

THE SONGS OF RESISTANCE

Psalm 23

July 22, 2018

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Psalm 23

A Psalm of David.

¹ The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.

² He makes me lie down in green pastures;

he leads me beside still waters;

³ he restores my soul.

He leads me in right paths

for his name's sake.

⁴ Even though I walk through the darkest valley,

I fear no evil;

for you are with me;

your rod and your staff—

they comfort me.

⁵ You prepare a table before me

in the presence of my enemies;

you anoint my head with oil;

my cup overflows.

⁶ 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 23 *adapted by Barbara Gibson*

Creation takes care of me

and gives me what I need.

I lie down on the green grass,

I swim in the clear river.

My heart is whole.

I do what is right for the earth.

Even when I walk in a dark valley,

the shadow of death behind me,

I am not afraid

because creation is with me;
the trees and the mountains comfort me.

Earth's table is set for us
even when we doubt.
Earth's plenty flows over us like balm,
more than enough for everyone.

Surely goodness and mercy
are here for us every day of our lives.
We dwell in the house of earth forever.

SERMON: The Songs of Resistance

*My God has promised good to me, whose word my hope secures;
God will my shield and portion be, as long as life endures.*

Or, as Psalm 23, says it:

*Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life;
and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.*

Sometimes I think “Amazing Grace” and Psalm 23 have suffered the same fate; that is, they have become the familiar and popular music of personal devotion and funerals. And there is nothing wrong with that. They have served that purpose very well over the years.

But I think their use as a matter of personal piety has obscured their public and prophetic and, I dare say, political role.

You know, of course, that “Amazing Grace” is not simply the personal testimony of a converted slave trader. It was the public rallying cry for the abolition of slavery in Great Britain.

When a young white supremacist walked into the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, SC on June 17, 2015 and shot nine black folks having a prayer meeting, the community and the nation gathered for a memorial.

President Barack Obama spoke at the funeral honoring the church's pastor and State Senator, Rev. Clementa Pinkney. When he got to the end of his address he started to sing: "Amazing Grace."

At that moment "Amazing Grace" was not just a private song to comfort the families of those who were lost. It was a very public song of resistance. It was a rallying cry against the demonic power of violence and guns and racism.

And then there is Psalm 23.

One writer warns that: "To preach on such a foundational text [as Psalm 23] is to run the risk of trivializing the sublime, of turning the sermon into an autopsy on a beloved passage, or of trying to do too much to wring some new profundity from the text."

So I guess I have my work cut out for me.

I will say, as I said during the I Samuel series, that I think there is a back story for Psalm 23 that begins in I Samuel 15 and 16.

At this point, King Saul had become a faithless and erratic ruler. And God sends Samuel to anoint a new king. He is led to the house of Jesse where all Jesse's big strapping sons pass by.

"It must be one of these," Samuel says to himself.

"Nope," God says, "keep looking." And Samuel asks if there is another son out there somewhere.

"Well, yes," Jesse says, "but he is the youngest and he is out in those green pastures keeping the sheep."

"Go get him," Samuel says. And so someone goes out to those green pastures, down by that cool water, and they bring David back.

And Samuel anoints David king by anointing his head with oil – which is a revolutionary act because Israel already has a king.

So when this “psalm of David” talks about a shepherd and green pastures and being anointed with oil, the psalm not only offers comfort in the face of death. It calls us to resist all the forces of death.

And there’s more. You remember that David was eventually taken from his home and brought to live in King Saul’s house where David had to live with this secret about himself right under Saul’s nose. And to make things worse Saul’s son falls in love with David and that makes Saul even more furious. So furious, in fact, that Saul tries to kill David on a number of occasions – once when he was sitting at the royal table for dinner: “you prepare a table in the presence of my enemies.”

So, when the psalm says: “Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death” and “you prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies” and “my cup overflows” – you can decide if that means overwhelming blessing or a plate that is way too full – the context for all that might be this story about someone who has been anointed king as an act of resistance to the powers that be.

Like “Amazing Grace,” Psalm 23 is one of those “songs of resistance.”

And I want to thank Scott and the Summer Choir for singing the Howard Goodall version of Psalm 23. As some of you know, it is the music from a British sitcom of the 1990s called “The Vicar of Dibley.” It’s the fictional story of the first woman priest assigned to a small country parish and it is funny in that “British humor” kind of way.

It is silly. And it is serious because the show came into being when a television producer was listening to the debate in Parliament about whether women could be ordained a priest in the Church of England. You can probably imagine the heated arguments and all the nasty things people said about women in those debates.

When the vote came in 1992, the ordination of women narrowly passed. And, having heard the debate, the producer said he didn't think the general public would ever accept women priests unless they saw one on TV. And so the "Vicar of Dibley" was born.

By the way, the consultant for the show was an Anglican priest named Joy Carroll who happens to be the wife of American evangelical social justice advocate, Jim Wallis.

