

“Cross Pollination – Together in the Valley”

Psalm 23; 1 Corinthians 12:12-26 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
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Cross Pollination Lenten Sermon Series #5

Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might open our hearts to the wisdom you are sending us through our neighbors. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

You know there's got to be a reason if I have us use any translation other than the New Revised Standard Version for our scripture readings. To be fair, I often use the King James translation of the 23rd Psalm at memorial services, because it's the one that is etched in most people's hearts. But today, we read that version for another reason. In the NRSV, verse four begins, "Even though I walk through the darkest valley." But what I wanted to talk about today is, "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death."

There are certainly seasons in each person's life that feel like walking through "the valley of the shadow of death." We've talked about how observing Lent together at church helps us be better prepared for when our individual lives take us on wilderness journeys. But we are in a much rarer moment now, when it feels like the whole world is traveling through the valley of the shadow of death all at the same time, but without the comfort we usually get from doing things together, since we're all separated. So what is "the valley of the shadow of death", and how can we increase our sense of togetherness, even if we're all in different places?

“Valley” as a metaphor has some pretty obvious meanings. Valleys are low places, as opposed to the places where we feel “on top of the world”. Valleys are places where it’s hard to see the light, or where we see it much less than we normally do, meaning we’re easily trapped by negativity or despair. And “the valley of the shadow of death” specifically is a place of fear, because rather than an inspiring mountain peak to look up at, the thing looming over us is the threat of loss of life – our own, that of our loved ones, and that of countless of our fellow humans. It’s not a good place, the valley of the shadow of death.

If your days have been anything like mine, you’ve not been stuck in the valley constantly. Some days are easier than others. Some days we remember to exercise and eat right and call a friend. But other days find us obsessively checking the news, the number of confirmed cases, the death counts, the political bickering and hoarding of necessary household items. Too many days, the pull of the valley is stronger than our capacity to persist in seeking out the light, and we find ourselves walking in the valley of the shadow of death and feeling quite alone there.

But say the whole verse with me: “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me.” And another verse: “If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.” Despite how scattered we may be, we are in this together, and we will get through it together. So today, as we close out our Cross Pollination series, I thought we should review some of the lessons we

learned from our friends in other traditions, because they apply to this journey through the valley of the shadow of death just as well as they apply to Lent.

The first week we heard from Father Emmet that when we “pull a weed,” we also need to “plant a flower.” There are many things that have been removed from our lives right now, and we need to be intentional about replacing them with things that will bless our lives and help us grow in faith, rather than just letting whatever happens happen. Without some intentionality, this time of staying at home can make us lethargic and depressed. For those who are frantically trying to still do their jobs but in totally new ways, this time may not lead to lethargy, but increased stress levels and unhealthy ways of managing that stress.

The gift Father Emmet offers us is permission to take a moment and breathe deeply, so we can make intentional decisions about our coping strategies, whether we’re dealing with isolation and loneliness or stress and new technologies. There is even the possibility that being forced to do things differently during this time will introduce us to lifestyle changes we’d like to make permanent, ways to slow down, or use less, or connect more with loved ones who are faraway. The more intentional and reflective we are through these weeks, the more our spirits will benefit from the experience. If you’ve never kept a journal before, this is a wonderful time to start, so that we don’t forget what we learned.

Speaking of journaling, the second week we got this quote from Rabbi Devorah: “Your days are scrolls; write on them only what you want remembered.”

You don't need me to tell you that what we are living through right now is an episode of history that will echo loudly through the coming decades. Our lives and our world are never going to be the same. Things will be dated pre-COVID-19 and post-COVID-19. Generations will be shaped by how old they were in 2020 or whether they were born yet.

So as we are living history, our Jewish friends fruitfully remind us to make ethical choices and not neglect our collective responsibility for the state of the world. We know that this crisis is going to impact our more vulnerable populations far more harshly than those living with wealth and privilege. Even as we struggle to get through some days without breaking down, we need to keep our eyes out for those in prisons and detention centers, those whose jobs have disappeared – some perhaps never to return, and those facing a pandemic without health insurance. Some of those are us; many of them are people we will never meet who are nevertheless precious to God. What will the history books say about how we looked out for them? How can we write the scrolls of our lives to make that history better?

