
Remembering the World to God

A sermon by Canon George Maxwell
Easter 4 – Year C

*The Lord is my Shepherd,
I shall not be in want.*

*He makes me lie down in green pastures
and leads me beside still waters.*

He revives my soul. Psalm 23:1-3a

In her book, *Traveling Mercies*, Anne Lamott talks about finding her way back to church after years of searching for God in other ways and in other places.

She says that she was visiting a flea market near Sausalito, California, one Sunday morning, when she heard gospel music coming from a church right across the street.

The church was just a ramshackle building with a cross on top. It sat on a small lot behind a couple of skinny pine trees.

She recognized the music, though. She knew the old hymns from the times she went to church with her grandparents. So, she stopped to listen.

The next time she came to the market on Sunday morning, she moved a little closer. She crossed the street and stood in the doorway of the church.

She couldn't believe how run down it was. The floors were wearing over-shined linoleum and the walls were holding up plastic stained glass windows.

She couldn't believe how few people were making all of that music, either. There were only six people in the choir—five black women and an Amish-looking man—and only another thirty in the congregation.

They were all warm and welcoming, though.

During the peace, they came back to where she stood and shook her hand.

Yet, they never asked her to come any closer than she was comfortable coming, or to stay any longer than she was comfortable staying.

Soon, Lamott was going to the church about once a month.

She was going in and sitting down now, but she never stayed for the sermon. She loved singing about Jesus, but she didn't want to be preached to about him!

Slowly, something inside of her that was stiff and rotting began to feel soft and tender.

Somehow the singing wore down all of the boundaries and distinctions that had conspired to keep her isolated.

Sometimes when she stood to sing, Lamott said that she was so shaky and sick that she felt like she might tip over.

But, singing made her feel bigger than herself, like she was being taken care of, tricked into coming back to life.

I'm struck by how often Twenty-third Psalm works for us the way that the gospel music worked for Anne Lamott.

Time and time again, we have stood together around a hospital bed, or in the church, or over a grave, and recited the words of the Twenty-third Psalm.

We stood there feeling vulnerable and alone.

Yet, saying those words gave us the courage to remember that God was still there.

We remembered that it is God who knows us by name.

We remembered that it is God who, like a Good Shepherd, shows us the way to the good grass, and to the cool, still, fresh water.

We remembered that it is God who shows us how to go through places of danger, and comes looking for us when we wander.

We remembered that it is God who stands between us and danger, and puts us on his back to carry us back to the fold.

This is why we pray the psalms, of course.

We don't pray the psalms just to tell stories, or to say things that we believe to be true.

We pray the psalms to enter into those stories, and live out those truths as part of our lives.

We pray the psalms to feel, to the extent we can, the alienation, exile, and rejection that those who have gone before us on the journey have felt.

We pray the psalms to call on God to remember us, and them.

Every time we pray the psalms, we are reaching out to God again, seeking to encounter her again as if for the first time.

It is the heart of our spirituality and our worship.

It's how we know that God still is who we claim her to be, and that God still does what we claim her to do.

And, what we discover is that God has been looking for us ... in the grass, by the water, even in places of danger.

It is when we are found, and feel like we are being carried back to the safety of the fold, that our stiffness loosens, our boundaries of isolation wear down, and we begin to feel bigger than ourselves.

It is when we realize that God would even give her life for us that we are tricked into coming back to life.

It is then that we realize that the psalms call us to shift our focus, to turn from our own preoccupations and to look at the world through the eyes of the Good Shepherd.

In his book, *Worship and Spirituality*, Don Saliers talks about this turn as feeling the same compassion that Christ felt as we engage the world, and particularly those who are suffering in it.

He talks about this in terms of remembering the world before God.

To remember the world to God, he says, is to journey into the very heart of God's presence.

Saliers tells a story of going with a former student to visit a parishioner named Myrtie.

After walking down the halls of what felt like a forgotten place full of lost souls, they found Myrtie in her room. She was sitting up in bed and when they approached her, she said, “Oh, boy.”

The pastor greeted her and introduced Saliers to her. She responded quietly, “Oh, boy.”

The pastor told her that he had brought her gifts from the other parishioners. “Oh, boy.” Her eyes sparkled a little as she replied.

She laboriously unwrapped each gift with her one usable hand and when she saw what it was, she greeted it with a surprised, “Oh, boy.”

The pastor then shared with her the news of the church – births and deaths, bean suppers and worship services.

Then he opened the little case with the small piece of bread and the small cup, into which some wine was poured.

“The body of Christ,” he said, as he gave her the bread.

“The cup of salvation,” he said, as he gave her the wine.

“Oh, boy,” she responded, so prayerfully that it almost brought Saliers to tears.

They talked a little more and then said their good-byes. “We’ll see you again, Myrtie.” “Oh, boy,” was her thankful farewell.

As they were getting into the car, Saliers could see Myrtie at her window, looking at them from behind the curtains, her good hand waving ever so slightly, and her mouth forming “O” and “B.”

It was then that the Pastor told him that Myrtie had suffered a stroke allowing her only two sounds.

*Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I shall fear no evil;
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff, they comfort me.*

*You spread a table before me in the presence of those who trouble me
you have anointed my head with oil,
and my cup is running over.*

*Surely your goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life,
and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.*

Psalm 23:4-6

“Oh, boy,” I can imagine Myrtie saying, as if the stiffness inside of her had loosened and the boundaries of isolation had been worn down, allowing her to begin to feel bigger than herself.

“Oh, boy,” I can imagine the Pastor and Saliers thinking, as they realized that they had been carried back to the safety of the fold.

They had been taken care of, tricked into coming back to life, as they remembered the world to God.

Amen.

Please note that in describing what we remember about God when we say the words of the Twenty-third Psalm I have used the words of Jerome Berryman, taken from the *Parable of the Good Shepherd* in Volume 3 of *The Complete Guide to Godly Play*. We use the Godly Play stories and methods in our Christian Education at the Cathedral and I wanted to at least try to touch the memories of those experiences.

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