

Sunday, May 8, 2022

Rev. Robert W. Brown

SERMON

BAPTISM SUNDAY

Still Waters Run Deep

INTRODUCTION

How wonderful it is to participate in the Sacrament of Baptism on Mother's Day! It feels so appropriate I think because, to a very large degree, we get our idea of God from our mothers...and fathers too, but generally speaking, mothers are our first primary caretakers. As infants we are totally dependent on mother as the source of our food, comfort and sense of security. As we grow, many of us come to learn that there is a cosmic mother that we call "God." There is a creator behind all life, an organizing principle, a life-source who has provided all we need, an entity who can comfort us in times of trial and stress. And, by faith, we are given a profound sense of security. No matter what we might be going through, our faith in God offers us a sense of ultimate well-being, because God is actually with us.

Although the Bible tends to generally define God as "father," there is a distinct maternal character about God. Naturally, God is well beyond any specific gender identification, but I often like to think of God as feminine as well as masculine.

Throughout human history, we have struggled to define God, to understand God in relation to our particular lived experience. Often the most articulate ideas are expressed through the magic of poetry. Somehow, a poetic expression best conveys how our human experience intertwines with God's presence and activity among us, a God who is with us. Poets find language to express the deepest emotions. They frequently use metaphor to express joy, anger, pain and even reverent admiration. This poetic imagery somehow captures our imagination and can open our understanding of the Divine in ways that prose simply cannot.

The psalms, in particular, elegantly accomplish this poetic work. The psalms boldly articulate the full, unvarnished spectrum of the human condition. Like a magnet, they pull in every element that makes up the full spectrum of our human experience. And the real beauty is that we see that no matter what the condition might be, the psalms always point to the very real presence of God in all of it. They serve as wise counsel to guide us through every chapter of our lives. I often recommend reading one psalm and one proverb every day. It's like a wisdom vitamin for your soul.

Among the 150 psalms chosen to be canonized in scripture, one in particular is clearly the most popular and beloved. Many of us know it by heart. The 23rd Psalm is almost always recited in churches and synagogues, especially during times of mourning.

Yet the 23rd psalm is more than just a beautiful, poetic stanza. Through this elegant, tri-fold metaphor, Psalm 23 gives us precious insights into the character & nature of God and God's desire & promise for every one of us.

PSALM 23 (KJV)

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 are with me;
thy rod and they 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
forever.



PRAYER

Holy and beautiful God, you created this soft, green earth, and you called it good. You made the oceans depths and the soaring mountains. Even the seasons reflect your life, death and resurrection.

You are our refuge and strength. You are our very present help in times of trouble. Therefore, we will not fear.

Be with us now. Come Holy Spirit, Come. And, may my words and the meditation of all our hearts be pleasing and acceptable to you our Rock and our Redeemer.

AMEN

Do you ever feel like GOD is not paying ANY attention to us? Honestly, I sometimes feel that way. When it seems so undeniably clear to me that the unjust continue to gain more and more power or when blatant evil, corruption and lies systematically crush all that is good, reasonable and righteous, I can sometimes begin to feel so alone, powerless and hopeless. And when you think about it, we have witnessed so much escalating madness in our lifetime, ... we get worn down, cynical and worst of all complacent.

I do sometimes wonder, "where are you God in all this suffering? Don't you even care?" These desperate prayers & negative feelings eventually lead me back to scripture. It is where I always turn to find deep wisdom. Strangely enough, the stories I read, the poems, parables and proverbs all point to an alarming reality. These death-dealing forces that thrive on injustice and sustain oppression have always been, and will always be around. It would seem that unbridled evil and unchecked power are an ever-present part of the human struggle. I'll bet every generation since the dawn of time has asked that same question; is God even paying attention? Or worse, has God had simply abandoned us? They even taunted Jesus on the cross; "Where is your God now?" The disciples must have wondered why God didn't intervene? And for us today, we still echo the same refrain; how long, oh God, can this possibly go on before the whole human project crumbles into a sea of chaos and madness?

It's not unusual for people to ask me why, if there is a God, "why doesn't 'he' seem to care about injustice and innocent suffering? Where is your God when so many people are desperately suffering? Where is God when I'M suffering?" It is a fair question, Day by day we are assaulted by breaking news reporting yet another horrible atrocity, immanent threats and impending doom. It's not hard for us to feel that God is far away and totally uninvolved.

When pressed, I might say that God does see what is happening, and that God is right there in solidarity with all who suffer, surrounding them with compassion and love. Even though I truly believe that is true, I'm not sure how helpful or satisfying that is in the midst of despondency, grief or crisis. It often feels a little too shallow, even as it rolls off my tongue. It's too easy an answer, too flimsy to hold on to.

Even still, as we learned this past lent, when we honestly face our struggles head on, when we name our betrayals and explore our doubts, we take the first steps toward

redemption. We need to confront injustice with our eyes wide open, even when we benefit from the systems that sustain it. Facing our discomfort, doubts and fears is how we learn to stand compassionately with those who suffer and advocate for change. And then, we truly witness the very real and palpable presence of God. God's rescue always seems to come in the dark of night when we are at the very end of our rope and the only thing left to do is let go. It seems to be the only way. The astounding wonder and joy of Easter morning can only come when we endure the horror of Good Friday. All of our sacred scripture and also our own experiences teach us that God's redemption, rescue and resurrection is forever waiting to be made real on the far side of that dark valley of the shadow of death.

I think this is why the 23rd psalm stands out and resonates with so many of us. This poetic prayer has the power to refocus the foggy malaise of meaninglessness and reorient our point of view by narrowing in on a right sized relationship with a very real and entirely present God. We are sheep, wondering and wondering what the hell is going on! What horror could possibly be next? But here we understand God as our good shepherd, a constant presence, caring for our every need, protecting us comforting us and tenderly guiding us through even the darkest valleys that every life must travel. God, our good shepherd, leads us beside the still waters. He restoreth our souls along this journey of life with only goodness and mercy. Psalm 23 reminds us that in life or in death — in times of plenty or want — God is only good and worthy of our trust. It is a song of gratitude to a loving God even in the reality of a painful world.

These still waters run deep. We are birthed through this deep living water. We are claimed as God's beloved with living water, sustained and animated over the years by life-giving water. No matter how broken souls might feel, we can always be restored beside the still waters.

When our answers to unanswerable questions feel thin and weak, read psalm 23 real slow. Let these prayerful words wash over you like cool water on a hot summer day. Let them comfort you and restore your faith in the mysterious reality that our God is not powerless or indifferent. In a world full of chaos, threat and constant danger, God is always present. The Good Shepard, that we know as the risen Christ, is always with us, in our grief and sorrow and also in our celebrations, joy and gratitude.

In the deep stillness, beside the still water, we begin to see beyond the fear and despair. Like the psalmist, we begin to refocus all the pain and suffering. We remember God's astounding faithfulness and our own stories of transformation and surprising resurrections.

Here is another poet's take on it, Brené Brown¹ writes...

¹ Manifesto Of the Brave and Brokenhearted

We craft love from heartbreak,
Compassion from disappointment,
Courage from failure.

Showing up is our power.

Story is our way home.

Truth is our song.

We are the brave and brokenhearted.

We are rising strong.

People of God, trust in these words;

Surely goodness and mercy

shall follow me all the days of my life;