

Glen Ridge Congregational Church
 April 25, 2010 (Easter 4 - C)
 John 10:22-30; Psalm 23; "Still Waters"
 The Rev. Cynthia F. Reynolds

Let us pray: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

We did it – yet another Rummage Sale is history – lots of hard work for lots of people. Hours of effort and participation by so many – most of us here today contributed in some way to the success of the event. It's always a good time, though, in spite of open spaces in signs until the very last minute, and in spite of the long hours.

Certainly this is an important project for our entire church community – and not just because of the financial impact – the Women's Association does wonderful things to further the ministry of this church with the proceeds of this project, the sale in the fall, and the Antiques Show. But more than that, it's a time for us all to pull together – to get to know each other a little better – there are some folks we really talk with only at the rummage sale – whether they're busy sorting or bringing the proceeds from their cleaned out closets – this year especially it seemed there were more unfamiliar faces working together – a good way to introduce newcomers to this congregation. It's great to join in a common goal. I really enjoy going down to Robinson Hall to see everyone and finding treasures there too. And isn't there a great sense of accomplishment too – , for instance, let's not underestimate the work to put our Sunday School rooms back together in time for classes this morning.

The Rummage Sale is an important part of the doing of our faith – the gains of being together in work and play – the fellowship of the Rummage sale is every bit as important for the mission of the church, to sustain the mission of the church. Many of the confirmands worked the sale too – and every year I hear from people how helpful they are and what a pleasure to get to know them too. It works both ways as the confirmands get to know people of the church they wouldn't otherwise come in contact with. Everybody wins

Sometimes, though, we can get so caught up in the doing that we lose sight of the on-going being of our lives individually and in community.

Last week amidst the hustle and bustle of the sale preparation, I talked with someone going through a very difficult and painful time – as we talked, this person wondered out loud, almost pleading, what is God trying to tell me! What does God want from me! There was a silence and then, she said, I know God is with me – I have no doubt of that. I know I'm not alone. But I don't know what is happening here!

Someone else gets a phone call – they learn their son is going for tests to pinpoint a potentially dangerous heart condition. And they call the church in their fear and concerns and ask hard questions: what will we do if something happens to him! I just wanted you all to pray for him. It's the only thing we can really count on.

And another woman gets really good news from her medical test results – she suddenly has a future again – the relief shows on her face, in her whole demeanor – she's filled with gratitude for the prayers offered on her behalf, for the gathering around her of this church community.

A man comes into the office from the street – the open door of our church building drew him in – it’s hard for him to ask but he can’t pay his rent – can we help?

All of these situations have everything to do with the being of our faith: – those times when we just can’t keep on doing but are left solely to our being – digging deep for answers, for meaning, for comfort, for restoration, for profound thanksgiving.

The people who gathered around Jesus there at the temple asked the question that burned inside of them – are you the Messiah? Are you the one we’ve been waiting for? The one who will bring meaning to our lives, the one who will provide answers for our most profound questions? The one we can trust with our very lives?

We ask those same questions, don’t we. There’s a time when we all stop and wonder – there’s a time when we can no longer ignore those feelings of emptiness. And I think it takes a great deal of courage to let those feelings just BE, to sit with them, and to be open to the possibilities they hold for us. Because it’s when we’re most empty that I believe God is closest to us. Maybe it’s then that we can know that most intimate, most lasting relationship of all – our relationship with God. Again – from the Bread for the Journey Women – you never know that God is all you need until God is all you have.

We read a familiar, beloved psalm together this morning – some have said that the 23rd Psalm is the favorite of Christians worldwide. Perhaps we recognize it as probably the most widely read passage at funeral services. And I realize that whenever I’ve lead worship services at nursing homes and have used this psalm, I almost always see dry, frail lips moving, mouthing the words so many people learned as children. The psalm touches us in profound ways. I can’t help but wonder why.

Well – we Americans are known for being busy, productive, rushing people. Aren’t we always trying to push ourselves, do too much? Going to school, doing homework, participating in sports or drama productions, going to work, trying to maintain a home, tote children here and there – constantly on the move. And at the same time we’re often plugged into our ipods or other electronics – staying in touch, texting, playing music maybe. Even on walks in the woods or running, we listen to the sounds of others playing in our ears – not the sound of birdsong these beautiful spring days.

If we are busy, active people, quickly going from here to there, and if we are people who really don’t like it quiet, then how do we explain the popularity of words from this psalm that paint a picture of tranquility and peace? Maybe that’s what’s missing from our lives.

Listen to the words: “The Lord is my shepherd” – translate that to, I am content to simply be. I need nothing. I am at peace.

“He makes me lie down in green pastures” – I am secure and cared for. Life is beautiful. The hills are green and I am free to lie here looking into the sky with nothing else to do. Have you ever done that? Take the time to just lie down on the ground and watch the clouds? Look for shapes in the clouds?

“He leads me beside still waters” – utter peace and tranquility. There is a calm over everything outside, and I can soak all that up inside of me. Stillness and quiet are gifts God brings.

