

A Spacious, Well-Watered Place

Sixth Sunday after Easter
May 17, 2020

From the front pew of First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, IL

JOHN 14 & Psalm 66:8-12

Matt Matthews

A week ago I accidentally backed into my mailbox. Three days later, after rumor had spread around the country about my disabled box, two neighbors who don't even live in my immediate neighborhood came over with tools and know-how.

A church member knew how recent headlines have upset me, and she sent me her copy of *Waking Up White* as a means of channeling my frustration for good.

When the walls were closing in the sky was lowering, my son made me play ping pong and our garage became an oasis.

When I was hungering and thirsting for company, 39 of you showed up a few weeks ago for a Zoom dessert party. Together we got to catch up and see each other's faces.

Cupcakes, a gift card to the Custard Cup, and jazz have showed up at my doorstep.

In each of these instances, I have seen God's hand at work. The Good Shepherd was guiding my steps to connect mine with yours, and for a while we walked in step side by side.

The psalmist says,

*We went through fire and through water/
yet you have brought us out to a spacious place.*

I have met the saints of God in such spacious places my whole life. The Good Shepherd does such a good job. I'm thankful and glad.

Today's psalm is Psalm 66:8-12. I particularly love v. 12

⁸ *Bless our God, O peoples,
let the sound of his praise be heard,
⁹ who has kept us among the living,
and has not let our feet slip.
¹⁰ For you, O God, have tested us;
you have tried us as silver is tried.
¹¹ You brought us into the net;
you laid burdens on our backs;
¹² you let people ride over our heads;
we went through fire and through water;
yet you have brought us out to a spacious place.*

Here the psalmist describes having been led through a tough, tough time, through hardship to a spacious place. This is how Eugene Peterson puts it in his translation of this text:

*Bless our God, O peoples!
Give him a thunderous welcome!
Didn't he set us on the road to life?
Didn't he keep us out of the ditch?
He trained us first,
passed us like silver through refining fires,
Brought us into hardscrabble country,
pushed us to our very limit,
Road-tested us inside and out,
took us to hell and back;
Finally he brought us
to this well-watered place.*

Those last lines always get me: *We went through fire and through water, yet you have brought us out to a spacious place.* A well-watered place(MSG). A spacious place (NRSV). A wealthy Place (KJV). A place of safety (GNT).

We get the idea.

The good shepherd leads us places of rest. Green grass. Still water. Yes, life is hard. No, this pandemic is not easy. Yes, people grieve the loss of human touch, of hugs, of dinner parties, of movies, of proms, and

important spring ritual. Yes, some have suffered and are suffering so much more than we are. Yes, we have sometimes found ourselves in hard times, melting in the fires of life, hoping the silver that is left behind really shines, but not enjoying the process one bit.

The pandemic is bringing the best out in us.

And the worst.

The murder of Ahmaud Arbery makes me wonder if the cracks that divided our nation and communities before the Coronavirus won't get wider and swallow us whole.

The pandemic is turning up the heat.

Mr. Arbery, a 25-year-old black man, was killed by two white men while jogging through his neighborhood.

Adam Serwer writing for *The Atlantic* wrote that George E. Barnhill, the prosecutor in Brunswick, Georgia, where the murder happened concluded that no crime had been committed. Mr. Arbery had "tried to wrest a shotgun from Travis McMichael before being shot... The two men who had seen a stranger running, and decided to pick up their firearms and chase him, had therefore acted in self-defense when they confronted and shot him, Barnhill concluded. . . . [A]s video of the shooting emerged on social media, a different Georgia prosecutor announced that the case would be put to a grand jury; the two men were arrested and charged with murder . . . after video of the incident sparked national outrage across the political spectrum."

We are in the fire.

And while some of us are at home watching The Great British Baking Show on Netflix, others are risking their lives by simply taking a jog through their own neighborhoods in broad daylight.

Eugene Peterson might say we're being road tested through hell and back in hardscrabble country.

Our prayer is, "O God, bring us quickly through the fire. Bring us safely through the deep water. Lead us to the spacious, safe place where our ancestors have found comfort."

I want you to imagine that spacious, well-watered place. It could be in the sunshine at Hessel Park, or the park in your neighborhood. It could be along the shores of the Chesapeake Bay where I grew up. For some of you that spacious place would be in the mountains. Imagine that wide, spacious place.

Imagine it.

Our job as Christians is to celebrate that place. To look forward to that place. And to make room for that space in our own neighborhood. Our job is the reach across the divide so that everybody gets to enjoy the same picnic on that wide lawn. At the very least, our job is not to dare to get in the way of the Good Shepherd as he calls the whole flock together--everybody--to this little piece of heaven on earth.

Our job is to say to Ahmaud Arbery's family, we grieve with you. (And that's the easy part.) Our job is to stand with that family, to stand up against the disparity that divides our land, our community, our family. Our job is to take off our rosy glasses and not only notice disparity but to shine a white, hot light on it and to work to make things right in whatever large or small ways we can. Our job is to loosen the net that holds whole generations down. Our job is to share the burden of those who carry great loads upon their backs. Our job is never to allow people to ride over anybody else's head.

A friend of mine—a friend of ours, Bill Gamble—has a saying below his name on his emails:

My Country, right or wrong.
If right, to be kept right.
If wrong, to be put right.

When Jesus tells us not to worry (John 14), what he's telling us is that he knows the way to that spacious, well-watered place. He knows the way through this pandemic. He's walking with us. Grace abounds. He knows the way through the fires and the waters, all the way through hell and back.

Thanks be to God.

