

“The Valley of the Shadow of Death”

A Message for Sunday Worship

on January 17, 2021

United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT

Text: Psalm 23 & Psalm 139:1-12

This has been a tough week, hasn't it? Yet at the same time it's been an ordinary week. Work to be done. Appointments to keep. Bills to pay. Zoom meetings to zoom into. And yet, in a very real way, it feels like our whole lives have shifted this past week in ways we are still trying to process. Someone I know made the observation that she thinks everyone is still literally in shock from the insurrection in DC last week and the ongoing ramifications of it. That feels like a pretty accurate assessment to me. We literally witnessed the unthinkable a week ago Wednesday and as the days have gone by, and more and more of the story starts to emerge, the full depth of it is even more frightening than what we saw with our own eyes. And that's pretty difficult to process. I have been in two clergy gatherings this past week and each of them had the same tone – shock, sadness, and anger overlaid with a healthy dose of anxiety as we each wrestle with the challenge of bringing some sort of message to our congregations that would be helpful, that would ease tensions and somehow make God's presence more tangible in the midst of this horrific mess our country is living through. Then, on top of all this, came word late Friday that progressive churches have been identified as potential targets of these domestic terrorists because what we preach and teach is so much at odds with their view of the world. We are left to wonder, what country are we living in anyway?

Dear ones, we are living in our country – the United States of America – the same place, at least geographically speaking, where most of us have lived all our lives. But it has changed over recent decades into a place that is at times unrecognizable. I have recently discovered and found great comfort in the daily columns of historian Heather Cox Richardson who, in true Karl Barth fashion, takes the events of the day from news reports and places them squarely within the context of history. From her I have learned that our great country has experienced moments like this before and has always triumphed. True, some elements of the current mess are novel and new, but many are not. In any event, I will leave to Dr. Richardson and others to place what we are currently living through within the context of history. I am more concerned this morning with how we are dealing with all this, how we are making sense, making meaning of all this as the followers of Jesus who call this faith community our spiritual home.

I am most concerned, in other words, with you and how you are dealing with all this. I was worried enough about that last week before I received word of so many deaths in the seven days just ended. Deaths from Covid itself, from long standing illness, from unexpected and traumatic events. Death, dear ones, has been too close a companion to us this past week and that is overwhelming. This is why I suspect that grief is the shadow enfolding us in its darkness at this moment: Grief over the loss of what we have always believed our country to be; Grief that fear is a more constant companion these days as Covid stalks our every more; Grief that life is almost unrecognizable as are the people we encounter, hidden behind the oh so necessary face masks; Grief that all those little things we never gave a thought to like hugging and sitting down with a friend over coffee are now only memories we wonder if we will ever reclaim in life each day; Grief that the death toll of this awful and relentless disease is now coming way too close as people we know and love pass away. We are lost, dear ones, in a mess not of our own making but we are paying the price for the mess, every minute of every day.

Surely, we all know this is not a unique reality to the human experience. We are not the first people to have our lives upended by something we never saw coming. We are not the first people to be caught up in the fallout of battling views of what our country can and should be. Quite the opposite, really. From the earliest days of this nation, people have disagreed on what the government should do, how it should operate. The Whiskey Rebellion in 1891 happened in the early days of George Washington's Presidency when whiskey became the first domestic product to be taxed as a means of creating income for the fledgling republic. This tax was not well received in certain quarters and the discord began. We worked through that disagreement and the one after that and the one after that and will work our way through this one too. But it's still disconcerting. We still grieve the disruption of our lives and the loss of so very many people to Covid and all the realities of this terrible time in our history. We are grieving, dear ones, and God understands. We are grieving, dear ones, but we are not alone in our sadness and grief. In truth we are gathering this morning, scattered in households across the area and indeed across the country to hear God's word of hope. We gather here in this moment of national despair tinged with hope as God's people especially aware of other loved ones who have died, even long ago, as well as the frailty of our own existence. We gather to comfort and support one another in this common loss we are living through. We gather to hear God's words of reassurance to drive away our despair even as we rest in God's healing presence.

One of the most familiar places we can find those reassuring words of God is in Psalm 23, a favorite and one so many of us know “by heart” as they used to say. This incredibly beautiful psalm is one of the most ancient songs of trust and comfort ever written which is why it is almost always a part of the memorial services and funerals in our congregational tradition and in much of the Christian tradition at large. It describes God as the most compassionate and gentle of caregivers, using the shepherd as a metaphor. But Psalm 23 is not a schmaltzy list of things to feel good about. Instead, this psalm emphasizes the overwhelming nature of God’s love for us by confronting and naming the evil always lurking nearby. We walk through the valley of the shadow of death. We sit at a table in the presence of our enemies. But, through it all, God the good shepherd is right there with us, meeting every need before we know it. In this beautiful psalm we are promised still waters and restored souls. We are assured divine protection so complete and total because it is in God’s own dwelling that we are invited to reside. We rest secure that goodness and mercy shall be with us all the days of our lives because God is with us, through it all.

