Words for the Wilderness

by Rev. Kristin Philipson

Psalm 23

Fourth Sunday in Lent – March 22, 2020

So we’re in the middle of the church season called Lent, the 40 days before Easter, a season patterned after the 40 days Jesus spent in the wilderness before starting his ministry – his work in the world – and the sacred stories we tell during this season are all about people living through wilderness times. Of course, the wilderness is a physical place, but in this church season we use wilderness as a metaphor for psychological, or spiritual, or emotional states. The stories we tell during this season are about people living through experiences for which they have no precedent, they’re stuck in the wilderness. The stories we tell during this season are about people who are off-kilter emotionally and don’t know how to get back to equilibrium again; they’re stuck in the wilderness. We tell these stories so that when we suddenly find ourselves unmoored and untethered we have a language to use – “ah, okay, I’m in a wilderness time.” We tell these stories to learn and grow from the practices of faith that helped people as they journeyed through.

We read today the words of the 23rd Psalm. The Psalms are an ancient collection of songs, of poetry, and Psalm 23 is attributed David, one of the kings of Israel. We know him as the gangly but cheeky teenage underdog who took on the mighty and powerful Goliath, with only a slingshot, and a stone. He had his moments of feeling on top of the world, in control of everything, but really for most of his life, and even though he was a king, David lived through different experiences of being stuck in the wilderness. He’d walked in the wilderness of loss when he was forbidden to see his best friend, Jonathan. He’d walked in the wilderness of grief with the death of his infant son a few days after he was born. He’d walked in the wilderness of regret because of all kinds of bad decisions he’d made. David lived most of his life in a kind of emotional and psychological and spiritual wilderness, not knowing what to do next to make things better, not knowing how to get back to the familiar, not knowing where to go, feeling like he didn’t have a map to navigate what he was feeling or how to make it through.

This is the experience of most of us right now, wouldn’t you say? All of us this past week have found ourselves stuck in a kind of wilderness, as we try to figure out how to go about daily life in the midst of a global health crisis. Our sense of normal and routine has been upended; we worry about the trajectory of a future we can’t predict or imagine, we wonder how to respond to the suffering we see spreading around the world. Every day has seen us try to navigate unfamiliar territory, so to speak – decisions we haven’t had to make before, feelings we haven’t had to feel – we wonder where to go from here, what direction to take, wonder how long it will be before we get through this wilderness.

Tradition tells us that the words to the 23rd Psalm are David’s words. And we don’t know exactly when they came to him, exactly when he would have chosen to recite them, but I think these words must have come to David when he was in one of his wilderness times. I picture him pacing the length of the living room; I picture him looking out his window at a suddenly quiet city; I picture him having just finished talking to his parents, whom he was worried about, or his brothers, who lived far away. What I’m saying is, I don’t think these words came to David when he was feeling secure and confident, I think they came to him when he was feeling stuck, when he wondered how to move forward, when he wondered where to go from here. It was when David was in an anxious and worrisome place, when he was stuck in a kind of wilderness that these words came to him and became his words: The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. You are my shepherd, Beloved, Holy One, Spirit.

The practice of faith in the wilderness isn’t about snapping our fingers, saying a prayer, and suddenly being whisked away from a hard place. The practice of faith is remembering who guides us when we feel worried, when we feel anxious, when we feel stuck, when we feel lost in the wilderness. It is part of being human that none of us can escape – there are times when it’s simply inevitable – we’ll find ourselves in a kind of emotional, psychological, physical, spiritual wilderness. And the practice of faith in these times is to remember that we are not alone, God’s Spirit is present, leading us, accompanying us; the Lord is our Shepherd, we say. We have a guide as we journey through, not to magically transport us out of the wilderness, but to show us a way to live in it and through it; the Lord is our shepherd we say.

In the Christian tradition it’s Jesus who we call “Lord.” Jesus was born in poverty. He knew what it felt like to live in tumultuous times. He was a friend to everyone who was left out. He treated women as equals. He was a healing presence and a source of peace and comfort to those around him. He built people up with nourishing words and shared what he had. He called on everyone who followed him to love others as though others were an extension of their very selves. This Lord is our shepherd, we say, walking with us through this wilderness; we shall not want. Even though we walk through the valley of shadows and death, we are not afraid, for he is with us.

I remember an experience of a wilderness time that I had. We had just moved to a new city for my husband to pursue a new work opportunity. But a few weeks after we arrived the job fell through. And here we’d totally relocated, uprooted the kids, uprooted everything. I had taken a leave from my own work. All of a sudden we had no income. That’s when the words of the 23rd Psalm became my words. The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. What surprised me in that wilderness time was my family’s strength and capacity. There was hope in us. There were reserves of patience. We were able to be compassionate with each other. Our experience of wilderness didn’t vanish, but we felt we weren’t alone as we journeyed through.

Sometimes it’s not until after the fact that we see it, how we were brought to green pastures for rest and led beside still waters. How our spirit was renewed and our soul restored. We shouldn’t have had enough, and yet we did – our cup overflowed. Hope is not exhausted, kindness is not exhausted, love is not exhausted – even in the middle of the wilderness.

How are goodness and mercy following you? How are you dwelling in the heart of the Beloved? That my invitation for you this week: to notice how and where the Lord is your shepherd through this wilderness time, to notice what you have in the middle of nowhere. Amen.