

Selah – Life in a Minor Key

Lent 2020 Worship Series

Ash Wednesday – Psalm 51:1-17

February 26, 2020

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. ² Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. ³ For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. ⁴ Against you, you alone, have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are justified in your sentence and blameless when you pass judgment. ⁵ Indeed, I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me. ⁶ You desire truth in the inward being; therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart. ⁷ Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. ⁸ Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones that you have crushed rejoice. ⁹ Hide your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities. ¹⁰ Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. ¹¹ Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me. ¹² Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit. ¹³ Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will return to you. ¹⁴ Deliver me from bloodshed, O God, O God of my salvation, and my tongue will sing aloud of your deliverance. ¹⁵ O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise. ¹⁶ For you have no delight in sacrifice; if I were to give a burnt offering, you would not be pleased. ¹⁷ The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise (Psalm 51:1-17, NRSV).

Ash Wednesday is an event in and of itself. There might be those who believe that the invitation to the observance of Lenten discipline and the reading of the scripture is enough of a proclamation of the Word. Certainly the imposition of ashes, where that is observed, is the center of the worship experience. And the Selah series is designed to revolve around a spiritual as the heart of the service, so the song itself becomes a proclamation. Yet the preached word has a place, even in this most kinetic of services. Ash Wednesday begins with a need for repentance and the call to walk with Christ.

Suggested Spiritual: Motherless Child

Planning Notes

Primary Themes: congregational heart song, rest, silence, reflection, renewal, forgiveness, communal confession, contemplation, sung prayer (corporate and personal), forty days, life of Christ, abstinence, pilgrimage

Liturgical Symbols: Altar – purple fabrics from various cultures, water (a quiet waterfall), movement (liturgical dance, corporate),

If plants are included in dressing the altar, they should remind the congregation of the Garden of Gethsemane where Jesus spent time praying to God while anticipating crucifixion (i.e. vines, dry stalks, wheat, large rocks. This provides the opportunity for the community to fully experience the contrast when the Easter lilies replace the garden.

Suggested Colors: Shades of Purple

Other Special Days:

Women's History Month – March

International Women's History Day – March 8

Death of John Wesley (1791) – March 2

[World Day of Prayer – March 6](#)

Scouting Sunday – (Alternate) – March 8 (see 436-437 *Book of Worship*)

[UMCOR Sunday – March 22](#)

Death of Charles Wesley (1788) – March 29

Preaching Notes

As mentioned in the paragraph above, there are those for whom preaching on Ash Wednesday seems an unnecessary addition to a rich and profound service. Simply following the liturgy from the *Book of Worship* and the Invitation to the Observance of Lenten Discipline (pp. 321-324) might provide enough of a proclamation for the service. Certainly, the Imposition of Ashes, if practiced, provides a profound embodiment of the Word.

Yet the liturgy provides space for a sermon, so what words might we bring into this sacred space? The worship team at Discipleship Ministries has discerned a need for the church to turn to lament and to the psalms in general for inspiration and guidance through this Lenten season.

As a companion to the Psalm, we are also suggesting a spiritual to lay alongside. This spiritual may be a help to preaching, or it may be used in the liturgy of the day, spoken or sung.

So, on Ash Wednesday, we turn to one of the most familiar psalms of lament, Psalm 51. Traditionally assigned to David after being chastised by Nathan about his affair with Bathsheba, the psalm is full of the pathos of the consequence of sin on innocent life. The psalm speaks of the brokenness that is felt because of this breach. It speaks of the all-encompassing effect of sin, the all-surrounding effect. "I was born guilty," the psalmist writes, from conception, sin is my identity, my defining nature. All I know and all I am is sin.

I have a recording of the great Paul Robeson singing "Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child." As with many old recordings, there is a crackle in the recording, as if there is an electrical field surrounding us as we listen to that deep, resonant voice sing those words.

Sometimes, I feel like a motherless child / Sometimes I feel like a motherless child / Sometimes I feel like a motherless child / a long way from home / a long way from home."

That's all there is to it. You don't have to struggle to learn the lyrics. What you must struggle to learn is the depth of suffering behind those words: the emptiness, the brokenness, the aloneness of those words. Or maybe you don't. Maybe this feeling of abandonment, of despair, of wanting to hide from the consequence of your actions or the impact of the actions of others on your life is all too present in our reality. As you preach on Ash Wednesday, be assured that those who gather are aware of their sinfulness and brokenness in their lives. We live in an alienating world, a divisive and hurtful environment, where too many draw inward and apart and away from a community of faith where healing and acceptance might be found.

Let's be clear: Ash Wednesday is not a time to slide into easy solutions or a shallow grace. Instead, we can embrace the depth of the sorrow and begin our Lenten journey with a full awareness of our mortality. "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return." There is an awareness of the brokenness of our society, our world, and even ourselves that is palpable in our communities today. We may not know why, or what to do about it, but the sense of estrangement is real. "I know my transgressions and my sin is ever before me." What is needed is a hope that joy and gladness can be heard. What is needed is the confidence that crushed bones can rejoice.

