Tolf is to help us to love the world again with her poetry, she can carry us with her attentiveness. We need her remembering that in the Valley "Rain sounds different, its steady falling a remembered wisdom." We need her wondering, "What if the dark waters waiting to carry us home slept inside every one of us?" so that we might connect to our own watery depth, here and now, and thereby live differently today: living that nimble-fingered attentiveness to love, now, abandoning what is unimportant, becoming re-attuned to our bodies, our families, our communities.

We need her pointing us to a longer view, saying "We were loved before stars existed. We are older than light." She points us out beyond the valley, to the night sky above. It may just be a sliver of starlit sky, but it can connect us to the infinite, the ineffable, drawing us up and out, in a way that welcomes the valley and the green pastures to coexist and overlap, such that we can affirm, even from the Valley of Shadow, that the Lord is my Shepherd. You have been in the valley before, but not *this* valley. It's all new. It is time again, to hand over all our fears to the Lord, shepherd and guide, and trust that there is a way through to the infinite, ineffable, that we will in God's own way, be drawn up and out.

Blessed are you, O God, whose strength and loving power encompass the universe, you breathed life into ancient primordial soup, and declared it good. You made covenant with your people, and led them toward fullness of life, your goodness made known in what some might call small victories: water from rock, the enduring voices of prophets and teachers, an empty manger on a cold night, the healing touch in the midst of a crowd, the mystery and promise of an empty tomb.

Your faithful presence reveals the long arc of your love reaching into our lives today, as we witness the sunlight golden through the evening clouds; monarchs flitting amidst the August flowers guided by some magnificent internal compass; the check or the job offer arriving just in time; the memories shared along the drive to the freshman move in; the relief at finding the right kind of glue stick on the back to school shopping trip; the custodians, teachers, and administrators putting in extra hours to create the best possible year of learning for students; the reluctant arm offered for the vaccine; the extra measure of patience smiling behind the mask; the deep peace that comes in the heartbreak.

God we are grateful. These small victories outline your long arc of steadfast love for all people. Yet, even as we delight in these tender moments, it sometimes feels as if the arc of justice is held by a wavering bowstring, threatening to snap backwards into brokenness and despair. And so we pray for those situations where your kingdom seems far off: the war torn nation being taken over by harmful forces; the people of Haiti facing the aftermath of the earthquake in the path of a storm; the millions of refugees who wait for safe haven on borders and in tent camps around the globe; the deep divides that separate neighbors and loved ones; the fires, heat, drought and flooding that devastate too many places; the impacts of climate change that seem irreversible; for illnesses that do not yet have a cure. We bring these heartfelt petitions and so many more to you, in trust and hope that it is your steady hand, not some thin bowstring, that bends the arc of peace and justice.

Blessed are you, O God, whose strength and loving power encompass the universe, you breathe life into our lives and restore creation, your love and grace are steadfast, you shape and transform our lives. Grant us joy in what is good, grant us wisdom, strength and courage to participate in bringing peace and hope into places where it is needed, through your son Jesus Christ who teaches us to pray...

⁵ Crews, James. *How to Love the World Again: Poems of Gratitude and Hope* (Storey Publishing: North Adams, MA, 2021), 82.