

He Restores My Soul

A Sermon by
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It was a magnificent old oil painting. I was drawn to it partly because of its age, but also for the dark and brooding character that it seemed to possess. The sky looked dark and threatening, and the woods – mysterious and foreboding. But there was one part of the painting that was noticeably brighter than the rest – as if the sun had broken through, and warmth and light flooded an otherwise gloomy landscape.

On closer inspection, however, I realized that this was the work of the restorer. What I was looking at was not a sombre, mysterious masterpiece. It was a vibrant, light-filled landscape that had been obscured by decades of dust and grime.

The work of the restorer is a remarkable one, as with a sure, yet sensitive hand, the grime is painstakingly removed to reveal the original beauty of a masterpiece.

The Psalmist says, “He restores my soul.”

The Bible opens with the grand story of creation in which God, the Master Artist at work, forms a lump of clay into a body and breathes into it the breath of life – and there was a living soul. And God looked upon all that God had made, and said, “It is good.” Another translation of the Hebrew text might say, “It is beautiful!” God made this living soul to be beautiful.

But then, microscopic bit by microscopic bit, the dust and grime of life's hardships and injustices, desires and disappointments began to obscure that beauty, until eventually the masterpiece of God's creation bore little resemblance to the work the Artist intended.

What wonderful news, then, when the Psalmist sings out, “He restores my soul!” There is *hope* that beneath this dull and tarnished exterior, encrusted with the mistakes and fears of centuries, the masterpiece may yet be found and its original beauty restored.

I once heard a pastor speak of visiting a couple in his congregation. On every visit, he would ask, as he would ask of all his parishioners, “Is it well with your soul?” And they would talk. One day the wife of the couple went to the pastor and said, “My husband doesn’t want you to visit anymore. He’s uncomfortable when you come.” So right away, the pastor went to the husband and said, “I’m so sorry if I’ve offended you. Can to tell me what I’ve done?”

The man replied, “It’s that every time you come, you ask, ‘Is it well with your soul?’” “Yes,” replied the pastor, “Why does that question bother you so?” “Because it is *not* well with my soul,” cried the man. And he began to weep. And oh, what beautiful tears they were, as they began to loosen the fears and injuries of years. One could literally see the hand of the Master Artist at work... “He restores my soul.”

At first hearing, this verse may sound like the satisfied sigh of one who has finished the course. The race has been run; the heat of the day, long passed; and in the calm of the evening you might imagine the weary traveller relaxing comfortably and softly intoning, “It is well with my soul.”

But I don’t think that’s what the Psalmist is trying to suggest. “He restores my soul,” does not refer to rest and retirement, but to alertness and apprenticeship. It is not the reward at the end, so much as it is the preparation at the beginning. It is well with my soul, I will fear no evil, not because, “I’ve got this,” but because, “You are with me.”

Which brings us to the heart of the matter.

First there are green pastures and still waters. But where does the Psalm go next? The way grows dark and dangerous as the valley of the shadow of death looms large. “He

leads me in right paths for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me."

Sometimes when we find ourselves in the darkest valley we may wonder what went wrong. Where did I make a wrong turn that has led me into this place where my happiness has been stripped away? And how can I get back on the right track? Now, this is intriguing, for there is no suggestion in the Psalm that the darkest valley is the *wrong* path. Perhaps just the contrary.

In a recent post, Franciscan theologian Richard Rohr speaks of "liminal space" – that uncertain terrain where the familiar supports fail us and where we are forced to reevaluate where we have been, who we are in this twilight zone of transformation, and who we will be when we emerge. What is the darkest valley – or as many of us know the Psalm – the valley of the shadow of death? It may be an unwelcome diagnosis, a debilitating illness, the loss of a loved one, the end of a career, a wound that refuses to heal, a broken heart, or simply the weariness that can come with the years.

