

Sermon for the Fourth Sunday of Easter: Psalm 23

The Rev. Brooks Cato

In the wilderness outside of Jericho, there's a sheer wall of rock. It's called by Christians "The Mountain of Temptation." It's the place where Jesus had his run-in with the devil. But the Jews have another name for it -- we'll come back to that. As you work your way along the top of the mountain, you come to a place where the terrain is cleft in two forming a gorge. It's a treacherous place, but even here life goes on. Even here, a narrow footpath works its way from the top all the way down to the valley, where centuries of shepherds and sheep have wandered up and down, moving from the barren mountaintop to its secrets down below. The chasm is situated in such a way that you can only see clearly down to the bottom right when the sun is directly overhead. Only then can you see a shimmering down there of a stream as it trickles from somewhere underground to a tiny wadi or an oasis. But the rest of the day, it lays hidden in darkness. This is the Valley of the Shadow of Death.

You know, I've been thinking about shadows a lot recently and for kind of a weird, spooky reason. Because before Becca left for Florida, she went to Costco and came home with a prize. Becca bought us some nightlights. These are fancy nightlights. As the shadows take over, they come on with a low glow. And if there's no movement, they shut off. But they have these sensors so that if you get up in the middle of the night and wander out in the hall, they spot you, and click the light on so you don't step on a dog or careen down the stairs. This is all well and good. But, occasionally, I've been waking up to what seems to be an increase in the light when nobody but me is there...the dogs are snoring calmly and I'm all tucked in. It seems that something passes the beam and causes the light to turn on. And, y'all, there's nothing there. At least there's nothing alive, there. I've started wondering if maybe there's a haint or two taking up residence in the rectory now that Becca's out of town.

Now, I'm from the South, and we've had more than our share of violence and tragic death. Everywhere you go you'll find battlefields where hundreds and thousands poured out their life's blood, fighting for a good cause...or a bad one. And there's trees with extra strong limbs always carrying the specter of strange fruit. And there's homes that too often held hearts of men who knew the fear of a cross burning right outside their door or who knew the wicked thrill of lighting one. And because of all that there's a haunting there that I don't always feel when I'm away from the South. But lately, I gotta say, I'm feeling it a little more, even up here. Lately, it seems we've woken up the shadows in this land, stirred up something that usually hides in the dark, but's coming to light now. Or maybe our eyes have just become more adjusted to living in darkness. I don't know.

But when I listened to reports of the Derek Chauvin trial and probably rejoiced more than I should, I'd felt a shadow pass over my heart that made me doubt whether or not justice was even gonna come. And you know, I read that in March, there were more mass shootings than days in the month, and I wonder what shadow has passed over our county to make it this way. And I watch our national leaders pull away from each other, justifying winning rather than leading because they've been able to transform their opponents into creatures of the shadows, and I wonder what shadow has passed over our halls of government to make seemingly rational adults act this way. And I wonder what we're doing now that such darkness falls over us that we can't see human beings standing right in front of us. Sometimes, all we see are wolves. And we either hide or strike, and either way, the results are tragic. As Christians, this is not where we should be. Hate and fear and jealousy and revenge and rage. These are shadows of our lives. And they are death. But Christ defeated death. We cannot, as his followers, cling to death. We cannot cling to those shadows.

Last Saturday, we did the funeral of Dave and Bev McKay, and his family and I read the 23rd Psalm, "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil. Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me." And I noticed something in that old poem. That's the point of shadows, isn't it? That we see

them. And we can't see them unless there is light. But we can't see them unless there is darkness, too. Light and darkness coexist. We can't live with just one of 'em. With too much of the one, we'll go blind, and with too much of the other, we already are. The light of the world goes with us into the darkness, like a shepherd going down the path with his sheep into the Valley of the Shadow of Death. Jesus goes ahead and Jesus is there in the darkness, just like stars in the sky. The light of the world shines in the darkness, leading us there to confront injustice, fear, alienation. Poverty of the soul and poverty of the body. Loving the unloved and, yes, taking risks doing it. Because that, that is where the shepherd leads us.

There's an old Jewish story of a rabbi who asked his disciples, "How do you know when the night is giving way and the morning is coming?" One of the followers stood and said, "Teacher, won't you know that night is fading when, through the dim light, you can see an animal and recognize whether it is a sheep or a dog?"

The rabbi answered, "No."

"Rabbi," asked another, "won't you know that dawn is coming when you can see clearly enough to distinguish whether a tree is a fig or an olive?"

"No," responded the rabbi. "You'll know that the night has passed when you can look at any man and any woman and discern that you are looking at a brother or a sister. Until you can see with that clarity, the night will always be with us."

As it turns out I don't have a haint in the house. I got a chair out and sat vigil in the dark one night. Turns out what was happening is this: early in the morning, when cars start going up and down Madison Street, their lights would hit the corner of one of my doors. That would throw a shadow across the wall just right, like something moving, and the nightlight got tricked into coming on. I can rest easy. But for a few nights, I was afraid. Because there are scary things in the shadows. And what lurks in the darkness can attack us, can transform us into things we'd rather not be. The darkness is, after all, "Where the Wild Things Are." But there's beauty there, too. There is quiet, and there is rest. There in the darkness is the sound of a million prayers laying down to sleep. There in the darkness are the lights of creation and the appearance of angels.

There in the darkness is the soft light of the moon with its own shadows, there's the haunting call of an owl. There are dogs and sheep, figs and olives, men and women, brothers and sisters yet to be seen. There in the darkness is nothing less than the awesomeness of God, illuminating covenants and dreams. There in the darkness is the Valley of the Shadow of Death, and the shepherd that comforts us, even there. Even in darkness.