

6th Sunday of Easter 2020

“Sheltering in Place, which sounds a lot like what meteorologists order us to do when there's a tornado in the vicinity, has turned into a rather extended affair. Weeks of isolation are becoming months. People are lamenting a loss of definition to their lives as weekdays and weekends blur together. Sharp distinctions between work hours and down time aren't so sharp anymore. Blue light from prolonged screen time is throwing off our biological clocks and sleep schedules. Even caring about the day's weather, and what we should wear in light of it, hardly matters to our indoor lives.” (Peter W. Marty, Christian Century)

Thomas Merton wrote, in his book *Praying the Psalms*, that we should read the Psalms as a map of inner experience. “There is no aspect of the interior life, no kind of religious experience, no spiritual need of human beings that is not depicted and lived out in the Psalms.”

The people of Israel had been tested. they wandered the wilderness in search of the Promised Land. Psalm 66.

10 For you, God, tested us;
 you refined us like silver.
11 You brought us into prison
 and laid burdens on our backs.
12 You let people ride over our heads;
 we went through fire and water,

On the other side of their tribulations, after 40 years, the Israelites had finally reached the borders of the Promised Land. Verse 12 “...but you brought us to a place of abundance.” We are conditioned to think of the promised land as a piece of real estate, a land of milk and honey. But what if it is something deeper than a geographical location? What if the promised land is not a physical location but an interior awareness? What if the

promised land is understood as a place where one experiences safety, security and peace?

And what if the wilderness is that inner experience where life is solitary, alone and conflicted? In the wilderness of that experience, it's sometimes hard to breathe. So, what if the wilderness and the promised land are states of Consciousness within ourselves?

Life is hard. You already knew that, I'm guessing. But it is not impossible. And life is wonderful—ultimately. But, still, it is hard, and there are struggles and hurdles we all must overcome.

For the lion's share of evolutionary history, humans lived in nomadic groups. Exercise was essential every day. Famine was common. Premature mortality was common. Disease and death from predation were parts of everyday life. Life has always been hard for our kind. Always. And no matter how cushy your life may be in some ways today, life is still hard for our kind.

Anxiety motivates people to get themselves out of dangerous situations. For example, if you're hiking and you almost slip and almost fall off a cliff, you might feel anxious. And that anxiety will keep you away from the edge of the cliff in the future. Negative emotions are deeply rooted in our evolutionary past—like it or not. We are all anxious.

From the evolutionary perspective, organisms that passed the test of natural selection are those that had ancestors with qualities that facilitated their own survival and reproduction. To a large extent, all organisms evolved with a suite of physical and behavioral qualities that primarily benefit themselves. This is why you are motivated to eat when you are hungry—this basic drive benefits you and helps you survive. Hunger is a basic adaptation that works similarly in all of us. Our psychology includes a

host of processes and drives such as hunger that primarily benefit ourselves. We are all selfish.

When we find ourselves in a situation where we are struggling, sometimes we don't think we can make it. We feel like we don't have it in ourselves to overcome. But, you can flip this on it's head and say that this feeling of being lost is a preparation for being found. When you're at the bottom, you can find inner resources you never knew you had.

When you've been down, when you've been in a hard position, have you ever made a deal with God? "Dear God, if only you help me out of this situation, I promise I'll change...I promise I'll be a better person, I promise I'll do such and such..." In the heat of the moment, we make promises, we try to strike a bargain with God. Then, once the moment passes, our promises fade and we forget the vows we made.

13 I will come to your temple with burnt offerings
and fulfill my vows to you—
14 vows my lips promised and my mouth spoke
when I was in trouble.

Here, in Psalms, the writer did not forget his promises. He brought forth offerings and sacrifices to God, and praised God to everyone who would listen.

16 Come and hear, all you who fear God;
let me tell you what he has done for me.
17 I cried out to him with my mouth;
his praise was on my tongue.
18 If I had cherished sin in my heart,
the Lord would not have listened;
19 but God has surely listened
and has heard my prayer.

These prayers, while spoken aloud, emanated in the heart. Wholehearted prayers, heartfelt supplications offer no guarantee or promise that we will be delivered from whatever difficulty we find ourselves. Remember again, verses 11 and 12;

11 You...

...laid burdens on our backs.

12 You let people ride over our heads;
we went through fire and water.

God does not promise to keep suffering away from us; in fact, we are continually being tested. He does not change our external situations. Rather, He holds us, so that no matter what is happening to us; we are not alone.

As you struggle with the challenges of life, ask yourself:

- What are the most important things that you feel you need to thrive?
- Which aspects of your life do you find most challenging?
- How could other people help you?
- How can you help others in turn?
- Which societal expectations make you feel resentful?
- Do you enjoy the work you do?
- If not, what type of work would fuel your soul?
- Do you have expectations of what life should be like?
- Are those expectations making you unhappy?
- Would your life be a bit easier if you let go of those expectations?

We find ourselves in the wilderness, and we need to open ourselves to the possibility of change, of being found, of trusting God to lead us to the promised land.

We're not meant to go through life alone. Social isolation is detrimental to our overall health, and particularly our emotional and psychological well-being. Re-establishing a strong sense of community – and learning that it's okay to lean on others when we need them – might not solve all of life's hardships, but it can certainly make them a lot more bearable.

Remember that prayers that come from within our hearts, prayers in search of answers, open and welcoming, will find an answer in Presence. God is listening, God is with us. He listens to us, not from a distance, but from within. We cannot get out of many of life's challenges, we still have to carry those burdens on our backs, we still have to go through fire and water. And yet, the Psalmist concludes with a blessing:

20 Praise be to God,
who has not rejected my prayer
or withheld his love from me!

The wilderness in which we find ourselves; whatever it is, the inner experience of aloneness where it is hard to breathe, can be transformed into the Promised Land, an inner spacious place where we experience safety, security and peace. God is the patient, loving, listening Presence who transports us from the wilderness to the promised land.

Amen.