Quaker theologian Parker Palmer likens the darkest valley to a kind of pilgrimage: "a transformative journey to a sacred centre full of hardships, darkness, and peril." He continues: "In the tradition of pilgrimage, those hardships are seen not as accidental but as integral to the journey itself. Treacherous terrain, bad weather, taking a fall, getting lost – challenges... largely beyond our control, can strip the ego of the illusion that is in charge and make space for the true self to emerge. If that happens, the pilgrim has a better chance to find the sacred centre he or she seeks ... But before we come to that centre, full of light, we must travel in the dark."

I wonder if in these verses the Psalmist is affirming the faith that the darkest valley is in fact the *right* path – maybe even the *necessary* path. Maybe the psalmist is saying, "He restores my soul not by providing a detour around the most perilous parts of the journey, but by walking that difficult road with me."

Is it any wonder, then, that this Psalm is one of the most beloved and well-known passages of Scripture? If it seems to possess a power of its own to accomplish what it affirms, it is because it has a way of setting things in the perspective of God's goodness and mercy, which, the Psalmist says, will follow us all the days of our life.

It has been sung, painted, danced, memorized and meditated on by millions. It is a theological, spiritual, liturgical masterpiece. And therein lies a problem. For it runs the risk of becoming a piece of religious art that we revere only for its beauty. However, as Yogi Berra famously said, "In theory, theory and practice are the same; but in practice, they are not."

There is so much more to this masterpiece. For, when we begin to ponder the depth of its message, we see that while it celebrates beautifully God's unfailing presence, for Christians, it also calls us to the heart of what it means to be followers of Christ, whom the Apostle Peter calls "the chief shepherd and guardian of our souls." I love the way Martin Luther describes Christ as, "God sunk deep in human flesh." And when Jesus breathes on the disciples and says, "Receive holy breath; receive holy Spirit," he is saying, in effect, "Now God will be sunk deep in *your* flesh." Jesus' promise, "I will be with you," becomes, "I will be *in* you. Now *my* hands will be *your* hands, my word of comfort will be spoken through *you*, God's goodness and mercy will be *experienced* in the way you care for one another. I will be living *through you* to give flesh to the promise of God's unfailing presence, even in the darkest valley."

All of which brings us to today and this celebration of MacNeill's 93 Anniversary – the celebration of a congregation with an illustrious history and an amazing presence. And let us be reminded of this: We may never know the difference that our life in this place has made and will make for generations to come.

Would it surprise you to hear that when ministers get together they sometimes talk about their congregations? (It works the other way around too, doesn't it? My father used to call it "having preacher for lunch.") Well, I remember, years before I came to MacNeill, being in one of those clergy talk conversations. And while some of us were,

how shall I say, sharing some of our discouragements, one of your former ministers said, “Whenever I come home from meeting with the Council and the Deacons, I say to my wife, “These are wonderful people.” – a sentiment that I came to appreciate in the years I spent here.

The week before Thanksgiving, the CBC newsfeed ran a First Person column, the headline of which read: “When I was at my lowest, the people I relied on offered little more than thoughts and prayers.”

Writing about her loneliness and isolation during a period of debilitating illness, the author says, “These two years were the loneliest of my life. I felt abandoned by those who promised to pray for me, but never *with* me.”

In her final paragraph, though, she points to the grace that she experienced even in those difficult days in the darkest valley. “I am forever grateful to those who show up. Not only did they offer a safe place to navigate a vulnerable season but they also taught me the kind of friend I aspire to be – one who is committed to a relationship that will withstand life’s inevitable storms.” That, it seems to me, is a pretty good description of MacNeill Baptist Church – a safe place where, in the joyful, hope-filled spirit of Jesus, people are “committed to a relationship that will withstand life’s inevitable storms.”

Beloved congregation, God has blessed you and has made you a blessing. May this house always be known as a place of restoration and peace, a sanctuary of goodness and mercy, where God, who by the power at work within you, can do exceedingly more than all we could ask or imagine. To God be the glory in the Church and in Christ Jesus, from generation to generation.

And let us all say, Amen.