Psalm 139 continues the description of the totality of God’s presence in our lives only this time it acknowledges the deeply intimate nature of God’s awareness of who each of us is as individuals and how it is that each of us fit into God’s plans for the world. “O Lord, you have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you ... are acquainted with all my ways.” I love these words and the picture they create of a God who knows me so well, better than I know myself. Think about this for a moment. This text says God knows what we are doing every moment of every day – the good, the bad and the ugly. God knows when things are going well and when they are not. God knows when we are coping well and when we are ready to fly into a million pieces. God knows when we are happy and secure and when we are terrified and afraid of what waits ahead. God knows it all and God is right with us through it all. No wonder the psalmist says, “such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high I cannot attain it.” Dear ones, it is impossible for us to really understand what this means because even the most beautiful of words can only capture so much of God and God’s love for us.

This love of God for us that is impossible to understand fully, to appreciate fully, is so important these days when everything feels upside down and sideways from how we want it to be. “Where can I go from your presence or where can I flee from your Spirit?” the psalmist asks on our behalf. Nowhere is the answer. There is nowhere we can go where God will not be. There is nowhere that God’s hand will not be holding us tight.

There is nowhere we can be that God is not. Dear ones, we need to hear this. We need to know this in this moment like never before. We need to hold on to God's hand as we walk through the valley of the shadow of death that is Covid 19 as infection and hospitalization rates soar. We need to hold on tight as we watch the news and see the very foundations of our government threatened by an evil group of our own citizens. We need to trust that God sees the same fences and barbed wire around the Capitol that we see and that God weeps along with us, but never, ever letting go of our hands. We need to relax into the care of that compassionate shepherd who protects us from evil even as he leads us forward into the peaceful future we long for. We need to believe that though we may feel like we are surrounded by and sinking into darkness that "darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day for darkness is as light to you." Darkness is not dark to you, O God. Help us to see the light that you see God. Help us to keep our eyes on that light when it is so tempting to stay out of sight in the shadows of our fears.

This past week those shadows have felt especially close to us here in our church as news of the passing of two beloved, long time members and the family member of other long time members have broken our hearts. Just last Sunday we received word of June Sicilian's death from Covid and then this past Friday, we lost our dear Phil Panciera who has been in ill health for some time. Shortly after learning about Phil's passing we learned of the death of Gretchen Leming, wife of Scott, daughter-in-law of Vera and sister-in-law of Kathy Tarasuk. Six days and three deaths. Shortly before that our own Julie Grillo lost her father to Covid as she herself was still recovering. That is too much death, dear ones. That is too many teardrops falling, too many hearts aching, too many times when words of condolence from us seem so inadequate. Yet words are all we have right now. We can't even offer hugs or coffee cakes or a shoulder to cry on. We can't gather together to celebrate lives now lost to us through our rituals of gathering for memorial services and committal services and even collations. What our ladies wouldn't give to bake all those cookies and wash all those cups for June and Phil. What I wouldn't give to see us gathered here together to sing songs and tell stories and hold one another in prayer, enfolding these hurting families in our tender embrace as a community of God's people. But we can't. Not now. Not with Covid. We can't. And that makes the pain so much worse for everybody.

This valley in the shadow of death seems too long and too dark. It feels like it will never end. But, dear ones, it will. It will. God has already promised us it will. God has already shown us it will. Great wars – the Civil

War, two World Wars, Vietnam – they ended. The 1918 flu epidemic, the polio epidemic they both ended. Small pox was virtually eradicated. Cancer was once an automatic death sentence, and now cancer survivors far outnumber those who die each year. These are but a few examples of how we know God’s promises are true. The dark valley will lead us into the light for the darkness is as light to God. And that’s not even the whole story! God promises to hold our hand as we make our way forward through this dark valley we are in right now. Stop and imagine that for a moment! Close your eyes and remember what it feels like to have someone hold your hand. Imagine the warmth that gentle hand brings to you with its touch. Now, dare to believe that hand you feel is God’s hand in yours. The Psalmist told us it is! “If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast.” God’s hand holding on tight to ours. Wow. Just wow.

Yes, it’s been a tough week, dear ones. And I have no idea what the week ahead holds and neither do you. But that’s okay because everyday the darkness gets a little lighter – literally, as we inch once more toward the longer days of spring. Every day our hope that a new day is coming as a new administration is inaugurated in Washington gets a little stronger, a little easier to imagine. Every day we move forward on the path God places before us, timidly at first but believing our steps will grow more confident as our trust in God emboldens us to become who God always knew we could be. God’s bright new day is coming, dear ones. Let’s move forward to claim it together. Amen.