Ash Wednesday is a call to claim a Savior, to begin a journey of reconciliation. And it starts with confession. "Sometimes I feel like a motherless child, a long way from home."

First Sunday in Lent – Psalm 32 (NRSV)

March 1, 2020

Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. ² Happy are those to whom the LORD imputes no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit. ³ While I kept silence, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long. ⁴ For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer. Selah ⁵ Then I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not hide my iniquity; I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD," and you forgave the guilt of my sin. Selah ⁶ Therefore let all who are faithful offer prayer to you; at a time of distress, the rush of mighty waters shall not reach them. ⁷ You are a hiding place for me; you preserve me from trouble; you surround me with glad cries of deliverance. Selah ⁸ I will instruct you and teach you the way you should go; I will counsel you with my eye upon you. ⁹ Do not be like a horse or a mule, without understanding, whose temper must be curbed with bit and bridle, else it will not stay near you. ¹⁰ Many are the torments of the wicked, but steadfast love surrounds those who trust in the LORD. ¹¹ Be glad in the LORD and rejoice, O righteous, and shout for joy, all you upright in heart.

Week 1: Happy are Those

Happy isn't a mood we associate with the season of Lent. Lent seems to call for something a little more somber, reflective, and inward looking. Certainly, the Lenten journey calls for attention to the inner self and the working of spiritual disciplines in the life of the individual and the community of faith. It is also true that the weight of our sinfulness and our need for a savior becomes an undeniable presence during this season. But a light heart is not forbidden, even in Lent. We are sinners who know a savior. We are acquainted with the one who has a solution to the brokenness of our souls. In other words, "there is a balm in Gilead, to heal the sin-sick soul." "Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven."

Suggested Spiritual: "Balm in Gilead"

Planning Notes

During the season of Lent, we are encouraged to engage in a Season of *Selahs*. Throughout the Book of Psalms, we encounter this Hebrew term at least seventy-one times. It even appears three times in Habakkuk. While the word has not been definitively defined in scripture, the placement of the word suggests a shift, pause, break, or interruption; it suggests exhaling or resting from routine

activities. It is thought that the “Selah” functions much like a musical rest. This describes how we should understand our posture throughout the forty days of Lent. Christians are urged to refrain from business as usual in order to attend to the body, spirit, mind, soul, and heart. It is a time set aside for worshipers to connect their faith walk with the ways in which they live, move, and have their being throughout daily life. Thus, the trajectory for the Lenten journey is a renewed spirit and a genuine desire to become an incarnational presence in the world.

The Book of Psalms provides myriad examples of how these connections are made. Similarly, the African American Spiritual follows patterns that begin with suffering and end with positive, faith-filled notes of Glory, Hallelujah!! How is this possible? The African ancestors posit, “The Spirit will not descend without a song.” Song has always played a vital role in human life. In every part of history and/or cultural context, communities have depended upon a unique soundtrack; *songs in the key of life* that express a full range of human emotion:

- Lament/Joy
- Trust/Lack of Trust
- Thanksgiving/Unforgiveness
- Praise/Regret
- Complaint/Empathy
- Cries for Help, Love, Support
- Contemplation/Anxiety
- Hope/Hopelessness

The apostle Paul encourages followers of Christ to . . . *be filled with the Spirit, as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, giving thanks to God the [Creator] at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ* (Eph. 5:18-20, NRSV).

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God (Col 3:16, NRSV).

How important is song in your faith community?

How does song function in worship celebrations?

How does song serve to promote Selah-moments in worship?

What are the heart-songs of your faith community?
What songs best express or affect your relationship with God?
What songs help your corporate community pray?
Whose songs are missing from your community?
What songs help to promote the ethos of the *beloved community*?
Has the soundtrack of your congregation reached the ears of those beyond your sanctuary?
What role has song played in your local church's discipleship efforts?

SEASON OF SELAHS

Throughout this Lenten season, seek ways to invite your congregation into conversations around the list of questions above.

Consider creating a congregational survey of *psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs* that represent the heart songs of your community. Using the top forty, invite members to use the list to help frame their forty-day's journey through meditation, prayer, contemplation, conversation, silence, or song.

Preaching Notes

"Happy are those ..." But we know that doesn't mean "happy," at least as we understand "happy." Right? Just as in the Beatitudes that Jesus hands out in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus doesn't mean "happy," does he? No, we translate it as "blessed." In this case, we might better say, "relieved." In reading the text of Psalm 32, "relief seems the most logical translation. After the weight of sin, after the dryness of soul, relief seems like the perfect word here. "Blessed" would be OK too. But happy?

