

4 Easter, Yr. A
 Psalm 23, 1 Pet 2.19-25
 13 April 2008
 Church of the Holy Communion
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When I was a seminarian I learned that it was hideously old-fashioned and passé and just *not any longer done* to end a sermon with a poem in the classic fashion. That is why I am beginning this sermon with a poem – a poem by the late Howard Nemerov, twice poet laureate of these United States. A short poem of two sentences, he wrote not long after his seventieth birthday, the proverbial “three-score and ten.” The first stanza asks a question:

*What rational being, after seventy years,
 when Scripture says he’s running out of rope
 would want more of the only world he knows?*

The second stanza provides the poet’s considered response:

*No rational being, he while he endures,
 Holds on to the inveterate, infantile hope,
 That life ends but as the runway does.ⁱ*

Nemerov could not imagine that any right-minded person, having lived 70 years as he had, would want more of this life as it is (which is sad enough, I think), but at the same time he is aware of his wistful longing, childish and irrational as he believes it to be, that there might yet be something more, something beyond this life as it is, “that life ends but as the runway does.” It’s a nice image.

Well, that’s not the first poem we’ve read this morning. Three millennia prior to Nemerov, another and greater poet, the poet of laureate of Israel, pondered much the same reality:

THE LORD is my shepherd; * therefore can I lack nothing.
 2 He shall feed me in a green pasture, * and lead me forth beside the waters of comfort.
 3 He shall convert my soul, * and bring me forth in the paths of righteousness for his Name’s sake.
 4 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 comfort me.
 5 Thou shalt prepare a table before me in the presence of them that trouble me; * thou hast anointed my head with oil, and my cup shall be full.
 6 Surely thy loving-kindness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life; * and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.

David’s poem – a hymn, really, meant to be sung – marks out a map of life in the Lord. The 23rd Psalm, in brief, poetic sum, is what a faithful life in God’s covenant of grace looks like. Much of it is pleasant – wonderful, even. There are green pastures and still, quiet comforting waters. But there is also the “valley of the shadow of death,” which refers not to death itself, but to death’s long reach into all our living days – all “trouble, sorrow, sickness, or any other adversity” as the Prayer Book puts it.

And there is of course everything in between – those “paths of righteousness” that are each individual’s day in, day out calling – work, carpools, lawn maintenance, grocery shopping, sermon preparation – which

sometimes we experience as delight, sometimes as drudgery, and perhaps mostly just as the day's work faithfully to be done.

But in reducing David's poem to prose, as I have been doing, it quickly becomes, well, prosaic. The words and images that move us and resonate so directly with our own experience and give comfort in their poignant simplicity – well, after this treatment, they become mundane; trite, even. In fact, they begin to sound like a gloss on the 8 zillion or so high school valedictory addresses it has been my duty to endure as a youth minister and priest – nearly all of which have begun with something along the lines of, “Life can be likened to a highway,” following which our 18-yr-old sage will inform us that in life we can expect both smooth and rough patches. Well, no duh. (Having never been in even the slightest danger of having to give a valedictory address myself, it's easy for me to make fun.)

All of which takes us back to David's famous hymn of valediction and leads to this question: If it is only a map of a faithful life – green pastures, comforting waters, the shadow of death and all the rest in between – if this is what life looks like inside of God's covenant of grace (which is, in the fullness of time, life in Christ), then the first thing to say in response is, it looks remarkably like life outside the covenant, outside Christ. Of course life has its smooth and rough patches, God makes his rain to fall on the just and the unjust, and even the above average high school graduate knows it. So maybe we can be excused for asking, if the faithful life does not promise a higher proportion of green pastures and comforting waters to time spent in the valley of the shadow of death, what's the advantage? Where's the percentage in faithfulness?

But of course what is promised to us is not more smooth than rough. The promise is far, far better than that. The promise is, “for thou art with me.” The promise is, in green pastures, beside waters of comfort, all through the valley of the shadow of death, and all along the daily paths of righteousness, our God will, as David has it, “bring us forth for his Name's sake.” And his Name is Emmanuel, “God with us.” “Thou art with me” is consolation enough.

