

PSALM 23  
MAY 12, 2019

### “CALLED BACK”

AS I STAND BEFORE YOU, I FEEL CONFIDENT MANY OF YOU ARE EXPECTING A MUSICAL NUMBER OR SOME SMALL PERFORMANCE. NOT TODAY. TODAY IT’S JUST ME. NOW I HAVE PERFORMED HUNDREDS OF TIMES IN DOZENS OF SHOWS, BUT I’VE ONLY EVER SPOKEN BEFORE A CROWD PLAYING THE ROLE OF “ME” A FEW TIMES. I DON’T EVEN COUNT TEACHING AS PLAYING “ME”—THAT’S “TEACHER ME,” AND “TEACHER ME,” JUST LIKE “THEATER ME” IS FEARLESS. AS I STAND BEFORE YOU TODAY, I’M NOT FEARLESS.

LIKE I SAID IN MY POST IN THE BULLETIN, I’VE TALKED ABOUT PSALM 23 HERE BEFORE—WELL NOT HERE BUT IN THE GALLERY. AND IF YOU COULD READ BETWEEN THE LINES OF THAT POST, YOU WOULD NOTE THAT I WASN’T CERTAIN, AT THE TIME, WHAT IT WAS I INTENDED TO SAY ABOUT PSALM 23. ONLY THAT I MUST HAVE SOMETHING “MORE” TO SAY ABOUT IT.

I’D LIKE TO THINK I DID A PRETTY GOOD JOB THE FIRST TIME BREAKING THE PSALM DOWN. IF YOU WEREN’T PRESENT LAST SUMMER, I BELIEVE IT WAS JULY 22, HERE’S THE CLIFFNOTES VERSION: PSALM 23 WAS WRITTEN BY DAVID. IT’S A PASTORAL, AND IT IS MEANT TO BE UNDERSTOOD AS AN UPLIFTING PIECE. INDEED, IT’S A SERENE REFLECTION ON THE RELATIONSHIP DAVID HAS WITH GOD AS HIS KEEPER, HIS HOST, AND HIS LIGHT. IT’S A HAPPY PIECE. AND YET, OUR GO-TO RESPONSE FOR PSALM 23 IS A VISION OF DEATH, TRAGEDY, OF GOING THROUGH HARD TIMES BUT PERSISTING THROUGH WITH THE LORD AS OUR GUIDE. WHETHER MOST PEOPLE KNOW THE PSALM NUMBER OR NOT, THEY KNOW VERSE 4—VERSE 4 ALWAYS TAKES THE LIMELIGHT. “YEA, THOUGH I WALK THROUGH THE DARKEST VALLEY—OR THE VALLEY OF THE SHADOW OF DEATH IN SOME TRANSLATIONS—I SHALL FEAR NO EVIL.”

WHEN I GAVE MY TALK, I TRIED TO HIGHLIGHT HOW VERSE 4 HAS BECOME INGRAINED IN THE POPULAR CONSCIOUS AS THE THING TO SAY IN DARK TIMES, THE IRONY OF COURSE BEING THAT THE PSALM FROM WHICH IT’S TAKEN IS MEANT TO BE HAPPY. YES, THE LORD IS PRESENT TO GUIDE US THROUGH TIMES OF STRIFE, BUT ONLY BECAUSE THE LORD IS ALWAYS THERE! LOOK AT THE REST OF THE PSALM—THE LORD IS A PROVIDER, LEADS US TO GREEN PASTURES, BESIDE STILL WATERS. HE RESTORES OUR SOUL! ALL OF THAT...BEFORE ANY MENTION OF THE DARKEST VALLEY! THE PSALM IS A TESTAMENT THAT, AS GOD’S PEOPLE, WE CAN LITERALLY BE OVER-JOYED. OUR CUPS OVERFLOW. WE HAVE DIVINE FAVOR. SUCH DELIGHT AS STEMS FROM GOD, AS IT INSPIRED DAVID IN PSALM 23, WILL SURELY LAST ALL THROUGHOUT THE REST OF OUR DAYS.