There is some debate about the category for Psalm 32. The opening statements make some argue that it should be a wisdom psalm. Others consider that its reference to forgiveness and mention of confession group it with the penitential psalms. Because there is no specific confession, however, many are hesitant to consider it a confessional psalm.

Does it matter? Well, maybe not, except to a biblical scholar who wants to get it right. But for most of us, a psalm is just a psalm, isn't it? Unless by wrestling with what it is, we might be able to steal a blessing from the psalm. Which brings us back to "happy." What if the meaning really is "happy"? What if the psalmist was trying to give us insight into what really makes for happiness? That's our goal isn't it? Being happy? We say that about our children; we say that we don't care what they do as long as they are happy. We say that about our nation – that we believe in life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. We even say that about people who are doing something that we don't really understand or agree with – "as long as it makes them happy." Without a sense of what happiness is, however, we might be getting lost in a materialistic culture continually seeking after that thing that will make us happy. Because that is how happiness is defined in our culture, by what we can buy or own. If I had this latest thing, we're told to think, I could be "happy." If only I could store up a little more, make a little more, put away a little more, I could be "happy." It's a never-ending cycle, as you can see.

Let's go back to Psalm 32. "Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven . . . Happy are those to whom the Lord imputes no iniquity." Happiness, argues our psalm, is found in reconciliation with God and in living with a clear conscience. Our faith tells us that the former is within our reach and God is always seeking reconciliation, always offering forgiveness. But living with a clear conscience seems a bit more formidable. We are too aware of faults and failures and often think that these keep us from living in right relationship with God and God's people. We live, too often, under the weight of our brokenness. We would love to have the kind of happiness that the psalmist describes, but it seems beyond our grasp.

So, we ask again, what kind of psalm is Psalm 32? It sounds like wisdom, and it sounds like penitence, but there seems to be more. It's too happy for lament, and there isn't a clear petition throughout. So what is it? How about a psalm of hope? Psalm 32 is telling us that reconciliation is possible, that redemption is possible, forgiveness is possible, cleansing is possible. The psalmist is living in the new reality, the redeemed reality and witnessing to us about the joy that comes from that place.

There is a balm in Gilead / to heal the sin-sick soul. With an emphasis on the is!
There IS a balm in Gilead / to make the wounded whole. That's what Psalm 32 is telling us, the amazing news that a new start is available to us, to all, to any. Yet, like all the spirituals, this isn't an easy fix. You can't just snap your fingers and pronounce yourself "all better!" It is a long journey. That's why this psalm is at the beginning of our Lenten pilgrimage. We need to start with hope, to start with the possibility of reaching the destination. Because it isn't an easy walk in the park.
Sometimes I feel discouraged / and think my work's in vain. Our lives often feel like one step forward and two steps back. That's why we need to begin not with condemnation, but with encouragement. We begin with a psalm of hope, so that we can be reminded that we're not alone as we journey.

But then the Holy Spirit / revives my soul again.

Week 2 – Psalm 121 (NRSV)

March 8, 2020

I lift up my eyes to the hills-- from where will my help come? ² My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth.³ He will not let your foot be moved; he who keeps you will not slumber.⁴ He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.⁵ The LORD is your keeper; the LORD is your shade at your right hand.⁶ The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night.⁷ The LORD will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life.⁸ The LORD will keep your going out and your coming in from this time on and forevermore.

Week 2: Going Out and Coming In

It's only week two in Lent; there's a long road ahead of us. Yet, if we're not careful, we can begin to stop paying attention. We can begin to fall into the routine of the Lenten season. Let's not forget that Lent is about upsetting the routine and turning us inward and outward at the same time. God is here, even in the most routine moments of our lives. As we journey through this season, when we pay attention and when we forget to, when we go out and when we come in, we are not alone. In the morning when we rise, give me Jesus.

Suggested Spiritual: "Give Me Jesus"

Planning Notes

In this week's Lections, *The Gospel of John 3:1-17 points us toward the ritual of baptism, and the Baptismal Covenant (United Methodist Book of Worship, 106).*

Call to Worship:

L: Dearly Beloved

P: **The shadows are deep**

But the Light is rising.

L: Dearly Beloved

Who will we be?

P: **We're water-washed and Spirit-born.**

We're anointed, beloved and free!

Heather Murray Elkins, © 2018, Used with permission.

LITANY FOR INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S HISTORY DAY
March 8th

Leader: In the beginning, God created Eve and called her "the mother of all."

People: We remember Eve. We remember the finger of blame pointed at her, the pain it caused, and the abuse she has carried for generations. We also remember God's promise that through her, salvation would come to the earth.

Leader: The story of the matriarchs includes the tale of Leah. Her father mistreated her; her husband hated her, and the strife between her and her sister was never settled.

