

“No Need to Want”

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First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood

Sunday, March 26, 2017
Fourth Sunday of Lent

Readings from Scripture: Ephesians 5:8-14 and Psalm 23

For once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light — for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true. Try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord. Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. For it is shameful even to mention what such people do secretly; but everything exposed by the light becomes visible, for everything that becomes visible is light. Therefore it says,

*‘Sleeper, awake!
Rise from the dead,
and Christ will shine on you.’*

Ephesians 5:8-14

*The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures;
he leads me beside still waters;
he restores my soul.
He leads me in right paths
for his name’s sake.*

*Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I fear no evil;
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff—
they comfort me.*

*You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;*

*my cup overflows.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord
my whole life long.*

Psalm 25

Let us pray. Gracious and loving God, we open our hearts, our minds, our imaginations and our faith to you and to the power of your Holy Spirit. I pray that you would take the words and images that each of us carry within, the words that we've heard read from scripture, the words that we have offered in song and in prayer and the words that you have laid upon my heart this morning to share. Touch, bless and transform all of these into the living word of Jesus Christ and let that word feed us and encourage us, guide us and challenge us and call us into new ways of loving and serving you and our neighbors. We ask this in his faithful name. Amen.

Earlier this week, actually a week ago today, I, along with my wife and several others had the distinct privilege of being in New York City to listen to many members of our choir sing at Carnegie Hall. They did you proud! The great part about the trip was that we got to stay in one of the most peaceful and quiet corners of the world, snuggled as we were only one building away from Times Square, where you could hear a construction crane drop and sirens wail and horns honk, and did you know that they have billboards that are like 14 stories high and as wide as the whole building and the neon lights just keep flashing 24 hours a day??? The energy is just palpable. There are so many people and it's so busy and so loud and so crazy and I've never been happier—to be home!

One of the things I did before we went was I looked up where are the ten most precious paintings on display in New York City? And six of the ten are in the Museum of Modern Art. All of them happen to be exactly on the same floor, the impressionist or early modern period. So we walk in to the beautiful gallery and go around a corner and there is Van Gogh's *Starry Night*, one of the most iconic paintings in the world. And it's beautiful with the swirling dark and light and the play on it and the city that's underneath it all—and you are trying to figure out is it gloomy or is it bright? What's going on? And you stand there only to be bumped out of the way by 20 somethings with their cell phones on selfie sticks, trying to get their head in the frame with the painting so they can take a picture of it and put it on Face Book. My wife had to physically restrain me from gently reaching over and taking the selfie stick and not using it as...well, I won't go there because this is a Christian sermon. But we made our way through Picasso, Rodin, and some sculpture—just all these amazing paintings. And then we came across a painting that, I have to be honest, I wanted to see but I never really quite understood. There was a painting of Jackson Pollock's. You know Pollock, right? He painted on a concrete slab. He laid the canvas out flat and he walked around with a bucket of paint and brush and he kinda did this and he put some swirls there and some splashes there and dots there. Every time I'd seen a Pollock it was in a book and the picture was maybe one inch by three inches. I had no idea that a Pollock was probably 30 feet by 15 feet and took up a whole wall. This particular one had tans and greens and some black splattered on the background and then lots of white that was just thrown everywhere.

As I stood there and looked at it, it started to vibrate. And I thought maybe it was because I had had cataract surgery and every now and then if the light's just right I get this weird sense in my eyes, so I asked Jani, who hasn't had the surgery yet, I said, "Is it moving for you?" And she said, "Yes." There was this energy coming off this painting. It was so amazing and once you noticed it,

you couldn't not see the vibration of it. And I never understood until that moment that Wow! that's what this is about.

I feel like with Psalm 23 what we have done to it so often is that we've shrunk it down into a picture, a two by one inch sort of, oh yeah, I know that. I know where this goes and I've heard it a thousand times. What I want to do today is be a little more artistic. I want to kind of get out the bucket and the paint brush and fling the Psalm around and make it big and messy—just to see, will it vibrate for us and speak to us in a different way? One of the ways that I'm coming at this is to sort of acknowledge that when I was in New Mexico in January, I fell back in love with the Hebrew language. I learned Hebrew at Princeton Seminary during summer school. So I had a whole year condensed into about six weeks. I learned Hebrew with flash cards and memorization just enough to get an A on the exam and then I forgot everything I learned, except for the fact that instead of this way (left to right), it goes this way (right to left). Hebrew is backwards. But I took that love that I feel coming back and I went to Psalm 23 and I looked at it in the original and I discovered some things that I want to offer to you.

