

Kuhn Memorial Presbyterian Church
955 Main St.
Barboursville, West Virginia
July 26, 2020

Call to Worship

O God,

We gather together in your presence with expectation,
hungry for an encounter with you,
eager to hear your Word.

Open our eyes and ears to the presence of your Holy Spirit.
May the seeds of your Word, scattered among us this morning,
fall on fertile soil.

May they take root in our hearts and lives,
and produce an abundant harvest
of good words and deeds.

We pray this in the name of Jesus Christ,
our teacher and our Lord. Amen.

Christine Longhurst, *re: Worship*

Hymn Seek Ye First Text and music: Karen Lafferty, 1971

Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and its righteousness,
and all these things shall be added unto you. Allelu, alleluia!

Ask, and it shall be given unto you;
seek, and you shall find,
knock and the door shall be opened unto you. Allelu, alleluia!

You shall not live by bread alone, but by every word
that proceeds from the mouth of God, Allelu, alleluia!

Prayer of Confession

Loving Lord, you watch over us all our days. Help us to feel your presence today. We confess that we have allowed a host of concerns and frustrations to compete with your word and will for us. Remind us that you are not the author of confusion, but of peace. Guide our thoughts, strengthen our bodies, inspire holy intentions within us, that we might be faithful to you and gospel-bearers to our neighbors and families, strangers and friends.

Response Take, O Take Me as I Am Text and Music: John Bell, 1995

Take, O take me as I am; summon out what I shall be.

Set your seal upon my heart and live in me.

Repeat

Words of Assurance

Hear the good news- while we worry and fret, God is at work in our lives and in our world, that we might have a taste of God's blessed kingdom, the realm of justice, freedom, mercy, and peace. Believe in the good news of the gospel: in Jesus Christ our sins are forgiven. Alleluia! Amen.

Scripture Reading Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

The Morning Message

The twenty-third Psalm is perhaps the best-loved and most-often recited of the psalms. I probably use it at every funeral, usually dropping out myself so that I can hear the gathered community recite the familiar words. It becomes both prayer and affirmation of faith together and is a beautiful reminder of the loving and intimate relationship with have our Lord.

The Psalms are an important part of the Hebrew Scriptures. They are used in Jewish and Christian worship today. In our New Testament Scriptures, there are numerous references to Jesus as both Shepherd and Lamb of God. So, we have a tendency to see this psalm through a Christian lens.

Years ago, I had what I would call, a transformational experience, with Psalm 23. It was during the year I was an intern in Clinical Pastoral Education at a local hospital. All Presbyterian ministers seeking ordination in the Presbytery of West Virginia are required complete a unit of CPE.

On-call duty came twice a month. It was a sixteen-hour shift beginning at 4:30 in the afternoon. From midnight to 9 in the morning, the on-call chaplain was the only chaplain in the house. Some nights were slow and others terribly hectic and too often traumatic.

One evening, the head nurse of one of the units called seeking my help. One of their patients was an elderly woman with dementia. She had been hospitalized for pneumonia and had come down with a case of MRSA which you know is an extremely dangerous type of staff infection. It was important for the patient to rest which she would not do. She wasn't sleeping in spite of medication to help her sleep. As a result, she was becoming more and more difficult to control. She was an escape artist, leaving her room and wandering around the unit putting herself and other people at risk. She would not cooperate, would often become combative, and the staff was about at their wit's end. They needed help.

So, I arrived to find the situation pretty much as I described here. Trying to communicate with someone you've never met can be a challenge and this was going to take extra effort on my

part. She had dementia and I had minimal experience with that. I prayed my standard prayer for difficult situations: "Help!"

There were some get-well cards on the bulletin board in the patient's room. I pulled them off and asked her if she had looked at her cards. She shook her head. I sat with her and read them and talked about the people who cared for her and read their names. There was a church name added to many of the cards. She may not remember but here was a witness that she was a beloved member of a family of faith, a lamb of God's own flock, a sheep of God's own fold.