People: We remember Leah. We remember how she was left a legacy of women having babes, trying to win the hearts of men. We also remember that God saw her plight and deemed her the mother of the tribe of Judah, whose praise we uplift.

Leader: The history of the church includes Hannah, a woman abused by church and society because of her inability to bear a child.

People: We remember Hannah. The first biblical prayer comes from Hannah as she petitioned God for a son. Hannah promised to give her child back to God. Samuel, her son, was the first prophet and priest. We also remember the pain of all women who long for children.

Leader: Rizbah is a name seldom called. She is the foremother of Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, and Rosa Parks. Rizbah stands as a legendary figure for all women.

People: We remember Rizbah. We remember how she stood alone for five months, not only guarding her two sons, but five sons of others. She stood until God sent rain to refresh the land. The reign of justice in our world is due, in great measure, to women like her, who are bold enough to challenge injustice and stand alone.

Leader: We praise military leaders and applaud their mighty exploits. When we do, the name of Deborah must be uplifted!

People: We remember Deborah. We remember her hesitation in leaving her traditional and accepted roles of wife and mother to lead Israel into a winning

battle. Onto the battlefield she went, her example encouraging all women to follow God into uncharted waters.

Leader: We remember the abused, neglected, and unnamed women, whose stories are important, though not often told.

People: We remember women. We remember those filled with fears and anxieties. We remember the hurt, the rejected, and the depressed. We remember those with broken dreams, crushed spirits, and aching hearts. Today, we pause to remember all women.

Leader: We remember the extraordinary women in our lives.

People: We remember our nurturers. We remember mothers, sisters, grandmothers, sister-mothers, community-mothers, church mothers, teacher-mothers and friend-mothers. We remember their sacrifices of love, hugs, food, care, and role modeling. We remember that they had painful experiences, unrealistic expectations, wounds of their own. They had high hopes, dreams, and visions of a day when their hearts could soar. Today, for we remember, with love and thanksgiving, all of who they are, all of who they are, Remember! Thanks be to God for Women!

Hollies, Linda H. *Trumpet in Zion: Black Church Worship Resources*, Year A. Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2001), 70-71; transcribed by Cynthia A Wilson.

Preaching Notes

As you sit down to work on your sermon for this week, spend a few moments reflecting on all the miles you traveled. From visits to meetings to counseling sessions to events, how many steps has your pedometer clocked? Probably not enough, you're thinking, you've got to be more active. Maybe it hasn't been foot traffic. Maybe you've been in your car, which is beginning to feel more like home than the comfy chair you sit in there. Perhaps you were driving to a district event that was clear on the other end this time, or driving to the hospital in the next town because the member of your church has something the doctors in your local hospital can't handle, or driving to the soup kitchen with a team of youth who would rather be almost anywhere else. Or maybe you aren't traveling a physical distance at all, but an emotional going and coming, as you navigate a conversation between a couple on the brink of abandoning their twenty-plus year

marriage. Or maybe it's the emotional miles you've negotiated between the many sides of current church debates.

You've covered a lot of ground, and sometimes you wonder if there is anything to show for it. And if you're honest with yourself, there are times when you wonder if you are making all those journeys alone and carrying all those burdens alone. If you don't ever think that, be assured that there are some who will sit in front of you when you preach who do think that. There are people who have felt alone in the miles that they travel and who have felt alone in their coming and in their going. That is why we need Psalm 121.

"A Song of Ascents" is another name for Psalm 121. Eugene Peterson (The Message) names it "A Pilgrim Song." It is a psalm sung by the people of God as they made their way to the temple. You may remember that Jerusalem is built on a plateau, so that no matter from which direction you are traveling toward Jerusalem, you are going up. "We went up to Jerusalem," the pilgrims would say to their neighbors and family when they returned home, whether they went north or south. And the temple was located on the highest part of the city of Jerusalem. So, the whole journey was a journey up. The journey upward was true in terms of altitude, but also in terms of theology.

Although this psalm was used most often for the journey to worship, to ascend to the holy hill, and to abide in the presence of God, the psalms were not just about the worship life of the people of God. The psalms were about the whole life and every aspect, all the goings and comings. The psalms are reminders that our whole life is about how we worship God and how we abide in God's presence. Worship is not just about an hour on Sunday or whenever you gather with the community to worship God corporately. Psalm 121 is about all of life and about the promise of presence.

Notice how many times the psalm uses a form of the word "keep." *Shamar* in Hebrew appears six times in these eight verses. It would be wise to wrestle with the idea of God keeping God's people. It is too easy to fall into the idea that sticking with God will mean that nothing bad will ever happen to you. "(God) will not let your foot be moved" sounds like that may be the case. Yet our experience

tells us otherwise. We know that “bad things happen to good people” all the time. So, what does this *keeping* mean for us today?