Howard Goodall's musical setting of Psalm 23 became the show's theme song. And so Psalm 23 became identified, not just with a personal story about a woman priest, but with a public act of resistance to all those arguments about why it is that women should not be ordained.

When Barbara Gibson does her own adaptation of Psalm 23 it is not just a personal celebration of the beauty of the earth. It is a public act of resistance to all the ways we dishonor and damage the earth.

So I don't want to trivialize something sublime. And I don't want to do an autopsy on a beloved member of the biblical family. And I don't want to wring the life out of something that already has a life of its own.

What I do want, is to encourage you to pay attention to the connection between what "restores your soul" and what "leads you in the paths of righteousness, or justice," because, as "Amazing Grace" and Psalm 23 – those songs of resistance – teach us, there is a connection between your personal spiritual life and the way you engage each other and the world.

That makes me wonder this morning as, together, we pursue the paths of justice, what restores your soul.

Sometimes my soul is restored by simply realizing that I am not on that path alone.

Yesterday, several of you marched together in the children's march to highlight climate change. More than 20 others of you were at, what I like to call "the banquet of the Beloved Community," the Evergreen Black Caucus Barbecue. I am guessing that there was something about each of those experiences that, in their own way, might have helped to restore the soul of those who were there.

Being together in the pursuit of justice, by itself, can restore your soul.

Sometimes, however, I feel like I'm in the kind of situation that Cindy Ervin described earlier. I am trying to carry water and to "mend a hole in the bucket" all at the same time. I can't keep up. Things are moving too fast. I begin asking myself what difference my life makes anyway. And, like John Newton, I start to feel that it will take some amazing grace to save a wretch like me.

I remember reading Kathleen Norris on "wretchedness." She says: *The word "wretch" ... does not paint a picture of who we want to be. Or who we think we are. The word has become so unpopular in recent years that people began complaining about its appearance in the first verse of "Amazing Grace" ... Some hymnals have taken out the offending word ... "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved someone like me." Is there a fabled "someone," she writes, who never lies awake regretting the selfish, nigh-unforgivable things that he or she has done? Maybe there are people who are so thoroughly at home in themselves that they can't imagine being other than comfortable, let alone displaced or wretched in spirit. But I wonder. I suspect that anyone who has not experienced wretchedness – exile, wandering, loss, misery, whether inwardly or in outward circumstance – has a superficial grasp of what it means to be human ... It seems to me that if you can't ever admit to being a wretch, you haven't been paying attention.*

In these conversations on racism we are having, I may say "I am not a racist," but we are. As a white person, I benefit from a system of white supremacy and white privilege that is like the air we breathe.

And that feels wretched. But I can't leave it there because, if we are going to continue pursuing these paths of justice, I think we have to pay attention to what it is that restores our souls.

Sometimes it's just being together. Sometimes it's a walk in the woods.

I love the way Barbara Gibson talks about creation in her version of Psalm 23:

*Creation takes care of me
and gives me what I need.
I lie down on the green grass,
I swim in the clear river ...
Even when I walk in the dark valley ...
the trees and the mountains comfort me.
Earth's table is set for us
even when we doubt.*

Her words alone are refreshing. But they also remind me of how it feels to be sitting by the river; watching the sun come up or go down over the mountains; to hear the water rushing by and the wind moving in the trees; and something in my heart whispering, "you restore my soul."

Maybe it's coffee and conversation with a friend that turns into a kind of communion.

Maybe it's taking a random moment to watch children play and remembering what really matters.

Maybe it's returning again to that practice of devotions or meditation when you have been too busy for too long.

Maybe it's being lost in music or in a good book or in a beautiful sunset.

Maybe it's seeing yourself in the eyes of someone who loves you.

Maybe it's being here on a Sunday morning and being reminded that no matter how wretched things may be – no matter how wretched you may feel - there is amazing grace happening all around you.

Maybe it's all these things. And more.

Psalm 23 and “Amazing Grace” are songs of resistance not just because they give voice to the revolution that has to happen if we are going to live in God's house.

They are songs of resistance because they remind us that no matter how futile our resistance may feel, there is an amazing grace out there and in here that is longing to restore our souls.

“Goodness and mercy will follow us all the days of our life,” Psalm 23 says. That doesn't mean grace simply follows us like some kind of distracted puppy. As Rolf Jacobson says, it pursues us: “at times [grace] chases us down with the vigor and doggedness of a bloodhound.”

All we have to do is stop running.

The same goodness and mercy that is leading us in the paths of justice is longing to restore your soul.

Find a way to let it.

And today, if you hear that voice – that amazing grace calling to you - do not harden your hearts.

NOTES

Rolf A Jacobson, “Psalm 23,” *Psalms for Preaching and Worship*, eds. Roger E. Van Horn and Brent A. Strawn (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009), pp.100-105. Barbara Gibson, *Psalms for Troubled Times* (Crestline Press, 2003), p.30. Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith* (Riverhead Books, 1998), pp.166-167.