

*The Green, Green Grass of Home*

Psalm 23; Acts 2:42-47

Whitefish UMC

April 13, 2008

- † How many of you are longing for the green grass of spring? I know I am. As I drove home from Three Forks, I saw heifers, nursing tiny calves, nosing hopefully for green shoots. The deer along the Seeley-Swan, mangy after a long winter, clung even closer to the edge of the road where there might be greening forage.
- † “I’m really bored by the snow,” said Gavin. And the children at Rainbow’s End still can’t romp in their playground because it’s covered with snow. Although the birds of spring have returned (I saw a bluebird at Clearwater Junction!), even they must be disappointed by the slowness of the greening.
- † It all made me think of the old country song made famous by Tom Jones the year I graduated from high school, 1966. Its title is the same as this sermon’s, “The Green, Green Grass of Home.”
- † The song tells of a man who has been away from his home for a while. He sings that he is returning to his small home town in the country. When he steps down from the train, he touches the green grass. His parents, and “sweet Mary,” (who obviously is an old sweetheart) are there to welcome him home.
- † He notes the tokens of his childhood, including the old oak tree that he used to play on. He sees his sweetheart, hair of gold and lips like

- cherries, reach out her arms to him, along with his parents, in warm embrace, in homecoming.
- † The song evokes the familiar song of David, the psalm we said this morning. “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want; he makes me lie down in green pastures....” In other words, he leads me to the green, green grass of home.
  - † God has given us a home—and promises that we shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever. Patricia Farris intones: “The House of the Lord lacks for nothing. It is a place of abundance and beauty. In contrast to the parched places of our lives, it is a place of vibrant and nourishing green pastures.
  - † In contrast to the cacophonous noise of our daily lives and frazzled spirits, it is a place of deep, still waters, where silence carries us to the wellsprings of our faith. In contrast to the futile desperation of endless seeking after the latest thing, the newest, hippest, coolest whatever, when we sit at home with God, we know that our cup is already filled to overflowing.
  - † God is our home. And the more we know that, really know that, and believe it in our heart of hearts, the more we will shift from anxiety to assurance, from fear to fullness, from getting to gratitude. And our prayer will become ‘Thank you.’”
  - † It’s a lovely thought, isn’t it? And it makes me want to say to this excellent pastor, “Yes, but....”
  - † There is the desert, too, isn’t there—the long winter of discontent that just hangs on; the dry, deserted, lonely place where nothing can grow. And I’m not talking about geography here. But you know that place.

- † “‘Annie,’ she said, ‘I have to tell you about Matthew. It’s bad news, honey. In fact, it’s very bad.’ Her voice had a terrible force behind it, a blunt tenderness that could not be refused or run from.
- † And it just kept coming, pushing the truth toward me as if the truth were the greatest kindness...that afternoon, she said, Matthew and his father had been clearing underbrush in the lower new ground. Matthew drove the tractor with the bush hog attached.
- † He drove the tractor and mowed the field, and then he looked back over his shoulder, which is something he knew better than to do. Matthew had grown up on a tractor....He knew that you had to stay alert to avoid slopes and uneven ground.
- † ‘But he looked back and he ran up onto a stump,’ Mother said. The tractor turned over on top of him. We had been married for twelve years, since we were both twenty....
- † ‘Annie,’ mother said that night, as though she were trying to slip a message through a closing door, ‘He never knew what happened and he didn’t suffer, it was so sudden’....
- † I knew what had happened to Matthew. Annihilation happened, oblivion happened. A bomb went off in my head, a soundless rush of light that rose and blew things to pieces and left the pieces drifting there, suspended in the chaos of their breakup.
- † And that is the day when I felt the power of death move over me. The power to empty, to take everything from you and leave the world intact and unchanged, just to show you the place where you’ve lived so confidently—as though it were the whole world—was in fact so minute a fragment of this larger world that its destruction caused not even a wince, a shudder, or a pause.

- † Since that day, I had been a citizen of this larger, more indifferent world, and once I knew how small I was....”
- † Thus a mother named Pam Durban describes her descent into the desert, into the valley of the shadow of death. Alone, bereft, deserted, dead. The desert, the valley of the shadows, encroaches at any time, killing everything, stripping the once green earth and making it a wasteland.
- † It doesn’t take much to propel you there—a phone call in the night, a voice saying, “I’ve got some bad news for you.” A diagnosis. Someone you thought you’d never be without tells you they don’t love you any more.
- † Then you know the valley of the shadow of death, and the green pastures seem far distant.
- † Rabbi Harold Kushner, author of When Bad Things Happen to Good People, commenting on the 23d psalm on PBS’s Religion and Ethics Newsweekly, says that “God’s promise was never that life would be fair. God’s promise was, when it’s your turn to confront the unfairness of life, no matter how hard it is, you’ll be able to handle it, because God will be on your side. He will give you the strength you need to find your way through.”
- † Kushner says that the 23d psalm is the answer to the question, “How do you live in a dangerous, unpredictable, frightening world?” We affirm that God is loving. And when you see children dying, when you see innocent people suffering, and when you see young parents stricken with an illness, how can you believe in a God of love and compassion unless you say “some things happen in the world that God does not want to happen.”