Verse five says “the Lord is your keeper; the Lord is your shade at your right hand.” Your shade: That’s the same word that elsewhere is translated as *shadow*, as in “the shadow of God’s wings.” It is a comforting presence, an affirming assurance, a protective certainty that you are on the right path, when you stick to this shadow. It’s true that shadows are often depicted as evil; but in a desert culture, the shadow of the tent or the temporary shade from a passing cloud is a blessed relief from the burning sun. We embrace the shadow; we can relax in that grace.

In the morning when I rise / In the morning when I rise / In the morning when I rise / give me Jesus. The spiritual sings of a presence that is available in our going out and coming in. This is not a magical protection from the bumps and bruises of a complicated world, but a constant companion on the journey of our lives. And the more we claim that presence, the more we follow that guidance, the more we will be able to avoid the slipping of the foot and the burning of the sun.

The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in. *Give me Jesus / give me Jesus / you can have all this world / give me Jesus.*

Week 3 – Psalm 95 (NRSV)

March 15, 2020

O come, let us sing to the LORD; let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation!² Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving; let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise!³ For the LORD is a great God, and a great King above all gods.⁴ In his hand are the depths of the earth; the heights of the mountains are his also.⁵ The sea is his, for he made it, and the dry land, which his hands have formed.⁶ O come, let us worship and bow down, let us kneel before the LORD, our Maker!⁷ For he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand. O that today you would listen to his voice!⁸ Do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah, as on the day at Massah in the wilderness,⁹ when your ancestors tested me, and put me to the proof, though they had seen my work.¹⁰ For forty years I loathed that generation and said, "They are a people whose hearts go astray, and they do not regard my ways."¹¹ Therefore in my anger I swore, "They shall not enter my rest."

Week 3: Worship and Bow Down

There are many words throughout the Bible that are translated as *worship*. Many of them involve bodily movement of some sort. The worship posture described often in the Hebrew scriptures is face down on the ground. The psalmist this week tells us to bow, and to kneel. Worship is not just, or even primarily, a head thing. It is a whole body thing; we pour ourselves out in worship. We enter the worship space and nothing else matters but the community who gathers and the God we worship. We worship, not to neglect the world, but to remember the Creator of the world who sends us out to live and love that world and all who dwell in it. But in this moment, in this "ain't got long" moment, we steal away to Jesus.

Suggested Spiritual: "Steal Away"

Planning Notes

PRAYER OF THE PEOPLE

These Hands: A Prayer

(People stand, hands over chest.)

We take a few deep breaths.

(Pause for at least three breaths. Then make fists and raise them line by line.)

We live in a time of clenching fists:

In anger that threatens,

In greed that clutches,

in worry and fear that tense and tighten.

This is no way to live.

(Open hands and thrust them outward, as if breaking chains.)

And so, we let go.

We take a few deep breaths.

*(Pause. Lower hands, palms open, facing upward,
raising them line by line.)*

Our hands are empty.

We acknowledge our powerlessness.

We are not in control.

We are but humble protagonists in your great story of love.

We receive your grace that heals, forgives, and liberates.

This is the way to live.

And so, we open our hands, our hearts, our minds, our doors.

Ahhh!

We take a few deep breaths.

(Facing palms outward, raise them line by line.)

We extend our hands in blessing.

As we have been blessed, so we bless.

We hold no weapons and make no threats.

We seek peace with all and we make peace for all.

It is better for us to give than to receive.

Make us instruments of your peace, Living God.

We surrender our lives to your purposes.

May your Spirit fill our lives and work through these hands.

Amen!

(Pause, hands pressed together over heart.)

We open our eyes.

We see your light in one another:

a flickering candle in the dark,

a quiet glow at dawn,

a rising sun for this new day.

We call forth that light in one another,

And we honor one another with these hands.

May the peace of Christ rise in you.

(People silently turn and honor one another, praying a silent blessing over each other.)ⁱ

Brian McLaren in *Divine Echoes: Reconciling Prayer with the Uncontrolling Love of God* by Mark Gregory Karris, QUOIR, 2018, pp. 198-9. Used with permission.

Preaching Notes

The third week of Lent is an appropriate time to take a breath and give God thanks for this gift. What gift, some might be asking? The gift of intense spiritual scrutiny? The gift of honest confession and awareness of sinfulness? The gift of penance and spiritual discipline? Well, yes. All of that is a part of the Lenten experience and therefore necessary to the soul's preparation; therefore, we can be thankful for that grace at work in our lives. And we can be thankful that there is a community of faith that surrounds us as we do this important work.

But this week, there is another gift that needs to be acknowledged: the gift of worship, which is a little oasis in the penitential season of Lent. It is supposed to be a refuge, a solace in an intense time. But it doesn't have to be a place of somber silence all the time. Silence is good, and we certainly don't get enough of it in this loud and busy world. Presenting Lent, however, as a dreary re-enactment of contrition and sorrow for sin does not reflect the true nature of this journey.

