



Sermons from Northwood United Church

"Wrestling the gods: lost and blessed"

Psalm 23, Matthew 5:1-12

Will Sparks March 8, 2015

May the words of my mouth, the meditations of our hearts, and the actions of our lives be acceptable in your sight O God, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

How quickly things can change. Two weeks ago I thought I had the season all worked out. I was going to offer you a series of sermons focusing our attention on the many gods, little structures of power in our culture that want to claim your heart and mind. I was on a roll, remember? We talked about just how religious people are these days, worshipping at the alters of the market, the mall, the stadium. And then last week Karen Medland warned us about making even the church institution our god, replacing a relationship of trust and vulnerability at the heart of life with trust in an organization- even the church. And we were on track.

And then we had our annual congregational meeting. How quickly things can change. Have you had a chance to digest the news, the place we as a community of faith have found ourselves in now? Or if you are a newcomer, here for the first time, or if you missed the meeting you may not realize that last week we got the news that our finances are not what we thought they might be- that due to a number of factors, we are facing a significant deficit in 2015, and that as a result, things are going to change. The first thing to change is that Kimiko Karpoff is not going to be filling in for Kerry while she is on MAT leave. But the deeper, longer term question that lingers in the air is, what can we sustain on the long haul? And that's a really uncomfortable question because to answer it we need to not just tinker, but place the big things, people's job's, things we had hoped were solid, on the table.

Here I, and I think probably most of us had been cruising along watching other churches face the effects of being benched by the dominant culture, and we were thinking, or at least behaving like we were one of the lucky, blessed ones, somehow protected from the effects of the marginalization of Christianity. We are in it too. We must now share the sense of bewilderment, lostness that others have been struggling with in varying degrees for some years now.

So Pastor Will, isn't this the time to bring out the 23rd psalm, the psalm of great comfort and consolation for us in times of struggle. This is the comfort food of all psalms, sure to reassure us of the faithfulness of our comforting God- who makes us lie down in green pastures, leads us beside still waters, restores our soul. And no matter what happens, the valley of the shadow of death, at table with our enemies, we are blessed, anointed, protected.

Yes, that is a good idea, as long as we really listen to the psalm. As long as we remember that the 23rd psalm is, first and foremost a psalm of the Hebrew people, the ancient Jewish community, who were called Israel, which means, "those who have struggled with God." They struggled for a home that they were always trying to get into, hold onto or get back to. They struggled for peace, for food and for a future. Most important, they struggled for their faith in God. It wasn't always comfortable.

The Hebrews longed to live with God as sheep live with a shepherd, but their life was hard. And they were too afraid to keep believing that this Shepherd was leading them to green pastures, or that goodness and mercy would always follow them. So they frequently rushed down more promising paths toward more manageable gods, which always led them into unmanageable trouble. So it is not surprising that so many of the psalms describe the churning, disruptive experience of being lost and found, judged and forgiven, sent away and brought back. It is all a

part of the pathos of people who got scared and lost their way, and of the high drama of a God who searches to find lost sheep.

Have you ever been really scared? Maybe it took a disease to scare you, a notice that your job had been eliminated, a phone call from the police late at night, or a letter on a kitchen counter that said, "I'm not coming back." We speak sometimes of being scared stiff or paralyzed with fear, but as a pastor I've seen that most people react to fear not by standing still but by running like crazy. The late psychologist Rollo May has written, "Humans are the strangest of all of God's creatures, because they run fastest when they have lost their way."

This is how we get into real trouble -- by running when we are lost. It is then that we make the worst mistakes with relationships, family and work. The same could be said of churches, schools and governments. Not convinced that we are being led through our discomfort on the way to green pastures, we veer off course, try a short cut or run like terrified sheep.

I don't mind "the Lord is my Shepherd," but I've never been too flattered by being called one of the sheep. I had hoped to be the eagle of the Lord, or maybe the cunning tiger. Sheep aren't that smart. They scare easily, and have a knack for getting lost. Many of us don't really look lost. We don't bear the markings of having fallen through society's cracks. But many of us bear the hidden marks of having lost your way in a relationship that's offered more hurt than love, in a job that leaves you depleted and spent, or in the guilt of not being good enough, pretty enough or smart enough for someone whose judgment cuts deep. Some of us have gotten lost in our battles against declining health, lost in grief, or the shame of things done and left undone.

I am not sure about lost but I know that collectively, we have been tossed into uncertainty, and it is tempting to run from the uncomfortable moment, and that would be a shame, a huge lost opportunity. Because remember, we are followers of the one who never promised comfort, but who said, "take up your cross and follow me." We trust in God who doesn't simply relieve pain but transforms it, and re-creates us in the process, offers us a whole new life. We follow the one whose blessing comes through poverty of spirit, through grief, meekness, hunger and thirst, mercy, the struggle for peace, pureness of heart, persecution. These are not the characteristics of one whose faith is lion-like- powerful and certain. No, these are the markings of one whose faith is real, whose life is vulnerable- kind of sheep-like.

So, if that's us, in our life, in our church, what are we to do? Well first of all, resisting the temptation to run to a quick and easy solution, stop for a second, and pay attention. Notice, not just what we don't have, or what is missing or different, but notice what we do have, what is. When I say, as I often do, "count your blessings" that is what I mean. Notice: 195,000, thriving thrift store, active life... Notice people: people who hunger and thirst for what is right and faithful, people struggling to make peace, meek ones, grieving ones, joyful ones, those tossed aside by the gods of the market, of competition, of beauty skin deep. Notice the people, and how blessed we are.

Secondly, trust. Trust the promise of the very first line of Psalm 23- "The Lord is my shepherd. I have everything I need." This is not a statement of affluence, but a statement of trust. "THE LORD is my shepherd." I'm good. I trust that as I stand on the fine edge of scarcity, that in God, I have enough. Don't trust in the scarcity you think you see, but in the abundance of God that may not be visible immediately, but that we trust is there.

And finally, remember. Remember that the way God works is not to simply relieve discomfort, make it all better. No, this is the way of the cross, the way of death and resurrection, the way of transformation- being made new. Our God does not take away the pain, but meets us in it, and transforms us through it. Our God does not so much offer pain relief but healing, and a whole new life. So that we can say with confidence, surely goodness and mercy shall follow us, seek us out and find us, all the days of our lives, and though we will be changed, together we will be beloved community, the house of the Lord forever. Amen