

Celebration of Life Service for Harriett Donnell

The 23rd Psalm is probably the most recognizable Scripture of all time, reaching beyond churched people and those who profess their faith. When texts become so familiar to us, simply hearing them can bring up memories and invoke feelings associated with these memories. Maybe Psalm 23 has this effect on you as well.

Over the past couple of weeks, I have been particularly struck by the images contained within this familiar passage. Right now, we are living in a region facing a serious drought! The water level at Lake Casitas—only 5 miles down the road—is currently sitting at 54%, and there are heavy restrictions limiting water usage, particularly with watering on our lawns; the idea of lying down in a green pasture seems pretty unfamiliar. Almost unimaginable if you live here in the Ojai Valley.

Yet it was precisely when I was contemplating these inconceivable, fantasy-like images of green pastures and fresh waters that I realized how perfectly appropriate this passage is for us in our desert-like environment and in our time of grief.

The Psalmist assures us that the Lord IS our shepherd, no matter in which physical or emotional landscape we find ourselves. Even while we tend to the lack of water in our region, the Lord promises to make us to lie down in green pastures and lead us beside still waters. Even while we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, feeling dried up inside from shock at the sudden illness and death of our beloved Harriett, our Shepherd provides comfort and safety for us, his flock. Even when we navigate the familiar landscape of our daily lives while experiencing unimaginable pain of loss, God is present with us.

Harriett had a deep faith in the Lord, and spent her life following Jesus as a dedicated disciple. In so doing, Harriett herself became like a shepherd to those whom she encountered. She was a caretaker in every aspect of the word. She cared for her siblings as a sister, her parents as a daughter, her husband Alan as a wife; cared for her children Helen and Howard as a mother and her nieces and nephews as an aunt. Beyond her devotion and loyalty to her family, she cared for her students as a teacher, her community as a volunteer and board member, her church as a leader in every aspect of ministry.

No matter where Harriett lived, she joyfully served her Lord and continually pursued God in all that she did. And we can find comfort in knowing that God pursued her too. God pursues each one of us, whether we know it or not. Our Psalm as read today says, surely God's goodness and mercy shall follow us all the days of our lives. This doesn't quite capture the

fullness of meaning as it was originally written; the word translated “follow” really has the meaning of “pursue.” This may seem a small variation, but I think it is one with great significance. God’s goodness and mercy are not just lagging behind us, following wherever we are in life; God is pursuing us. Actively pursuing us and seeking to bring us into relationship where we might know God’s mercy and grace and love.

Our gospel passage tells us not to be afraid; it offers comfort, assuring us that Jesus has gone before us to prepare a place for us. We aren’t left alone because the Holy Spirit is given to each and every one of us, dwelling within us and offering peace beyond our understanding.

Harriet knew herself to be a beloved child of God, filled with the Spirit, and has gone home to rest in eternal life with her Creator. Her faith and certainty of the life to come has made it easier for some to cope with the earthly loss we are left with—the loss of a beloved family member and friend. May we all be comforted by the faith she embodied so well, and by the promise that we are not left alone to navigate this valley of the shadow of death. The Lord is our Shepherd and we shall not go wanting.

This might feel like a tall order at times. We may throughout our days longing for the time when we could pick up the phone and share some bit of news with Harriett, or ask her for advice, only to be saddened by her absence from this life. We may find ourselves wanting for a different reality in the here and now, but the good news is that God loves us so much, pursues us always, and invites us to dwell in the house of our Lord forever and ever.

Praise be to God for faithfulness beyond all measure. Praise be to God for holding onto us in times of trial and doubt; that it is not up to our own strength to hold on to God, but we are strengthened by the Spirit and it is God who holds onto us. Praise be to God for coming down to dwell with us in Jesus Christ, and who says to us, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.”

Amen.