Psalm 95 begins in exuberance. We're called to sing, and for those non-singers among us, we make a noise. A joyful noise, the croaking of frogs accompanying the sweet sounds of the birds, all are called to come into God's presence with joy. Does this seem alien to our usual Lenten observance? Perhaps, but it is not out of the realm of possibility, even in this season of introspection and confession. The psalm manages to incorporate both the call to joyous expression and praise and the call to return into right relationship with God. These are not mutually exclusive experiences of faith. Remember the famous troubling verse at the ascension of Christ? "When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted" (Matthew 28:17). Our struggles need not keep us from joyous worship of God. Our journey inward can be a journey outward at the same time. It is inward to examine the state of our soul and beg God's mercy on our sinfulness; outward, to embrace the grace and mercy of God in worship with joy.

We can steal away to Jesus, because God is calling. We can embrace the fullness of God's acceptance and love even as we struggle to take the steps of repentance and contrition on this Lenten journey.

Steal away, steal away / steal away to Jesus! / Steal away, steal away / I ain't got long to stay here.

Stay where? Is this an invitation to think about heaven, about leaving this earth for the glorious pearly gates? Well, that element was certainly present in the spirituals. The music pointed to a world that many would see only after death. But that's not the whole story, and some would argue not even the significant part of the story of the spirituals. Steal away was a call to take the risk to grasp freedom, and that the Lord desires that freedom for the enslaved soul.

My Lord, He calls me / He calls me by the thunder / The trumpet sounds within my soul / I ain't got long to stay here.

The darkness of night and the passing storm aren't just natural phenomena; they represent the voice of God calling toward freedom. The "here" is a life of bondage. Who would want to stay "here" when offered something else?

Psalm 95 calls us to freedom, the freedom of joyous worship and the freedom of abiding in the rest of the Lord, which is wholeness and reconciliation with God and neighbor. Unlike those at Massah and Meribah, we don't look at the wonder of what God has done and is doing in and through us and turn our backs, return to a life of slavery. No, we embrace the freedom God gives us to worship joyously, even in the midst of Lent.

Selah is a rest, and so this whole series is about finding our way into the blessed rest of the kin-dom of God, within the family of God's people. So, invite your people to come into God's presence with thanksgiving and to make a joyful noise with songs of praise.

Week 4 – Psalm 23

March 22, 2020

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.

Week 4: In Right Paths

Of all the songs in the hymn book of the people of God, the 23rd Psalm is probably the most beloved. It is almost impossible to read these six verses without hearing a favorite version sung. And there are many hymns and songs that take the central themes of the psalm and wrap them in beautiful music. We could argue for a long time about why this brief psalm has so captured the hearts of so many. But at the heart of this hymn is an invitation to trust in the one who provides care, the one who gathers in, the one who heals and comforts and loves, the one who puts our feet on the right path. And that's our prayer this Lenten season: "Guide my feet, while I run this race, for I don't want to run this race in vain!"

Suggested Spiritual: "Guide My Feet"

Planning Notes

CALL TO WORSHIP

The Lord Is My Shepherd
(Psalm 23)

One: The world offers busy schedules and more stuff to do, but God offers rest.

Many: The Lord is my Shepherd; I shall not be in want!

One: The world offers faster cars and bigger houses, but God offers comfort.

Many: The Lord is my Shepherd; I shall not be in want!

One: The world offers war and terror, but God offers protection.

Many: The Lord is my Shepherd; I shall not be in want!

One: The world offers cheap love and cheap thrills, but God offers goodness and mercy.

Many: The Lord is my Shepherd; I shall not be in want!

ALL: Come now and let us dwell in the house of the Lord!

Junius Dotson. *The Africana Worship Book: Year A*. Copyright 2006 (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 2006), 57.

Preaching Notes

Perhaps the most familiar six verses of the whole Bible are found in Psalm 23. Various translations, written into songs of a variety of genres, parodied in more ways than even Google can catalog, the 23rd Psalm holds a place in the canon of scripture that is unparalleled. And yet, do we listen to it? Do we examine its depths, live into its promises? Or do we simply slip into it like a warm bath, soothing and comforting, but hidden beneath the frothy bubbles of the comfort we seek?

