

May 3, 2020

'Tigers in the Dark'
(*Psalm 23, John 10:11-18*)

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"The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want."

It's so familiar, we could miss what it's saying. The opening is so lovely, so lyrical. And yet, it is shocking! Comparing God to a shepherd is to say that our loving Creator gets right down in the muck, the thick of it, with us! God stays with us through Covid-19; with the isolation, anxiety, long hours, risk, unemployment, loneliness, illness and death. God faces danger with us. God braves the storm to be with us.

In our fear and confusion, God is with us. We are never alone! Even when we "walk through the valley of the shadow of death," we don't need to be afraid. Now, I don't read this as saying that nothing bad will ever happen to us. This is divine assurance during all of our trials and tribulations!

I love this story of 'Tigers in the Dark:' One dark night, at a circus, the tent was crowded with thousands of people. They were waiting with excitement for the tiger trainer to come on and perform. He bowed to the audience, then went inside the cage. A hush came over the audience as the door was locked behind him. The trainer was putting the tigers through their routine performance.

Suddenly, there was a huge 'POP,' followed by a complete power blackout. For several long, long minutes that trainer was trapped in the cage with the tigers, in total darkness! He knew the tigers could see **him** in the dark, but he couldn't see **them**.

Finally, the lights came back on, and the trainer finished his performance. Every one was amazed that he wasn't attacked by the tigers in the darkness. Afterward, the trainer was interviewed by a TV station. He admitted how scared he had been. However, during the blackout, he realized that the tigers didn't *know* that he couldn't see them. He just talked to them as usual until the lights came back on.

I for one, am very grateful that for the most part, animals are not treated as inhumanely in circuses as they have been in the past! Circuses are not as popular as they once were. Still, the message from this story is real!

There are times when all of us are confronted with tigers in the dark.

Sometimes we find ourselves in a crisis not of our own personal making, like this Coronavirus Pandemic. Sometimes we are wounded in different ways.

Sometimes, beyond our control, we are struck with illness or death.

It's hard to trust God when our lives are so knocked off balance!

Like that trainer in the cage with no power, we live in darkness, afraid that we'll be attacked, hurt, rejected or taken advantage of. Just as that trainer had to trust that he could survive in the darkness while caged with the tigers, God invites us to trust when we are overcome with darkness and fear.

God is like a shepherd who protects the sheep by moving them to higher ground. But the way to higher ground is through deep valleys. The shepherd guides the sheep to leap over deep and narrow gullies. In the valley, there can be floods, rock slides, poisonous plants and predators looking for prey. During this time, the sheep are dependent on their shepherd for all their needs. They fear no evil.

In the early 1990's, on one of my trips to Israel/Palestine, I visited Masada, a mountain stronghold on the western shore of the Dead Sea. It was the scene of the last stand of Jewish rebels in the uprising of 66 BCE, just after the fall of Jerusalem in 70 BCE. The rebels took Masada back from the Romans. It was taken back by Romans in 73 BCE. It became the last stronghold for these Jewish people. While living there, the community was totally self-sufficient. They believed they were totally safe. This wasn't the case, since it's changed hands several times since!

Many people, when traveling up Masada choose to take a cable car. It's much easier and quicker. But I've always been grateful that I chose to hike up to the top of Masada. While hiking the very long narrow path, I was able to get in touch a bit with the everyday life of the shepherds who traveled these kinds of paths with their sheep. And when I finally reached the top of Masada, I was awestruck at the view! I had never been up that high except when in an airplane.

The way to higher ground is through the valleys. Most of us would rather ignore the valleys and twisted paths of life. We'd rather leap from mountaintop to mountaintop, from Christmas to Easter and avoid Holy Week. However, it is along the valleys, that the 'green pastures' and 'still waters' are discovered. Even while so many dangers lurk, these are places where nourishment can be found to sustain the journey.

It's not wrong to be afraid. It's a natural response to the threats we face. But we can, with God's grace, face our fears. Then, our hearts and our lives can be ruled by hope and love, not by fear. For love of our neighbors, we should take care to slow the spread of this Coronavirus. We should feed and care for others along this journey. And while we 'stay at home' to do this, let's remember two important things that the good shepherd shows us:

***God's love, in the end, is stronger than whatever we face.**

*God says to us,
"Don't be afraid, my love is stronger, my love is stronger than your fear...."*

***We are never alone.**

AMEN!