Still waters – an image of the peace that passes all understanding. And we believe that peace brought only by Christ. It’s not just quiet, though – it’s a quiet that your soul needs to strip away all the noise so that you can hear the still small voice of God speaking

to you. That quiet is a gift. Still waters is an image for solitude, an aloneness that is full, rich, satisfying, safe – because it is an aloneness that allows for awareness of God.

As part of our curriculum I ask the confirmands to define what the church is – this year I’ve been especially struck by how many of them describe it as a safe place – they describe church as a sacred place where all can come to feel safe and welcome; a place where people can go to feel safe and to be with people they can trust and confide in – a place where you can go to feel happy or sad; it’s a sanctuary; it’s a safe haven. And most of them describe church as a place where they can be in God’s presence more easily – to talk to God and listen to God. That’s what still waters are, isn’t it – I’ve been impressed by their wisdom to recognize that they need some quiet, some rest – and to find that in church – a time to nurture the being of their faith, a time to find some lasting peace. That’s a powerful testimony.

Where do you find the space to nurture your own soul – where does God lead you? Where is the place where the shepherd leads you to restore your soul? For me it’s at the water – for some it’s the woods, the mountains, your own backyard - it doesn’t matter where it is – it matters that we go there, led by God, for healing and peace. We have to escape the routine, the crowds, the chaos to listen to that steady rhythm of waves lapping the shore. That sound of water meeting rock and sand has a soothing, almost healing effect on many. Still waters invite reflection – the shepherd leads me beside still waters – and that’s how my soul is revived. The shepherd has taken me to where I need to be to find wholeness and peace again.

For the past many weeks we’ve been talking about discipleship – looking at the earliest followers who are models, mentors, for our own discipleship journey. There’s been much emphasis on what they did – the doing of their faith. Maybe it’s time for us to take a breath and take some time to focus on the being of our faith. They have modeled that for us as well – each of them spent time with Jesus – listening, learning, praying; filling themselves so they could go forth and help fill others. Like those early disciples, we too need to ground ourselves in prayer and worship, learning, listening to what the Good Shepherd is saying to us.

Now, we may not like comparing ourselves to sheep – they have a reputation of being rather dumb, lacking in initiative, maybe even falling off a cliff or getting entangled in brush or getting stuck in impossible situations. And although there’s some variation in their color, they all look pretty much alike. But here’s the thing – even though we can’t tell one sheep from another, the good shepherd can – each one is an individual, worthy of his care and attention.

Maybe this is all more true than we’d like to accept – we too get entangled in the brush of our daily living – our worries, our cares – and we too fall off cliffs on occasion. But the good shepherd calls each of us back to the fold – if we hear the voice. Jesus tells us in the gospel reading: my sheep hear my voice. I know them and they follow me. I give them abundant life.” So we hear and we follow. And Christ gives us abundant life. We can depend on that.

Maybe Jesus is trying to remind us of God's intimate love for each individual.

The 23rd psalm is incredibly personal, isn't it. It doesn't say, the Lord is A shepherd – people shall not want. It says, the Lord is MY shepherd – I shall not want. He leads ME beside the still waters – he restores MY soul. Maybe that's what touches us so deeply – it's about God's relationship with each one of us – individually and personally. Let's slow down and savor that.

Have you seen those signs while driving through mountains, steep hills, that alert drivers to the runaway truck ramp? One mile ahead – one half mile ahead – one quarter mile ahead – and then, there's the ramp itself. It's a dirt track heading off the highway and it's graded steeply upward so a runaway rig with no brakes can go barreling into it and be slowed by the incline to a gradual stop.

Maybe our worship is directed toward those of us whose brakes have failed and are on a runaway path. Maybe that's a purpose of the 23rd psalm. Maybe a few minutes of hearing the shepherd's voice in scripture and prayer and music will bring us to a stop and introduce us to the stillness. And we'll meet the Good Shepherd who eagerly waits for the opportunity to take our hand and guide us safely out of the fast lane. We are fortunate indeed to be taken onto the safety ramp so our out-of-control life can be slowed and stopped – because it's there beside the still waters that Christ speaks words of life to our soul.

It's one thing to visit the still waters but it's another thing to live there – I suspect that not many of us will escape to a nearby monastery or convent to live. That's a calling for only a few – the rest of us will continue to live as we do. But I also know that the stillness we find in this time of worship, the power of forgiveness that is announced to us each week, the encouragement we find in our community as we seek to see Christ in each other and offer each other the sign of peace as we greet one another each week – maybe that stillness we seek is right here – right now in this time of worship – and then throughout the week we can recall it and be stilled for a few moments where we live and work. We come here to a safe place and find that that safe place goes with us in our daily living.

There's a balance between the doing of our faith and the being of our faith – we really can't have one without the other. So as we recover from the hectic activity of the rummage sale or the hours spent in preparing for this afternoon's concert, savoring the glow of fellowship that comes with each of these things, let's go, led by the good shepherd, to the still waters that will restore us and empower us to do ministry all of the days of our lives. So may it be for each of us.

Let us pray: God of tenderness, God of compassion, I thank you for seeking me out as a shepherd seeks for his sheep. I thank you for keeping me safe – for standing with me in adversity and for blessing me with all that I have. Help me to listen more to you than I do right now – and give me the faith to follow you more perfectly. In Jesus' name, I pray. Amen.