

Beauty of the life we have/no matter what

Psalm 23

April 17, 2016

What do you see when you see Charley Corson in a pout and pigtailed?

What do you see when you watch Jack Conrad speak with such authority about the names and habits of various species of dinosaur?

What do you see when Laura Kaliban offers you the bread of life?

What do you see when Brittney Becker and Aaron Taylor bring their son to be baptized?

What do you see when Miah raises her hands to the keys of the organ manuals?

What do you see when Helen Lippold smiles?

What do you see when the first pink and lavender blossoms of the pulmonaria plant begin to open?

What do you see when the silvery heron lifts off from the edges of the pond with the elegant pulse of its huge wings?

What do you see when your dog breaks into a dead run in a futile attempt to catch the deer bounding through the woods?

What do you see when you look at Diane Highnam's photograph of two nuzzling puffins nestled on a tuft of thrift?

What do you see when you look back at the faces of the people gathered in this sanctuary with you this morning for worship?

You see the beauty of the life we have ...

The "beauty of the life we have/no matter what." It is an astonishing sermon title, astonishing because shows so much maturity of thought from one so young in years and life experience. It's not just a title, not just a suggested topic for discussion. It is a sermon, in itself!

The beauty of the life we have. She looks -- I don't know which of our confirmands proposed this sermon title, but I do know it is a "she" because they are all girls! -- she looks at the full scope of life that is laid out before her eyes and she sees beauty. She sees the beauty, the splendor, the glory God has infused into everything God has made. She doesn't merely recognize the intrinsic worth of every life, the undisputed potential of every life, the essential goodness of every life, she sees beauty. She sees the indelible mark of the Creator on every life and on life itself. It's not just: "life is good," but "life is beautiful."

She sees the beauty of the life we have. Not just the beauty of life as it could be or as it should be or even as it will be, but the beauty of the life we have, the beauty of this life, in all its complexity, with all its challenges and mysteries and disappointments and heartaches. And not just the beauty of soul or the beauty of eternal life, but the beauty of the life we have, this life, right here, right now: the learning, the growing, the working, the playing, the laughing, the crying, the tasting, the trying, the loving, the wanting, the doing, the being.

She sees the beauty of the life we have. She doesn't say the "beauty of the life I have," but the "beauty of the life we have," which is all of us, any one of us who at this moment in the history of the universe are living and breathing. She declares that the life we have, the life you have, is beautiful.

No matter what. The beauty of the life we have ... no matter what. Oh, my! How does she know that? She doesn't, because she is so short herself on life experience and because she cannot possibly know the trials and tribulations of every other person who lives. She doesn't know it. She believes it!

She believes that nothing, nothing at all, can ever diminish the beauty of the life we have, her own life and everybody else's, the beauty of this life that God has given us. For one so young, this faith is extraordinary. She has something to teach us, we who are supposedly older and wiser, about the beauty of the life we have ... no matter what!

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want ...

No matter what. All my life, whatever comes, I will not be left wanting. I will not be left bereft of help, bereft of what I need in that moment, because the Lord will be there, because the Lord is my shepherd.

But if the Lord is my shepherd, what does that make me? A sheep! And how's the life of a sheep? I've watched sheep on the Isle of Iona. Life is all about eating and drinking, exploring beautiful places and resting in beautiful places and hanging out with family and friends. Pretty good, I'd say ... as long as you have a kind and attentive caretaker, a good shepherd.

He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters ...

Is this a metaphor? Of course, it is. Just as a shepherd provides his sheep with good grazing ground and fresh water to keep them strong and healthy, so our God provides us with what we need to be strengthened and refreshed and recharged as we face each new day.

So this is a metaphor? Not entirely! Because God does take us into green meadows and leafy forests. God does lead us beside still waters and rushing waters. God leads us here and leaves us here, among the fields and streams and mountains and oceans, in a world with enough abundance, enough wonder, enough mystery, enough beauty to feed us and inspire us generation after generation.

He restores my soul ...

When I am running on empty, the Lord gives me enough to keep on going. When I fall to pieces, the Lord picks up the pieces and makes me whole again. When I am done in, the Lord is not done, and when I think it's all over, it's not over.

He leads me in the right paths for his name's sake ...

That's what a shepherd does. He chooses a safe path for the sheep, keeping the sheep away from and out of danger. But sometimes we wander off. Sometimes we don't follow, intentionally or unintentionally.

I have wandered off. There have been times when I have chosen, adamantly, to go my own way. But when I have stopped following, my shepherd has followed me, into the places of darkness and peril, still calling, still pointing, still guiding me toward the right path.

For his name's sake. It's his job. It's what he does. It's what he will always do. You may leave him, but your shepherd will never, ever, leave you.

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death ...

We do. Sometimes we do. Eventually all of us will. All of us will face dark times, sad times, dreadful times, fearsome times, times inciting in us both fear and dread. But we need not fear, we need not dread, because the Lord, our shepherd, is with us, always. I fear no evil, because my Lord is there with his rod and staff, with all the tools he needs to keep all that would destroy me at bay.

Even in the valley of the shadow of death, we may see the beauty of the life we have, no matter what. The Prescott family -- Ron and Debbie, and Paul and Hannah, and Lucy and Arlo and Crosby -- walk now in the valley of the shadow of death. Steve and Liz Thorpe walk now in the valley of the shadow of death with their dear friend Doug Oberman. Is there beauty there? Is there beauty in the life they have? There is.

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies ...

Even there, surrounded by those who would love to see me lose, who would love to see me humiliated, who would love to see me brought to nothing, even there, I will not be afraid. Even there, the Lord is with me, taking care of me, feeding me, treating me as his honored guest, treating me as his own beloved son, because, by his choice, I am.

So, is this about gloating, about getting in the face of my enemies, about living the high life right in front of their faces? Ha!

You prepare a table. You anoint my head. My cup overflows. I have enough. I have more than enough. My cup overflows.

My cup overflows. Who will reap the benefit of the overflow? Who will share in the overabundance of the bounty God has shared with me? Well, who's around? You prepare a table for me in the presence of my enemies. Doesn't it seem that the guest list to this divine banquet includes both me and my enemies?

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life ...

Goodness and mercy, all our days. The beauty of the life we have, no matter what.

And I shall dwell in the house of the Lord ...

In the house of the Lord! Where is the Lord's house? Where can we find it? Where is it we will be living? Wherever I am, wherever you are, that is where the Lord's house is, because the Lord makes his home with us. Because the Lord makes his home with us. Because the Lord is our home ... and what a beautiful house it is!

What do you see when our children gather on these steps?

What do you see when Japhy Holt dances?

What do you see when Donnie Damon proudly shares news of his successful weight loss?

What do you see when Dave and Shelli Panicucci walk to the doors of the church hand-in-hand?

What do you see when Carol Driver walks down the center aisle of the sanctuary to her seat?

What do you see when you ride the bike trail near Hartman Reserve accompanied by a symphony of peepers?

What do you see when Iowa farmers are out on the fields once again tilling the warming soil?

What do you see when a wary brown trout darts for cover upon seeing your shadow?

What do you see when you walk outside on a cloudless, moonless night and look up?

What do you see today? Right now? Do you see the beauty of the life you have?