The first is that the Hebrew language is simple and beautiful. Few words that capture an enormous amount of meaning. The first phrase of the Psalm, the Lord is my shepherd, is two words: “Yahweh shepherds.” And then it says rather than I shall not want, it simply says “need not.” “Yahweh shepherds need not”. I love that instead of naming the Lord as a shepherd that it's the verb form that gets changed into a noun. That it is shepherding that the psalmist wants us to understand that God is about. I love that rather than not wanting something, because I tend to want some pretty extravagant things that are easy to give up, it says “I shall not need,” that whatever concerns I have, whatever worries, God will take care of them. In the next couple lines, God will make me lie down in grassy grazing places and leads me beside resting waters. And then for us the next line is “He restores my soul”, and this is where I wish I were smart enough to be on the committee that did the translations because I would have argued, “No, let's be literal.” It says in the Hebrew that God returns my soul, that God gives back something to us, that life or a life without faith takes from us. And it doesn't just mean soul, it means life, desire, passion, energy, commitment—all of those vibrating things about who we are as people, that life takes away. The Psalm says, “no, God will give all of that back.” And on and on it goes and at the very end in the English it says, “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life.” But the psalmist wrote, “Surely, goodness and mercy shall pursue me all of my life and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long.”

Rather than these things just following behind, no, God is pursuing us and wanting to give us back our life, give us our goodness, give us our mercy, give us kindness—all of those things. I realize that Psalm 23, through its history as a prayer of the people, has been many different things depending upon the context that it is uttered in. If a people have seen themselves as being chosen, then it's a prayer of reassurance. If it's people in bondage in Egypt, this psalm was a liberating prayer. No, Pharaoh is not my shepherd, the Lord is my shepherd. If it says the people wandering in the wilderness were awake to the promise but haven't quite gotten there, this is a prayer of resilience or encouragement. Even though we are traveling through this valley of uncertainty, we are going to make it, we're going to be okay because God is with us. And as a people who live in a land of plenty but whose way of life is under threat, as the Hebrew people knew and as maybe we know, this prayer is a grounding prayer and invites us into a stance of humility to realize that God is with us now and forever.

One of the things that people have done throughout the course of study of the Psalms and

especially Psalm 23, is to every now and then offer their version of it, to set the prayer in a different context and to see where it would go. And so one morning early in Times Square at about 6:15, after I had gotten my Starbucks at the corner and bundled up because it was 32 degrees, I went and sat at one of the red tables that the choir members may remember, out in Times Square. I was the only one there, because, again it was 32 degrees at 6:15 in the morning. I was a little crazy, but I thought if somebody who designed a giant 14 story billboard went to translate Psalm 23, what would they say? And so I came up with Psalm 23, the Time Square version.

I will see myself through life. I want it all. For nicer watches and for fancier shoes and for trips far away, I will give away my soul. I will do whatever it takes. Even though I live in the city that never sleeps in a canyon of flashy ads and honking horns and unending sirens, yes, I'm still afraid. I am alone with my cell phone and my selfie stick. I am all I have. I fight for a small table in a restaurant filled with tourists only to get ignored. Waiter? Can I please place my order? Goodness, kindness, mercy, tranquility—they all can wait as I dwell in the apartment of my landlord for one more day.

I may have been a little gloomy that morning, reflecting on the chaos of being in New York and the peacefulness of living in Kirkwood, but there is sort of a message when you sit in that city—it is all up to you and that what you have is not enough and you need bigger and better and faster and flashier. And so these are the words that came to me. But then I remembered a translation that Karen shared with me. It's from a Japanese poet who rather than looking at the Psalm and allowing her culture to speak it, looked at Psalm 23 as a word against the busyness that she found. Here are these words:

The Lord is my pacesetter; I shall not rush. He makes me stop and rest for quiet intervals. He provides me with images of stillness which restore my serenity. He leads me in ways of efficiency through calmness of mind and his guidance is peace. Even though I have a great many things to accomplish this day, I will not fret, for his presence is here. His timelessness, his all-importance will keep me in balance. He prepares for refreshment and renewal in the midst of my activities by anointing my head with the oil of tranquility. My cup of joyous energy overflows. Surely harmony and effectiveness shall be the fruit of my hours for I shall walk in the place of my Lord and dwell in his house forever.

The poet took the words familiar in Psalm 23 and spoke them as a counter message towards the demands of her anxious culture. As I sat there and wrote the gloomy version of Psalm 23 and coming home, I thought, you know, I'm going to take one more try at it. Rather than saying it in the negative, I am going to see if the words can speak positive truth to us. So here's my long translation of Psalm 23.

The one who chose our ancestors and us to be a people set apart for good works, who promises us a blessed existence, who liberates us from slavery and bondage, who awakens us and all people from drudgery, who is with us in our wandering and who desires for us to live in wholeness, this one shepherds me. I need nothing more. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside resting waters, he gives me back my soul, my life, my desire, my passion. Even though I walk through the valley of darkness and gloom, I fear no evil. You are beside me. Your rod and your staff, they comfort me. You set before me a table in the face of all that attack. You anoint my head with oil. My cup is full. Surely kindness and goodness and faithfulness and mercy shall pursue me all the days of my life, and I shall return to the house of the Lord my whole life long. Amen.