Comfort is important. So is being soothed when we ache and when we are unsettled. We long for those arms to wrap around us and protect us, to shelter us, to love us when it seems no one else will. But David was hoping for more, wanting more than simply balm to soothe our troubled souls. Psalm 23 is about equipping, about building up so that we can walk, so we can live. Not just exist, but to live. The shepherd doesn't just protect us, doesn't just feed us, but makes us alive. "He restores my soul." A soul, living being, life, self, desire, passion, appetite, emotion – that's the definition of the Hebrew word that is there: *nephesh*. It's not simply a breathing being, it's not simply an entity that is content, upright, taking in nourishment. But one that is enjoying the meal. One that is alive to the greenness of the grass and depth of the still water teeming with life itself. He makes me alive again. Again, like I was created to be. Like I have been in moments, fleeting experiences that make my heart pound and my eyes tear up and the laughter burst from my lips. I want that again. I want to walk in the right paths. Not the paths of self-destruction, self-satisfaction, self-centered preference

driven gluttony; but your paths. Because only those paths will keep me alive when the darkness comes, when death surrounds, when despair grips so tightly hope slips from our fingers. *Guide my feet while I run this race / guide my feet while I run this race / guide my feet while I run this race / for I don't want to run this race in vain.* Restore my soul.

And then, typical of attention deficit David, we leap from pastures to dining rooms. Without a warning or commercial break, we find ourselves ushered into a luxurious ballroom, convention center, like we've stumbled into a wedding reception we aren't sure we're invited to. The table is groaning under the weight of all of our favorites, so we lunge to our seat and dig in before we notice that the guest list includes many we would have left off. Those we hoped to avoid. But the waiter keeps filling our cup, we thought to grab and go, but we're stuck. We're there, with them. Them. And we're blessed by it.

I've often wondered what David had in mind with that "in the presence of my enemies" line. Probably thought about thumbing his nose at them, behind the velvet rope, kept at bay by the same servers who keep the cup overflowing. He probably thought it was an in your face kind of taunt, a bit of I'll show them that they don't know who they're messing with. I wonder if that's what he thought as he wrote it with a cruel grin on his face, not realizing that the inspiration for that verse was taking him farther than he intended to go. Than he hoped to go. Than he wanted to go.

Search my heart while I run this race / Search my heart while I run this race / Search my heart while I run this race / for I don't want to run this race in vain!

Those right paths, those tables in the presence, they're not so frothy and bubbly when you think about it. Not so comforting, not so warm bath-like. The Lord as shepherd isn't the walk in the park we might have imagined. It has an edge, a demand hidden inside. He gives us a hint. Gives himself one too, I suspect. In the word choice at the end of the psalm. Our translators hid it from us, uncertain how we would respond to it, perhaps, afraid we would be confused by the real

message. We make it a passive, because comfort and ease sounds passive to us. But there's nothing passive about the job of a shepherd. That's why he's got a rod and a staff. The staff was the crook, used to keep sheep on the path, hooking the end around the neck of the wandering sheep and lifting them bodily back into a new, safer direction. The rod was a weapon, a ninja bo staff or bokken, used to fight off the enemies that would make a meal of the poor unsuspecting and defenseless sheep. The shepherd's life was at risk all the time. Not a very passive profession. So why a passive ending. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me. Like a puppy, a lost lamb, ready for me to turn and take it when I wanted it, and to leave it when it is inconvenient for me, but I'm in charge. It follows me. I'll acknowledge it when there's time. When I'm in the mood. When nothing better comes my way. Surely it'll be there. Waiting. For me.

Except it isn't waiting. The verb is an active verb. A better translation would be surely goodness and mercy shall pursue me, shall chase after me, all the days of my life. That's what I want. Isn't it? A love that will not let me go. That will chase after me, even when I try to run. Even when I think I'm not worth chasing. Even when I don't know what I want.

Some may struggle with the opening verse. I shall not want. Doesn't that say we shouldn't want? Anything? That wanting is bad? Or anti-faith somehow? We are made to want. It is a part of who we are. Part of the human condition. A life of faith doesn't remove the wanting; in some ways it drives it. We need to long for the Kingdom, to want justice, to work for peace. And to not settle for anything less. We need to want to be alive and to rid ourselves of anything that makes us less than all God created us to be. And want to stop letting anyone tell us we are less than we are in God.

What David meant was that when he stopped to think about it, he had everything he needed to be alive. Maybe what should have said The Lord is my Shepherd, I'm going to stop whining when I don't get my way! Or better, not my will, but thine be done.

Hold my hand while I run this race / Hold my hand while I run this race / Hold my hand while I run this race / for I don't want to run this race in vain!

Week 5 – Psalm 130 (NRSV)

March 29, 2020

Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD.² Lord, hear my voice! Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications!³ If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities, Lord, who could stand?⁴ But there is forgiveness with you, so that you may be revered.⁵ I wait for the LORD, my soul waits, and in his word I hope;⁶ my soul waits for the Lord more than those who watch for the morning, more than those who watch for the morning.⁷ O Israel, hope in the LORD! For with the LORD there is steadfast love, and with him is great power to redeem.⁸ It is he who will redeem Israel from all its iniquities.