AH, YES. THAT WAS THE KEY POINT I LANDED ON LAST SUMMER. THAT PSALM 23 IS WRITTEN IN DESCRIPTION OF THE PRESENT. WE CAN BE CONFIDENT THAT THE GOODNESS OF THE LORD GOES WITH US THROUGHOUT THIS LIFE. PLENTY OF PSALMS TO BE MINDFUL OF ABOUT WHAT'S BEEN PREPARED FOR US AFTER THIS LIFE—PSALM 23 FOCUSES OUR ATTENTION HERE. SO YES—THOUGH WE MAY EXPERIENCE DARK VALLEYS, THE LORD SHEPHERDS US AND PROVIDES FOR US *NOW*.

SO, WHAT DO YOU THINK? DID I GET IT ALL? MAYBE?! WHY WAS I DRAWN BACK TO THIS PSALM THEN? LIKE I SAID IN THE BULLETIN, I DIDN'T INTEND TO GO THROUGH THIS AGAIN, BUT THEN I SAW IT ON THE LECTIONARY FOR THIS WEEK, AND IT SEEMED TO BE CALLING ME BACK. THERE'S SOMETHING MORE TO SAY. SO I THOUGHT, WHAT'S HAPPENED SINCE LAST SUMMER THAT I CAN ADD?

A LOT. A LOT'S HAPPENED.

THIS IS THE PART THAT I WANT YOU TO UNDERSTAND AS ME BEING FEARFUL. I'M GOING TO TALK TO YOU ABOUT WHAT HAPPENED IN MY LIFE AND IN MY FAMILY AT THE START OF THIS YEAR. SOME OF YOU KNOW, THOUGH I DON'T THINK YOU KNOW EVERYTHING. AND EVEN IF YOU DO, I'M AFRAID THE GRAVITY OF EVERYTHING THAT HAPPENED WILL OVERSHADOW WHERE I WANT THIS TO END UP. SO JUST LIKE WHEN WE HAVE TO PUSH PAST THE POPULAR CONSCIOUS THAT LINGERS ON VERSE 4 OF PSALM 23, I WANT YOU TO TRY YOUR BEST TO STAY WITH ME. LIKE THE PSALM, BE MINDFUL OF THE PRESENT.

ON JANUARY 14 OF THIS YEAR, MY GRANDFATHER PASSED AWAY. HE WAS 76 YEARS OLD. ON FEBRUARY 2, MY DAUGHTER CORA, MY SECOND CHILD, WAS BORN. AND ON FEBRUARY 23, MY DAD DIED. TO GIVE YOU SOME FRAMING OF THAT TIMESPAN, MY GRANDFATHER DIED ON A MONDAY, IT WAS THE FIRST NIGHT I STARTED TEACHING CLASS AT IVY TECH THIS SEMESTER. IT WAS AN 8-WEEK CLASS. WHEN CORA WAS BORN, I WAS SET TO BEGIN TEACHING CHAPTER 3 OF THAT CLASS. AND WHEN MY DAD DIED, I WAS FINISHING UP CHAPTER 6. I DON'T RECOMMEND GETTING ON THAT ROLLERCOASTER.

NOW, OF COURSE, EVERYONE DEALS WITH THINGS DIFFERENTLY. I'M A HUMORIST, AND I HAD A NUMBER OF GO-TO JOKES TO GET ME THROUGH EVERYTHING. MY FAVORITE ONE WAS SAYING TO THE EFFECT, "I'M DONE WITH THE YEAR 2019!" I WOULD JOKE THAT IF I COULD COAST THROUGH THE REST OF THE YEAR—AS THOUGH THAT WAS EVER POSSIBLE WITH A NEWBORN—I WOULD. I WOULD FEEL ENTITLED TO SUCH A THING. SEE, I DIDN'T MENTION THE KEY PART HERE—AND I'LL REMIND YOU TO STAY WITH ME. MY DAD DIED, HE WAS 53. HE DIED BY HIS OWN HAND.