In today's epistle lesson, St. Peter writes to a group of Christians about how they should conduct themselves in the valley of the shadow of death. It's pretty striking stuff. He tells them they must patiently endure pain while suffering unjustly. What makes it even more striking is recalling the life setting, the social and economic circumstance, of those to whom he is writing. They are slaves. Injustice is their life. For them there are precious few green pastures and miles and miles and miles of the valley of the shadow of death. But notice how Peter encourages them – not with a false promise, not by negating their pain and saying, “it's really not so bad.” No, what he reminds them of is that their God does not hold himself aloof from their suffering, but actually cares so deeply about their pain and is so determined not just end but redeem it, that he has entered into it with them:

For Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps... He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree... By his wounds you have been healed.

Jesus, Peter encourages them, is the “Shepherd and Guardian of their souls,” and is with them in their unjust suffering, being no stranger to it himself; indeed knowing it intimately to its worst depths. Peter's letter is nothing but a real life application of David's psalm and its promise: In the valley of the shadow of death, *thou art with me*.

But the consolation promised goes beyond even the companionship of our Lord. Or, rather – it's not that the promise goes beyond our Lord's companionship, but that our Lord's is an eternal companionship. David had only intimations of immortality, but Jesus saw clearly and spoke plainly: God is the God of the living, not the deadⁱⁱ, and the climax of David's psalm is, “I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”

Last Sunday as I drove in to church I heard an interview with Professor Paul Colinvaux, an ecologist who has spent 40 years traveling around the equator unraveling a particular question regarding biodiversity during the ice age. It actually sounds sort of fascinating. At the end of the interview, as the interviewer congratulated him on coming to the end of his very fruitful 40 year career, Professor Colinvaux said, with equal measures of wistfulness and bitterness,

*Well, I would like to have another 40 years. I rather suspect the good God's not going to give it to me. Perhaps because I'm an atheist like most biologists with sense.*ⁱⁱⁱ

No, not for him Nemerov's "inveterate, infantile hope/that this life ends but as the runway does."

That was Sunday, but on Wednesday I remembered Prof. Colinvaux's sad and bitter words - and I prayed for him (I hope he won't mind). I did so because on Wednesday we kept the feast of blessed Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the Lutheran theologian and martyr who led Christian resistance to the Nazis in Germany. Bonhoeffer was arrested for his work and eventually hanged in the Flossenburg concentration camp. On April 9, 1945, the last day of his life - though he did not know that it would be - the great theologian spent his morning telling small children about Jesus and leading them in worship. After the service, the guards came to get him. Bonhoeffer looked at a friend and said, "This is the end. But for me, it is the beginning."

The Christian hope, our Easter hope - blessed Dietrich Bonhoeffer's hope - is not irrational, not childish - though it should make us childlike in our wonder and awe. Our Christian hope, that the Lord is "with us," and that we will "dwell in the house of the Lord forever," is a sure and certain hope because it is grounded in the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is not just a nice story; it is the "true myth," the fairy tale that actually happened, in our history. It is the event that transforms all our days so that they are filled - even in the valley, even in Flossenburg - with "goodness and mercy." And it transforms our dying days, so that we see that our life's road, with all its smooth in rough patches, and in whatever proportion we have had them - our life's road really is a runway, leading us "to the house of the Lord forever."

The promise, our hope, is that the Lord, the Shepherd and Guardian of our souls, is and will be with us, who is our journey and our journey's end.^{iv} ❖ ❖ ❖

ⁱ Howard Nemerov, *Collected Works*. I first came across this poem and received much of the inspiration (to the point of plagiarism) for this sermon from the article "A Pilgrim's Progress: Comfort in the Valley", by David Calhoun in *Covenant*, 1999.

ⁱⁱ Lk 20.38

ⁱⁱⁱ *Living on Earth*, 4 April 2008. <http://www.loe.org/shows/segments.htm?programID=08-P13-00014&segmentID=7>

^{iv} Boethius