Week 5: Out of the Depths

Even though Palm Sunday is part of Lent, we've chosen to deal with it separately, as a part of the Holy Week/Easter commemoration and celebration. Therefore, this week is the last week in our Selah series. (It is possible, of course, to extend the theme to cover Palm Sunday, using either Psalm 118 if focusing on the Palm event or Psalm 31 if centering on the Passion story.) Psalm 130, however, provides a proper ending to the series and an anticipation of what is to come. The psalm is a cry from the depths of pain or despair. And there is no clear resolution, no clear fix to the brokenness; the separation still abides. And yet, there is hope. There is the confidence, even from a position of pain, that resolution is at hand. There is a trust that even in suffering, there is someone who knows us. Even if nobody knows the trouble we see, there is always a "but" in our faith; nobody knows, but Jesus.

Suggested Spiritual: "Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen"

Preaching Notes

First, a liturgical note: Sometimes we engage in responsive bidding prayers during worship. The petitioner will share a prayer concern, situation, or person, asking for the community to pray for the concern. The response is often "Lord, in your mercy." And the body responds, "Hear our prayer." Note that the proper response is not "hear our prayers" but "hear our prayer." This is about joining prayers together to become one. The body prays together. "Hear our (corporate, joined) prayer."

It's a minor point, admittedly, but not without meaning or value. It is significant because it reminds us that we are in this together. Though each of us may have arrived at the time of worship with our own personal concerns and fears and hurts and joys, the time of worship is about binding together. Worship is a unifying moment in our divided lives. "Hear our prayer" is one way of signaling that unity and giving us a sense that we are in this together.

This is the same journey that the writer of Psalm 130 makes in our text this week. He makes a journey from intense personal pain to corporate hope. "Out of the depths, I cry to you, O Lord." The "I" is especially poignant here. The human experience is that when we are down, we are alone. The suffering of the moment is compounded by the loneliness of our souls. "Nobody knows the trouble I've seen". Nobody understands what I'm going through. Nobody has been where I am right now. Never mind that logically, if I gave myself space to reflect objectively, I would have to admit that others have suffered and that much of what others experience is more extreme, more intense than mine. But my pain is my pain. It becomes my world, which is why people often react strongly when we say things like, "I know how you feel." We are certain that nobody knows how we feel.

"Out of the depths, I cry to you, O Lord." Yet, there is hope even here. This is a lament. I cry out to you. Lament, one commentator explains, is different from complaint. In complaint, I cry out about God. In lament, I cry out to God (Stephen Farris, "Homiletical Perspective on Psalm 130," *Feasting on the Word, Year A Vol. 2*, p.131). That difference is significant, especially when it is accompanied by that faith that says God is about healing and forgiveness. The psalmist models for us crying out to God in faith, trusting that a hearing God brings reconciliation – even though we sometimes, usually, must wait.

My soul waits, writes our psalmist, from the depths of whatever brokenness is known. My soul waits because of what I know about God, because of what the Word says about God. I wait with eagerness. I wait with discipline as though it were my duty or my vocation to wait on the Lord. I do better than those who watch the gates of the city. I am more diligent than those who stand guard over our safety and security. I am more persistent, more willing, to wait. I wait for God because faith tells me that God hears and that God cares. I know this because of what Jesus revealed about the nature of God.

Nobody knows the trouble I've seen / Nobody knows my sorrow / Nobody knows the trouble I've seen / Glory hallelujah.

Where does the hallelujah come from? From the faith that says even though my lived experience is that nobody knows, my faith experience is that Someone knows. God knows. Jesus knows. Some versions of the spiritual say *Nobody knows but Jesus*, as a way of articulating more clearly that faith. But it is evident in the glory, evident in the hallelujah. Because of that confidence, I can wait. I can watch.

It is this willingness to wait that brings the psalmist out of the depths into the community of faith. Watch with me is the call, the invitation. Watch for the redemption of the Lord. Watch for the hearing of God. O Lord, hear our prayer. What are we asking for when we ask the Lord to hear our prayer? The psalmist doesn't ask for anything but God's hearing. We don't ask anything but, "Lord, hear our prayer." Is it that hearing is healing, hearing is redeeming? Hearing is resolving? Well, yes, sometimes it is. We all have certain outcomes that we desire for our prayers: healing for loved ones, lives turned around, conflict resolved, jobs found and bondage shattered, fires put out, and devastation-wracked communities rebuilt; our outcomes are as varied as the situations for which we pray. But in it all, we pray for hearing. Nobody knows the trouble I've seen / nobody knows my sorrow / nobody knows the trouble I've seen / Glory hallelujah. We want to get to the hallelujah. We want to know the glory, to know that God is hearing and that God is with us.

John Wesley supposedly said on his deathbed, "Best of all, God is with us." It is presence, not power. that we seek most of all. It is someone who hears, someone who knows who makes all the difference in the world. As we end our season of *Selah* and prepare ourselves for the Passion, for the death and Resurrection of our Lord, we are all like the man on the cross beside Jesus who simply said, "Remember me." Glory hallelujah.
