

Palisades Presbyterian Church
April 29, 2007

It is for the church we pray...
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Thomas Merton Trappist Monk, Writer, and Peace Advocate once wrote:

“One slowly comes back to life, with the realization that all things are possible.”

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And, I think, in that revivification of hope that follows times of doubt, with the realization that all things are possible, a sense of gratitude and peace settles upon us.

We realize we are in the right place. A sense of well-being seems to cuddle us.

Well-being... always present and out of reach at the same time. Sometimes as mysterious as the greatest of distant stars, unpredictable, indefinable, present.

Whether we are following the teachings of Jesus, or have other faith traditions, this well-being illuminates us - goes right to the heart of who we are as spiritual beings, somewhat distracted by this human experience! After all,

- We long for peace
- Healing
- Wholeness
- Unity
- Oneness – without sameness
- Completion
- Love
- The end to violence
- Compassion
- God

Sound like a spiritual being in there somewhere! A being that more consciously knows God than our human apparatus can process. Yet we get such glimpses. Often, for me the glimmer of such things comes through the study and teachings of Jesus. Something about him and his life that assures me, us perhaps, whether directly or indirectly – that we'll make it through whatever it is and we will be ok. Just his name can be healing.

Now, I am not saying that these things happen like flicking on or off a light switch: one moment distraught and the next calm, peaceful, joyful. No, it's more like the calm, peace, and joy are always there, clouded over by life's happenings, but that they break through – sometimes in overwhelming, promising, life-refreshing ways – even in the face of what can seem to be totally insurmountable obstacles.

The psalmist in today's reading of Psalm 23 knows the place we seek. Probably second in universal recognition to only the Lord's Prayer, Psalm 23 is all about peace, gratitude, assurance, calm, presence, wellness – God, even in the midst of turmoil. It is a psalm, a song, that emerges from a heart that knows God in such a way that it produced this response, which touches the God in the heart of just about all who read it.

The heart and soul of this psalmist reaches out through a pen that touches our faith and gratitude toward God to such a degree that reading it alters us, shifts us, and slows us down into God's presence so that, at least for a few moments, time – the dimension of time – ceases: tick – tock...

Think I'm kidding. Watch your body's response...

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

And, it comes to life in the midst of God's creation, not human creation

- Green pastures
- Still waters

No institution here. Green Pastures. There is no intermediary between creation – human or otherwise – and God. Still Waters. It is the grateful writings of one who understands the love of God and the love for God in ways that brings the writer to the truth of who we are, where we have come from, and to where it is we are all eventually headed. It is about the peace and presence that sustains us daily, today, and all the days of our lives.

But, we are human - and maybe like me, you, too, *forget* from time to time, almost as though we have some wiring, some "built-in forgetter," that requires we be reminded. And don't let this robe fool you – I forget often.

And, that's why we, I, come here and to places like this. Speaking for myself, I need to be with and around others who know that's the way it is, who know the struggle through ups and downs, and who know that through it all we are ok, even when we don't feel ok – because somewhere in our midst are others who have been there, who have made it through those times, and still come here to praise, to comfort and be comforted, even just to be sorrowful. Some days are for sorrow, I think.

But when the time is right, the power of God and places like this come through – it is a place from which to go forth – not to withdraw from reality.

And, this leads me to John's reading this morning. Jesus is having another one of his parables with the leaders of the temple. Jesus is on the porch or portico of Solomon's temple, on the east side outside the inner temple, where the more "traditional" – non-Jesus folk gathered for lessons and work.

It was the Festival of the Dedication, Chanukah – the 25th day of Kislev: the period aligned with our November-December. It was winter, and Jesus was teaching under the cedar awning, protected from the elements. In plain sight of the temple leaders; I'm sure he knew they were irked by him; and I am sure that there were many instances like the one described this morning. Here they were challenging him again.

If Jesus did not want his ministry to be public – this is the last place he would have taught. There was no venue more visible in the city than Solomon's Porch.

I also wonder if, as Jesus taught and prayed and was outside the temple, if he prayed for what was going on within the institution, how it had moved from its call, maybe, been co-opted by the powerful and ever-shifting forces of the times.

I wonder if a part of him, the faithful Jew that he was, held on to the temple – at least a little, waiting for it to catch up with the plans God had for it, plans gone awry while current occupants led it astray?

Whatever it might have been though, he didn't stop being Jesus. He prayed and taught and continued to carry his message – whether he was agreed with or not. He was not, from all we can tell, seeking popularity.

And think of the joy the disciples must have had each day, getting up and sitting in the presence of a teacher like Jesus. Think of the passers-by stopping to listen – "Oh, he's the one. That's that Jesus everyone is talking about. C'mon let's go listen."

It must have really been something during the good times; sort of like the best convention of your choice headed by the rock star of your choice! Heady, exciting, powerfully gripping to have been taught in his presence.

And think about how the institutional church in some ways over the centuries has taken that joy, headiness, power, and love - and used it not always in the best of ways. Uses it today, not always in the best of ways.

But, no indictments on this morning. I still believe the institutional church has a chance, if it can become more like the faithful, journeying, seeking people that seek it as a center of their sojourn. I believe more today than ever that the church has a unique place in this world, a potential for unleashing the Spirit in ways that

can shift the planet's orbit. It has the potential for healing beyond anything that exists in our world. And, in the meantime, I see God pacing the horizon, hoping and waiting for us to catch up.

For now, like Jesus, we're under the portico, teaching, worshipping, being church in something of its original form – ecclesia – the people, doing our best to welcome all to the tables we set – following the tradition of old. And it is the way we create green and safe pastures, the hospitality we offer the strangers in our lives, the way we teach and carry the Good News – these are the tenets of peace, the still waters.

And, so, I pray for a church that listens deeply from its soul – and hears the cries of those in the world who so desperately seek the sanctuary – not as limited partners in this Creation Endeavor, but as brother and sister – across all boundaries.

Just think what a church would be like that said to the world, “Your violence of exclusion and marginalization and power is not ours. Your ways of warring are not ours. We don't have all the answers and we are not even sure we are doing it right, but we are going to err on the side of love. Come to us if you seek your God. Join us in worship, praise, and fellowship and wonder. Become part of this great and mysterious effort to get it right, to get caught up in the Spirit and the new thing God is doing, begging us to follow these teachings in this fractured place we call home...come, you are all welcome.”

Lie down with us in the pastures, by still waters, or sit with us in the shade of Solomon's porch, enter into peace and magnificence that gives us joy and gratitude and comfort –

Come, come back to life in this place, where we realize all things are possible.

Amen