Rabbi Devorah was one of a handful of faith leaders who shared reflections in last Sunday's Union-Tribune; Imam Taha Hassane of the Islamic Center of San Diego offered another. I commend them all to you. Imam Taha was the featured partner for our third week, and that Sunday's sermon focused mostly on forgiveness. But what strikes me as the most useful lesson from our conversation for these "stay at home" times was what he shared about the five daily prayers, the Friday prayers, and

the month of Ramadan as “stations” at which we can stop and ask for forgiveness, for what we’ve done in the prior period and what we will do in the coming hours, days, or months. Those of us living in close quarters with others have particular motivation to find ways to immerse our days and nights in forgiveness, because people, simply put, are irritating. But all of us, whether we’re crowded in with others or rattling around all alone in our homes, need to be practicing forgiveness with ourselves. We’ve never done this before; we’re going to make mistakes; we’re not going to live up to our own expectations or hopes. It is vital that we maintain a clear sense that God is near, and God’s mercy abounds.

While the Muslim practice of five daily prayers is not a natural rhythm for us as Christians, what could it look like to impose some structure for our spirits over these weird weeks and months? There are lots of suggestions out there right now for creating schedules to bring order to these undifferentiated days. Such things work better for some people than others, of course. But mostly, these recommendations are about different activities for your body or mind. What about our souls? What if you set an alarm for two or three times throughout the day to remind you to consider what in your life needs mercy, what calls for gratitude, and what needs to be let go? Follow it up each time with the Lord’s Prayer or another simple prayer, and you’ve created a set of lamp posts to get yourself through the dark valley. These stations, as Imam Taha called them, will help us to remember to re-connect to God when we might be coming unmoored.

Something that came up in my conversations both with Rabbi Devorah and Imam Taha seems worth repeating in this context: they both talked about how the ritual fasting of their traditions' repentance practices wear down people's defenses. Enforced staying-at-home is not exactly the same as fasting, but there are some similarities. When our regular routines are disrupted and our normal emotional crutches – whether over-working, or eating our feelings, or shopping – are removed, we begin to bump into truths about ourselves we might have preferred to remain oblivious to. It could get ugly, so let's prepare ahead of time to embrace such experiences as opportunities for spiritual growth. Those things we might learn about ourselves? God already knows them. And God already loves us anyway. God's merciful compassion is there to help us confront those weaknesses or fears we've been hiding from and seek out new ways of being. God already knows that we're going to do the bad thing we're sorry we did again. But God is also always ready to help us not do it quite as badly as last time. And it looks like we might have a lot of time to practice getting it right! As one internet meme said, "This is the Lentiest Lent I've ever Lented!"

Our final partner conversation from the Cross Pollination brings us back to this valley of the shadow of death. Pastor Kim Dawsey-Richardson of First Presbyterian Church in El Cajon reminded us of the opportunity Lent gives us to engage in the practice of lament. Practicing lament as a spiritual discipline helps us remember that God is with us all the way through the valley of the shadow of death.

We do not need to fear any evil. God's rod and staff can bring us comfort.

Incidentally, some of the spiritual disciplines and intentional structures we've already discussed could be considered rods and staffs. That metaphor is from the image of a shepherd keeping watch over a flock on a hillside, where a staff might be extended alongside a path, to keep the sheep from falling over the side. Rods and staffs are like guardrails, the things God puts in place, through our faith communities and traditions – and even in perilous times like these, through our county & state health officials – to keep us safe from harm.

As the Body of Christ, it is our calling to help maintain these guardrails for one another. When one member suffers, all suffer with it. When we're all suffering, we're suffering together. Lament becomes our holiest song, when death stalks through our valleys. And we will sing it together, because there will be many who suffer. In these times when some are named "essential" and called to great sacrifice, and others are sent home to wait, feeling useless, it is vital for us to remember that the foot cannot say "because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body." Just as important, when some talk of the sacrifices some might have to make so others can maintain their stock portfolios, we must insist that "the eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you.'" Though it is dark, and we can only tell we're not alone by listening carefully, we are together in this valley. Death looms, but the presence of God overcomes all fear. Let us proclaim our dwelling to be in the house of the Lord, forever! Amen.