I'VE HAD ABOUT TWO AND A HALF MONTHS TO TRY TO MAKE SENSE OF THAT. TO TRY TO DISTILL DOWN WHAT *YOU ALL* WOULD NEED TO KNOW TO MAKE SENSE OF IT WITH ME WOULD TAKE FAR TOO LONG, AND IT'S NOT REALLY

NECESSARY. SUFFICE TO SAY, MY DAD SUFFERED FROM DEPRESSION—REALLY BIPOLAR DEPRESSION. HE HAD UPS, AND THEY WERE BIG UPS, AND HE HAD SOME OF THE WORST DOWNS IMAGINABLE, MADE EVEN MORE WORSE WITH ALCOHOL. AND NO ONE REALLY KNEW HOW LONG IT HAD BURDENED HIM, BUT IN THE MONTHS OR SO BEFORE HE DIED, HE SEEMED TO HAVE TURNED A CORNER. CLEARLY, WE WERE JUST EXPERIENCING ANOTHER UP. AND THE STORY I TELL MYSELF, BECAUSE HE LEFT NO NOTE, IS THAT HE COULD FEEL A SEVERE DOWN COMING, AND HE DIDN'T WANT TO PUT HIMSELF OR ANY OF US THROUGH THAT AGAIN...THE DARKEST VALLEY, RIGHT?

IN PSALM 23, WE'RE NOT PROMISED TO NEVER ENCOUNTER EVIL, ONLY THAT WE NEED NOT FEAR IT. BUT I HAVE TO TELL YOU, I'VE STRUGGLED WITH THAT. WE'LL ENCOUNTER EVIL—GOT IT, I'M OKAY WITH THAT. WE NEED NOT FEAR IT—SO WE SHOULD SUBMIT OURSELVES TO THE LORD, TURN TO HIM, GOT IT. BUT DOES THERE NOT SEEM TO BE AN IMPLICATION OF DELIVERANCE THOUGH? IF WE FOLLOW THE METAPHOR OF THE SHEPHERD ALL THE WAY THROUGH, AM I TO TAKE MY DAD'S DEATH AS A SHEEP HAVING BEEN TOTALLY AND UTTERLY LOST?

I'M NOT TRYING TO DIP INTO A THEODICY PROBLEM HERE, TRYING TO WONDER WHY THE LORD WOULD ALLOW SUCH BAD THINGS TO HAPPEN. REMEMBER, WE ARE NOT PROMISED TO NEVER ENCOUNTER EVIL. BUT DAD'S EVIL WAS A MENTAL ILLNESS THAT, BY ITS VERY NATURE, DISTORTS REALITY. I KNOW BECAUSE I HAVE IT.

I DON'T HAVE BIPOLAR LIKE HE DID, BUT I HAVE BEEN DIAGNOSED WITH DEPRESSION. AND THE ONE THING THAT STICKS OUT WHEN I REMEMBER DAD TRYING TO DESCRIBE WHAT HE WAS GOING THROUGH RESONATED SO CLEARLY WITH ME. HE CALLED IT "NOISE." MAYBE YOU'LL BETTER UNDERSTAND IT AS "VOICES," BUT THAT GOES TOO FAR. WITH DEPRESSION, IT'S NOT HALLUCINATIONS, IT'S AN INNER MONOLOGUE. IT'S *MY* VOICE. IT WAS *HIS* VOICE, THOUGH HE NEVER EXPLICITLY STATED THAT—HE CALLED IT "NOISE." SO IT'S MY VOICE, HIS VOICE, TELLING US THINGS THAT ARE OVERLY SELF-CRITICAL BUT STILL WITHIN THE REALM OF IDENTIFIABLE. THINGS LIKE "I CAN'T DO ANYTHING RIGHT. ALL I DO IS CAUSE PROBLEMS. I'LL NEVER FIGURE THIS OUT."

DEPRESSION IS ONE OF THE MOST DEVIOUS DISORDERS, AS THE SYMPTOMS IT INDUCES MAKE IT ALL THE MORE DIFFICULT TO TAKE THE ACTIONS TO FIGHT IT. WE MIGHT SAY "YOU NEED TO GO SEE A PROFESSIONAL." THE RESPONSE FROM THE DEPRESSION VOICE WOULD BE, "NO ONE CAN HELP ME; I'M A LOST CAUSE." "YOU SHOULD PROBABLY BE ON MEDS." "HOW PATHETIC IS IT THAT YOU CAN'T EVEN FUNCTION WITHOUT SOME MEDICATION." "DAD, WE LOVE YOU." "I KNOW, I LOVE YOU TOO. I JUST DON'T KNOW WHAT'S WRONG WITH ME."

