

Message for March 19, 2023 Tippecanoe Presbyterian Church
4th Sunday in Lent
“Restored in the Wilderness” Rev. Trish Eckert

Psalm 23

John 9: 1-8, 13-17, 28-41

In the familiar words of Psalm 23, we find comfort in God’s loving guidance even through the valley of the shadow of death.

On a spiritual level, this psalm so beautifully expresses our need for God. I don’t know about you, but I lean toward a “Type A” personality, so I actually have to be led to places that replenish my spirit. Those places often include green meadows and still waters. By reconnecting with God’s Creation, my soul is restored. Sacred words provide shape and meaning to our lives. This psalm can frame our experiences within the larger picture of God’s loving will for us. Psalm 23, when we learn it by heart, can be the very presence of God shepherding us, restoring us, protecting us, guiding us, and blessing us with goodness and mercy.

I’d like to invite us as a community to delve more deeply into the familiar words of this Psalm. The practice of lectio divina enables us to hear a text multiple times and pay attention to what words or phrases most powerfully speak to us in any given moment. So, I will read the text again, but first I think we should read the Psalm together – aloud, as a group, and allow the words to wash over us, to sink into us, to open us to a state of restoration and replenishment. Notice how the words land on your ears and enter your heart. Then we’ll allow for a moment of quiet and then I’ll read it again. Awaken to what this well-known Psalm has to say to you today, in a fresh way:

Psalm 23

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.

God makes me lie down in green pastures;

God leads me beside still waters;

God restores my soul.

God leads me in right paths

for God’s name’s sake.

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.

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.

Healing is one form of a wilderness journey. And while this passage is about a miraculous healing, it is also not about that healing at all.

Confusion about the blind man, how he was healed, and what power Jesus wields is central to this story, to the point where even reading it can be disorienting. What **is** clear is that Jesus is disrupting the order that the community knows so well. Jesus' final words to the religious leaders, "I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind," echoes the "first shall be last and the last shall be first" sentiment so common in Jesus' teachings. As the wilderness is known for disruption, metaphor, transformation, even confusion, it is almost as if with this mud Jesus uses to heal, he brings the wilderness to the community, giving them a taste of what his kin-dom will truly be.

In the Gospel of John, we are often faced with paradox and irony. Ultimately, it is only the man blind since birth who can truly see. The physically sighted people throughout the story are the sightless ones. Jesus's presence, and the miracles he performs throughout the Gospel expose this irony and paradox. The miraculous event of one man receiving sight models for the disciples and for the church how to relate to others and to the world.

John's Gospel is riddled with light and darkness, blindness and sight, truth and lie. John tells the story of a man born blind from birth. From birth he knew nothing but darkness. That Jesus sees the man who cannot see him is a literal fact. It is also a theological truth. From Nicodemus in the middle of the night and the Samaritan woman at the well to Judas in the garden and Pilate at the headquarters, those who dwell in darkness cannot of their own will see the God who has come to them in Jesus Christ.

"I am the light of the world," Jesus has just said to religious leaders a chapter before this morning's reading, and now he says to his disciples, "As

long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.” The words are related to the opening of John’s Gospel: *the Word in the beginning with God*, spoken against the chaos and the darkness of the beginning in Genesis: *Let there be light*. So, just as God did at creation, Jesus bends down and takes the dust of earth, mixes it with living water, and spreads mud on the blind man’s eyes. The act is an act of creation.

Today’s Bible Wisdom teachings are well-worn, tried and true, spoken and read and contemplated year after year. But if we allow ourselves to truly hear and see, to clear our ears and eyes, to open our hearts to what these texts have to say to us and how they can guide us, we can bear witness to the light that they shed. We experience the light, a moment of understanding breaks through, and then the world, our lives, our routines take over. How might we carry these images, these stories, and their earth-bound elements with us as we navigate the complexities of our lives?

The season of Lent invites us to get up close to the things of the earth. Ash, wilderness, water, dirt, mud: these days impress upon us what an elemental person Jesus was. Throughout his ministry we see him touching the world around him, employing the things of earth to reveal the things of heaven.

Jesus used earthly elements as he brought sight to a man who was blind. His acts of healing, of teaching, of preaching, of praying do not come from thin air: Jesus grounds these acts in, well, the ground. Although the Christian tradition, as it developed, would make sharp distinctions between matter and spirit, Jesus seems less inclined to do so. We are reminded that our connection to the earth, to our bodies, to being human, are gifts that can bring us spiritual truths.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

In this Lenten week, how are you seeing? Is there anything you need to clear from your field of vision so that you can see more clearly? How grounded are you these days? Where do you perceive the presence of Christ in elemental, earthy things? ~ Queries from Rev. Jan L. Richardson, excerpted from her blog, *The Painted Prayerbook*