

Goodness and Mercy Psalm 23 FPC 4/25/21

Author Cheryl Strayed is rather well known as someone who took on the massive challenge of hiking much of the more than two thousand and six-hundred-mile-long Pacific Crest Trail by herself, and the image of her boots and the huge backpack she nicknamed “Monster” have become fairly iconic. And to be sure, her hike was a monumental physical challenge. But, the power of her story for me was found in her incredible emotional bandwidth as she faced the ongoing pain of grief that had led her to hike the PCT in the first place. Strayed’s mother, her north star, had become ill quickly and died just seven weeks after being diagnosed with lung cancer. The 24-year-old Strayed was stunned and reckless in her grief, and the hike that began in the desert of California and ended in Oregon might just have saved her life, because it gave her the space to mourn her loss and begin to find a way forward.

That’s the thing about grief that isn’t often mentioned. It has a way of disorienting the griever, making simple tasks seem absolutely impossible, dragging waves of exhaustion in its wake. People laid low by loss often describe themselves as feeling unmoored, direction or sense of place or self, unclear. That’s why the 23rd Psalm is such a comfort at times of suffering, why it so often finds its way to hospital rooms and into funeral liturgies. The orientation is clear

with the words, “The Lord is my shepherd.” We may not know where we’re going, but we know who is leading us. And that loving, gracious shepherd knows just how to bring balm to our souls—lying upon the cool, sweet-smelling grass, the calm water like glass. Our souls are restored! And when we consider “SUB”, the root word of the Hebrew for restore, we find a much more expansive understanding. The Lord restores our souls, meaning they are turned back, brought back, refreshed, or taken back. In the disorientation so common in grief experiences, God takes us for a metaphorical walk among lush and beautiful lands, and helps us find our way back to ourselves in a way that is both refreshing and familiar. As we walk through the darkest valleys we know, God is with us, and God is prepared for what may come; the rod to protect from beasts with nefarious intentions, and a staff to pull us along the path, if needed. God is our dependable, loving shepherd, leading the way when we are too weary, too afraid, too tender, or too absolutely bewildered to be left to our own devices.

For many of us, I think I just described the current moment. Or, perhaps more accurately, the longest moment in the history of time: the roughly 410 days we have experienced since the world as we had known it ceased to exist last March. While it’s certainly true that vaccinations are happening in rising numbers, and as a resilient people, we have been able to locate pockets of joy despite the changes,

I want to take a moment to name another truth: since this all began last March, we have lost 307 residents of Kalamazoo County, 17,289 Michiganders, 585,871 Americans, and more than 3 million people around the world to the coronavirus. And in addition to our greatest loss, that is human life, there have been scores of smaller losses all along the way: missed gatherings with family, milestone events canceled, travel grounded, businesses closing, poverty growing, domestic abuse and overdose statistics rising, mental health critically impacted, and a sense of normalcy and safety all but non-existent. We've been in a holding pattern far too much like the movie Groundhog Day, and our fatigue is real. Our loss is deep and it's unclear when our lives will function without the specter of disaster constantly overhead, the sour taste of worry in our mouths. I want to name all of this, and I hope you're naming in your minds the particular experiences of grief that you have known in the last 13 or so months, as well. Not naming simply for the purpose of brandishing our tender spots, but because we can't attend to that which we do not see. As James Baldwin wisely said about racial injustice, but which also applies aptly to grief, "Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced." Our cultural approach to grief has not always been this stoic. When I worked as a historical interpreter at Greenfield Village, the open-air museum begun by Henry Ford, I was often scheduled to staff

the jewelers on Main Street which had cases and cases filled with 19th century “mourning jewelry” such as brooches, hair combs, necklaces, and earrings in somber black that communicated loud and clear that the wearer had experienced a loss. Mourning had a clear and lengthy role in American culture. So, when did this transparent expression change? Hope Edelman wrote in the Washington Post in February, “Then came the one-two punch of [World War I](#) and the 1918 influenza [pandemic](#). With so many deaths occurring so fast, mourning rituals became prohibitively expensive and social mourning was effectively impossible to maintain. Like today, [large public gatherings were prohibited and quarantines enforced](#). Funerals shrank in size, mourning periods contracted, and families were left to grieve in isolation. By the 1920s, grief in America had largely gone underground.”