- † “God is good. Nature is not always good. Nature is blind. Nature is amoral. Fire burns and bullets wound and falling rocks injure and disease germs infect everybody, whether you deserve it or not.”
- † Rabbi Kushner and his wife lost a son to an incurable illness, so he knows first hand about the valley of the shadow of death. Through his experience he learned that God gave him love and strength and faith when he thought he couldn’t find them, had lost them, would never possess them again.
- † We can find ourselves stuck in the valley of the shadow, and we don’t know how to find our way out. And that’s where God comes in. God’s purpose is not to explain and justify the pain, but to comfort, to find people when they are living in the darkness, take them by the hand, and show them how to find their way into the green pastures again.
- † Sometimes we let ourselves stay stuck in the valley of the shadow. We feel guilty that we are still alive when someone we love has died. Sometimes we’re afraid. We’re afraid if we ever permit ourselves to recover, then we’ll lose the person not only physically but emotionally as well.
- † But that’s not how it works. When you have loved somebody, they have entered so deeply into the fabric of yourself that neither death nor time can ever take them out. They are always with you.
- † We’re afraid of the unknown future that looms ahead without the person or the thing we’ve lost. And yet the psalmist says, with confidence, “surely goodness and mercy shall follow me.” How can that be?

- † Remember the old song, “The Green, Green Grass of Home?” After the sweet vision of returning home to outstretched arms of love, the singer begins a spoken section when he awakens in prison:
- † “Then I awake and look around, at four grey walls that surround me. And I realize that I was only dreaming.” The man is, in reality, awaiting his execution, and he will only return home when he is dead and buried.
- † “Yes, they’ll all come to see me in the shade of that old oak tree, as they lay me neath the green, green grass of home.”
- † It’s one thing to dream confidently of green pastures of peace and home on the other side of this life. But it’s another to find green pastures, to know that goodness and mercy will follow us, on this side of life. Although we may not literally be in prison, there are plenty of fears, addictions, and behaviors that imprison us.
- † Yet, surely goodness and mercy shall follow me, says the psalm. Did you know that the Hebrew word for “follow” is actually the word, “pursue?” As Edwin Searcy says, “Suddenly goodness and mercy are not like two little puppies following close behind, tails wagging.
- † Now goodness and mercy are the hounds of heaven pursuing lost souls.... Surely goodness and mercy shall pursue me...and finally, catch me.”
- † And that’s where today’s scripture reading comes in. When we as individuals are lost in the valley of the shadow of death, in the dry desert of despair, it takes a congregation, a church that eats together, prays together, learns together, and praises God together to lead us back to the summer pastures of peace.

- † God’s alternative to living in fear and the shadows of death is God’s house of love, the church. In the words of Henri Nouwen, it’s the place where we can think, speak, and act in the ways of God, not in the ways of the fear-filled world.”
- † When is the church at its best? When is the church most like the green pastures and still waters that we long for? When it does just what it did when it first became the church as we read in Acts today.
- † When we witness to the resurrection of Jesus Christ; when each of us in our own way tells why this resurrection, why the love of God poured out, has mattered to us. When we share what we have with one another, when we pass on what we’ve learned and experienced, when we take our prayers and put feet on them, when we reach out to others with arms outstretched in welcome.
- † Then we become the “green, green grass of home.” And it’s not just a wistful dream, but a compelling reality.
- † As I drove home and finally arrived in Creston Wednesday night, a rain storm suddenly fell and I rounded the corner on Highway 35. There a field of winter wheat just turning green grabbed my attention and took my breath away.
- † And I was reminded of one of my favorite Easter songs. We’ll sing it now as a reminder of the resurrection life that our Good Shepherd calls us to live. It’s a reminder that even in the deserts and shadowed valleys of our lives, Christ’s love rises like wheat that springs green from the drab earth.
- † And we sing with confidence that “love will come again like wheat that springeth green.” Let’s sing “Now the Green Blade Riseth.” And sing it like we’re home in God’s green pastures of peace. Amen.

Sources:

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