-OR-

“HAVE YOU TRIED TALKING TO GOD?” “I DON’T THINK THAT’S GOING TO HELP. HE WON’T ANSWER.”

“ARE YOU SURE?” “IT DOESN’T MATTER. IT’S NOT WORTH THE TIME.”

“WELL, IF IT’S NOT GOING TO HURT ANYTHING, DON’T YOU THINK YOU OUGHT TO TRY IT?” “I JUST DON’T THINK IT’S GOING TO WORK.”

YOU EVER TRY TO GET A THREE-YEAR OLD TO TRY NEW FOODS? EVER WONDER HOW MUCH MORE FRUSTRATED YOU WOULD BE IF IT WAS A GROWN MAN? AH, BUT THAT’S A CRITICAL POINT FOR UNDERSTANDING DEPRESSION. TALKING TO MY DAD WHILE HE WAS DEALING WITH “NOISE” WAS STILL JUST TALKING TO MY DAD. THERE WAS NOTHING DIFFERENT ABOUT HIM—HE LOOKED MORE TIRED THAN USUAL, I GUESS, THAT’S IT.

BUT TALKING TO HIM ABOUT PRAYER—AND MIND YOU I DON’T THINK I’M VERY GOOD AT PRAYER, BUT I WAS ALL ABOUT EXPLORING EVERY OPTION. TALKING TO HIM ABOUT PRAYER AND HAVING HIM RESPOND, “IT’S NOT WORTH THE TIME; I JUST DON’T THINK IT’S GOING TO WORK” WAS A DARK VALLEY. FOR ME. AND I WAS AFRAID. AND I WAS ANGRY. I ASKED, “WHY IS GOD, *THE LORD*, NOT PIERCING THROUGH HIS THICK SKULL, BLASTING LIKE A TRUMPET, ‘YOU’RE WORTH IT—I’M HERE—I LOVE YOU. I’LL MAKE YOU TO SIT IN GREEN PASTURES BY STILL WATERS. I’VE PREPARED A TABLE FOR YOU. YOU SHALL NOT WANT. YOU’VE GONE ASTRAY AND I’M CALLING YOU BACK.’” BACK HERE. TO THIS LIFE.

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WHICH IS WHERE I WANT YOU ALL TO COME BACK NOW. HI! IT’S MAY 12. WE’RE AT EASTMINSTER, AND THE YAHOO AT THE PULPIT JUST TOOK YOU ON A LITTLE TRIP. AND MAYBE YOU’RE A BIT UNEASY ABOUT THAT. THAT’S OKAY. YOU’RE OKAY. AND I’M OKAY.

IN THE WEEK THAT FOLLOWED MY DAD’S DEATH, LITERALLY THE VERY NEXT WEEK, WE CELEBRATED HIM. WE GOT REACQUAINTED THROUGH STORIES AND PHOTOS WITH A MAN WHO’D BEEN GONE FROM US FOR SO LONG. YES WE CRIED AS A FAMILY. BUT WE SHARED AND BONDED AND DREW STRENGTH FROM EACH OTHER. AND OVER TIME WE’RE LEARNING TO DO SOMETHING I DIDN’T EXPECT. THEY SAY YOU HAVE TO LEARN HOW TO LIVE WITHOUT THE PEOPLE YOU LOSE, WHICH IS TRUE BUT ALSO TAUTOLOGICAL. WHAT THEY DON’T SAY, EXPLICITLY, IS YOU LEARN HOW TO LIVE WITH THEIR SPIRIT. UNSURPRISINGLY, DAD’S SPIRIT COMES THROUGH IN MOMENTS OF FRUSTRATED HUMOR. WHAT IS THAT? MY DAD WAS THE FIX-IT OF ALL MR. FIX-ITS, AND HE PROMISED TO FIX A LOT BEFORE HE WAS GONE. HAVING TO NOW FIX THOSE THINGS OURSELVES, WE LAUGH WITH EACH OTHER. MY MOTHER, A WOMAN WHO HAS LOST SO MUCH, A FATHER AND A HUSBAND, SMIRKS AND LAUGHS, SAYING TO THE