But if the most basic psychology has taught us anything, it’s that going underground does not mean gone away. It may not be staring us in the face, but in many ways, that’s actually worse, because we can’t face what we can’t see. We can’t address pain that refuses to be seen. And it’s a fairly well-known fact that pain that is not addressed is transmuted, and then often, transmitted.

The psalmist [doesn’t negate](#) the pain of those darkest valleys. There are no well-meant though rarely helpful platitudes offered like, “They are in a better

place”, or, “Just be positive”, or “I guess it was their time”, or “God needed another angel.” There’s simply an acknowledgement that the darkest valley exists. Whether we are grieving the loss of a human we loved, a beloved pet, an ended relationship, a job we needed, the deaths and overall suffering of brown, black, Asian, or Indigenous lives due to racial injustice, health or function of our younger selves, or the world as we have known and adored it, platitudes are no match for grief. Broken hearts are not healed by pat phrases or a community that turns away from the pain because it’s just too uncomfortable or hard to bear. The salve we need is a shepherd willing to walk with us through the darkest valley, reminding us that the still waters and bucolic hills are still there. What we need when it feels like the ground beneath our feet can’t continue to hold us up is to be anointed by a loving hand with something as precious and nourishing as oil, even when those who don’t understand or care about our pain (read our enemies) are standing right there. The 23rd psalm is powerful because it isn’t merely flowery words of support, but because love is an action verb embodied by a shepherd compassionate enough to hold us up when even gravity seems unable to do its job. And I believe it is also that same shepherd’s presence within us that gives us the capacity to do as the Rev. Frederick Buechner suggests in the words printed on the front of this morning’s bulletins, saying “Keep in touch with pain as

well as the joy of what happens because at no time more than at a painful time do we live out of the depths of who we are instead of out of the shallows.”

Keeping in touch with the pain not unlike Thomas touching the wounds of Jesus in the story we heard last week. We can believe in resurrection AND be people who hurt and grieve when death parts of us from our beloveds; the two are not mutually exclusive after all. In fact, I might even go a step further and suggest that our claim of being Easter People stands even more poignantly and powerfully when we have known the sting of death, the thorn of grief.

Of course we can't know for sure in the case of the psalmist, but when I read the words, “surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life”, I understand this not to mean that there won't be future dark valleys, that there won't be times when we feel we are in the presence of enemies, but rather, that the presence of goodness and mercy offer succor, and often in the form of people and communities that have the courage and compassion to see our pain and hold us in it; people and communities that are willing to hold our pain when we barely feel able to hold ourselves up. As our reading from the first letter of John so beautifully says, “We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. How does love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet and refuses to

help?” How powerful and exquisite to consider that our acts of love for one another in times of grief demonstrate the abiding quality of love. Laying down the needs or tasks of our own lives for a brother or sister through cooking a meal, or sending a card of care, or calling with words of support, all seemingly small gestures, but ones that go straight to the heart of our faith and life here together. Our darkest valleys are real, they hurt, we often don’t have much control over them, and they certainly deserve our attention. But, goodness and mercy are just as real, and we have extraordinary control over what they look like. Sometimes goodness and mercy is active listening, sometimes it’s not turning away from someone’s pain, sometimes it’s silent or spoken prayers, and sometimes, just sometimes, “goodness and mercy” is a warm, bubbling casserole made by human hands. These may seem like mundane tasks, but from the perspective of anyone touched by grief or loss, they are acts of abiding and extravagant love that mirror the Good Shepherd, the Jesus we follow. May we give thanks for goodness and mercy, and may we find ways to be it. Amen.