Easter 3

April 18, 2021

Psalm 4

Throughout this past year, I’ve spoken often about how we are all traveling through the valley of the shadow.

For each of us, the valley is a different experience. There are days when it feels like we might be coming close to the other side, nearing the end of our journey through that difficult time. We may find it easier to imagine God traveling through the valley of the shadow with us, leading us to the other side, making room for us to take the time we need to make the journey.

But then there are the darker days. The days filled with anger and frustration and despair. Those days, it can feel as if God is hidden from us and the forces of darkness are winning.

Too much time in the dark days, and it’s easy to stop looking for God at all.

I have been in that part of the journey lately. I have found myself quick to anger, anxious, easily frustrated. I begin to imagine that God is just an annoyed with other people, just as frustrated with other people, as I am.

Part of the trouble with being in the darker part of the valley is that we can easily get stuck there.

For me, the process of getting unstuck started with our dog developing anemia.

We took her to a new vet who was able to steer us on a good path for her treatment. In the process, he shined some light on my own troubles.

Rescue dogs like our Molly, he said, are often more sensitive to the moods of their people. Molly had developed some anxious behaviors and, he said, it was quite possible that some of that was because of the stress we had.

Rather than shaming us or scolding us, he encouraged us to be better to ourselves, to tend to our own well-being, which would help her *and* us.

In the weeks since, I have come to understand that being in the darker days of the valley means my regular habits of prayer aren’t enough. Because it’s not so much that I feel like God’s face is hidden from me. It’s that I’m forgetting to even look for God, and not paying attention to the ways God is present.

Each of us has our own way of being aware of how God is present with us. For some people, it’s meditation or some other mindful activity. For others, it’s a long walk on the beach or in the woods.

For me, it has always been music.

It shouldn’t surprise me, then, that it was a song that began to pull me out of my funk. I remembered a song that I haven’t heard in a while, a song that ha has helped me in the past. I put it on repeat as a I drove. Sometimes, I sang along. Other times, I let the words just sink into me.

I felt like weight was being lifted off of me.

Not all of the weight. But some of it.

My world began to feel a little brighter.

And it occurred to me that I stood up here last week and preached about peace, that God invites us into the work of creating *shalom* in the world, but it’s *really* hard to have peace with others when we’re not at peace in our hearts.

It can feel some days like anxiety and bitterness and divisiveness are threatening to drown out the good that is in the world.

It’s easier than ever to make sure we don’t hear things that disagree with our opinions, our understanding of the world. And that just makes it easier for us to be convinced we’re right. Which is great for our egos, but not so great for our relationships with each other. Because when we don’t listen to each other, especially to people who think differently from us, we become easily dismissive of any experience, any world view that doesn’t match our own.

And then it’s really easy to forget that each of us is a beloved child of God. That, by virtue of having been created in the image of God, each of us is worthy of dignity and respect and *agape* love. The very love we are offered freely by God is the love we are meant to share with one another.

Into those difficulties, the psalmist brings advice for us.

“When you are disturbed, do not sin; ponder it on your beds, and be silent.”

Rather than lash out in anger or frustration at those who caused him difficulty, he practiced being aware of God’s presence.

The psalmist says that God gave him room when he was distressed. I like to imagine this as if he imagined God sitting on a big rock overlooking a river. He imagined God scooting over to make room for him to sit down. And then God put gladness and peace in his heart.

For the psalmist, being able to be still and ponder things, rather than lashing out at those troubling him, is a demonstration of trust in God. He doesn’t seem to expect that God’s going to make his problems go away. Instead, he just wants God to be present with him as he deals with it all. Because then he can know peace in his heart.

Whatever way it is that allows us to experience the presence of God, whether art or music or nature or sitting in silence, when we fail to make time for that practice, we’re not going to be able to know the peace that only God can bring. And when we don’t make a habit of being aware of God’s presence during the good days, it’s even harder to do it on the dark days.

Prayer isn’t just about asking God for what we need. It’s about learning to attend to the ways God is present with us, making room for us not just in our distress, but always. It’s about our journey to “not my will, God, but yours,” and to seeing the world the way God sees it, seeing other people the way God sees them, and loving one another as we are loved.

I want to end by sharing with you the lyrics that helped me this week:

Be still and know that I'm with you  
Be still and know that I am here  
Be still and know that I'm with you  
Be still, be still, and know

When darkness comes upon you  
And colors you with fear and shame  
Be still and know that I'm with you  
And I will say your name

If terror falls upon your bed  
And sleep no longer comes  
Remember all the words I said  
Be still, be still, and know

And when you go through the valley  
And the shadow comes down from the hill  
If morning never comes…

Be still and know that I'm with you  
Be still and know that I am here  
Be still and know that I'm with you  
Be still, be still, and know[[1]](#footnote-1)

1. “Be Still” by The Fray [↑](#footnote-ref-1)