EFFECT “WHEN I GET UP THERE, I’M GONNA BOP HIM.” IF YOU’RE LAUGHING NOW. THAT’S GOD. I KNOW SOME PEOPLE WHO WOULD ROLL THEIR EYES AT ME FOR SAYING, “THAT’S GOD.” THAT IT’S A PLATITUDE, THAT RECOVERY AFTER LOSING A LOVED ONE IS JUST PART OF THE HUMAN CONDITION. AND ISN’T IT A GRAND PART?! THANK YOU GOD! MY CUP OVERFLOWS! HE RESTORES MY SOUL. TAKES AWAY THAT SINFUL ANGER.

I DON’T HAVE AN ANSWER TO THOSE ANGRY QUESTIONS I WAS ASKING OF GOD IN MY DARK VALLEY. AND I DON’T HAVE A RELIGIOUSLY GROUNDED RESPONSE TO DEALING WITH MENTAL ILLNESS, DEPRESSION, OR SUICIDE—UNLESS YOU COUNT THIS SERMON I SUPPOSE. I *DO* THINK IT’S FITTING THAT PSALM 23 FOLLOWS THE PSALM OF THE CROSS. THE ONE THAT STARTS “MY GOD, MY GOD, WHY HAVE YOU FORSAKEN ME? WHY ARE YOU SO FAR FROM HELPING ME, FROM THE WORDS OF MY GROANING?” IT’S SAME ONE THAT SETTLES ON “TO HIM, INDEED, SHALL ALL WHO SLEEP IN THE EARTH BOW DOWN; BEFORE HIM SHALL BOW ALL WHO GO DOWN TO THE DUST, AND I SHALL LIVE FOR HIM.” YES, IT’S FITTING THAT WE EXPERIENCE IN THIS LIFE THE VALUE OF PAIN AND LOSS TO TRULY KNOW THE SWEETNESS OF WHAT WAS SHED FOR US TO RECEIVE THE DIVINE SHEPHERD’S FAVOR. AND TO BE CALLED BACK WHEN WE LOSE OUR WAY.

I’VE SPENT THIS WHOLE TIME TALKING ABOUT PSALM 23 AS THOUGH IT’S AN INCLUSIVE PIECE, LIKE IT’S TALKING FOR AND ABOUT US AS BELIEVERS. WHILE SURE IT EXTENDS, AS ALL PSALMS DO, TO CHRISTIANS EVERYWHERE, LOOK TO THE PART OF VERSE 4 THAT NO ONE KNOWS AND NO ONE QUOTES: “YOUR ROD AND YOUR STAFF—THEY COMFORT ME.” THEY COMFORT *ME*. PSALM 23 IS PERSONAL. THAT’S SOMETHING I DID NOT FOCUS ON LAST SUMMER. WE PICTURE DAVID SINGING THIS UNRIVALLED PASTORAL WITH A HEART AS FULL OF GLADNESS AS IT COULD HOLD. FOR HIM TO NOT SET TO SONG HIS FEELINGS OF RELIGIOUS DELIGHT WOULD MAKE HIM BURST. AND SO WE GET THIS ODE TO THE LORD AS A SHEPHERD. SUCH A HUMBLE IMAGE FOR A LORD. BECAUSE THE LORD OF DAVID, OUR LORD, MY LORD, IS SO GOOD, IS SO ACCOMMODATING, LOVES US SO DEARLY, AND WANTS US TO BE WITH HIM SO MUCH, THAT HE’LL GO AFTER US WHEN WE STRAY.

SO YEAH, IT’S PERSONAL. I HAVE BEEN CALLED BACK. I SHALL LIVE FOR HIM. SURELY GOODNESS AND MERCY SHALL FOLLOW ME ALL THE DAYS OF MY LIFE. I PRAY THE SAME FOR YOU.

AMEN.

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