Well, that took about ten minutes and I hadn't made much progress in settling her down. She was still up and down and in and out of the bed. I hadn't signed up for this, but here we were.

Reading seemed to help a little. But, what to read? There were no magazines in the room or books. A thought as clear as day struck me: open the drawer in the bedside table. Of course! Thank God for the Gideons! They place Bibles in every patient's room.

I pulled out the Bible and asked the woman if it would be ok if I read to her awhile from the Bible. She quite enthusiastically responded that yes she would like that. So far, so good. We're communicating. She's not trying to get out of the room. She's starting to quiet down.

"What would you like to hear?" I asked her.

" Oh, it doesn't matter," she said." It's all *good*"

Ok, here goes. I turned to Psalm 23 and began to read those beautiful words from the King James translation, hoping she might recognize them. I slowly read about the Lord making a resting place for us in lush green pastures. The patient leaned back on her pillows. I read about the Lord leading us beside still waters. And she pulled up the covers. I read about the Lord restoring our souls and protecting us even in the valley of the shadow and her eyes closed. And by the time I reached the verse that declares goodness and mercy will follow us all the days of our lives, her body had completely relaxed. And when I reached the end, the promise that we will dwell in the house of the Lord forever, she was asleep.

I've raised three kids. I know better than to think the baby is sound asleep at the moment they close their eyes. You have to rock a little longer, hum another verse, give a few more pats...and then sneak out the door unnoticed.

So, having read Psalm 23, I continued to Psalm 24 and 25 and I can't really remember when I stopped, because the sense of peace that had settled upon that room and patient was indescribably beautiful.

Friends, we may not be in that particular situation today. We may be oriented in the present and not causing problems for those trying to care for us. But, we have all come to worship today in search of the Good Shepherd, the one who leads and guides and comforts and restores our souls. The pandemic continues. We are under orders to wear masks in public and that is a point of controversy. There is no consensus about how to return to school. We stand in line to be admitted to the grocery store. We miss our family and friends. My grandson cried this week, and his mom asked him why he was sad. He said he missed his friends. He just turned six. Six year-olds learn to climb trees and catch lightning bugs and play hide and seek with their friends. I'm sad for him.

Psalm 23 calls to mind simple images of pastures, flowing water, a dark valley, a table, to explain how God accompanies believers through real difficulties. It is quoted and consulted over the span of our lives, becoming part of the fabric of our spirits. We return to it again and again through all the seasons of our lives.

I'm going to read the psalm once again. And, as I do, I invite you to sit back and relax. Visualize the green grass, the quiet stream, the banqueting table, the anointing oil, the abundance of God's blessings prepared for you.

This is an image of the kingdom of God. The kingdom is like a quiet stream, a family feast, salve on a painful wound.

And...the kingdom is like someone coming to your rescue. The kingdom is like a name signed to a 99 cent greeting card. The kingdom is like the eyes of a saint closing in peace.

What is the kingdom of God like to you? Even in these stressful days, even though we are unsure and unsettled, the kingdom is here and you are its witness.

Pastoral Prayer and the Lord's Prayer

God of beginnings and endings, as the summer heat deepens and the pandemic continues, we ask for your wisdom. Do not let us give in to our fears, but inspire us with your Spirit. Show us the new things you are doing that we might join you in them. In all the upheaval and pain, the loss and uncertainty, may we be aware of new possibilities revealed by this era. Grant us the courage to not only see the cracks in our society, but give us the faith to repair them for the sake of all your children.

Confident that the Spirit intercedes for us in our weakness, we ask you to guide those in leadership positions as they make difficult decisions for our schools and communities.

Hear our prayers for those on our minds and hearts...

We pray for ourselves and for this, your Church, that we might persevere in the present circumstances.

We boldly pray as Jesus taught us, saying, Our Father...Amen.

Blessing

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope. Romans 15:13

Postlude