

Dark Valleys, Healing Trust
Reading from the Old Testament: Psalm 23
Reading from the New Testament: 1 Peter 2:18-25

Nope! There are times when expectations are set, or directives are issued, or statements are made, even in our most sacred texts, that our immediate and only fathomable response is simply — Nope! Even in scripture, there are instances where words, images, references, or rules are so far removed from the character of God as revealed in Jesus Christ that we must pause to question, to clarify, to critique. When Deuteronomy gives the directive for parents to take their rebellious son to the city gate so that the elders can stone him to death, we now know such a practice contradicts the character of the God we serve (though there were days I may have been tempted). When the text declares that even the great, great-grandchildren of an unmarried couple are not allowed to enter a worshiping community, we must pause to say such an idea is completely alien to the ways of God and the grace of our Lord.

Similarly, when the text fails to condemn the institution of slavery or counsels the enslaved or abused to accept their condition and weather their abuse, we have to declare this a flagrant offense against the God whose heart is directly connected to the oppressed. What was Peter thinking? If

Peter had said this when traveling through Galilee with Jesus, I can just hear Jesus again rebuking his friend and disciple, “Get behind me Satan. For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

So, what do we know about Peter? The Gospels do give evidence that Peter could be impulsive and had a knack for speaking or acting before thinking things through; that he was far too quick to tell Jesus what he thought Jesus ought to do (*Never a smart move*). And there was that time Peter so proudly declared he would never abandon Jesus, only to have a rooster cock-a-doodle-doing those words back at him after Peter denied any connection to Jesus three times on the night of Christ’s arrest. Peter was like that obstreperous aunt to whom you hesitate to introduce your fiancé because you fear the embarrassment of what will come out of your aunt’s lips. You have that relative? They speak, and you can hear the rest of the family go - *Ooooh!*

“Slaves, accept the authority of your masters with deference, not only to those who are kind and gentle but also those who are harsh.” *Ooooh!* Not a good look. That’s a tough text. Those are dangerous words, so dangerous that when biblical scholars were putting together a tool known as the

lectionary, a balance of scripture readings for each Lord's day, they skipped over this verse, deciding to just leave it out and start the reading at verse 19. However, ignoring the verse doesn't do us any good, any more than denying you're related to that rascally relative. It's not like you couldn't just pick up a pew Bible and read it. I remember a beloved church member long ago, telling me that whenever I read selected verses of a passage, he'd pick up the Bible and find what I left out, to see if it was something I was just afraid to bother with. So, Pat McDonnell, wherever you are, this one's for you.

It's not a good verse. Even though scholars point out that it doesn't actually endorse slavery (*Note that it doesn't condemn it either*); even though it sets the stage for an important word on how the character of Christ should inform our journey in a broken and sinful world; it is essential to say up front that in no way is it God's intent to tell the oppressed, the enslaved, the abused that there is any justification for their suffering, or that there is no reason to resist or condemn the oppressor.

Our entire faith is centered on a God who delivers us from captivity, from captivity to the powers and principalities that demand dominion over

us, or from the shackles of injustice in a sinful world, or from captivity to the sin that holds us down. In Exodus 3, the Lord tells Moses, “I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians...” In Luke 4, quoting Isaiah, what is it Jesus says about his purpose? “He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.”

Why do we call Jesus our Savior? From what do we need saving? From powers that deform and destroy; from the sin that clings to us; and sometimes from our self-destructive selves, our worst impulses, our hatred. We pray the prayer every Sunday — *Deliver us from evil...*

The fervent 19th-Century abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison read his Bible, all of it, and his reading of Scripture led him to proclaim with full-throated passion for the abolition of slavery. He railed at his detractors who urged patience and moderation: “I do not wish to think, or to speak, or write, with moderation. No! No! Tell a man whose house is on fire to give a moderate alarm; tell him to moderately rescue his wife from the hands of

the ravisher; tell the mother to gradually extricate her babe from the fire into which it has fallen; — but urge me not to use moderation in a cause like the present. I am in earnest — I will not equivocate — I will not excuse — I will not retreat a single inch — AND I WILL BE HEARD.” You go, Willy! Amen!

In perhaps the most egregious betrayal of Christ’s authority and history’s most transparent misappropriation of Scripture, this verse in 1 Peter was used to justify the institution of slavery in America, and the destructive force and effect of that misuse continues to ripple through the tapestry of the nation, tearing at its fabric and staining its legacy.

Our God is a deliverer, releasing the captive, setting free the shackled spirit, and never is our God content with the bondage of humans by humans. Nor does God ask us to be content with oppression and suffering and abuse wherever it is found.

So Peter, blessed Peter, can we step back from that dangerous text for a moment that we may hear an important word you have for us on how Christ can lead us through those dark valleys that come upon us in our journeys?

The Psalmist proclaims, “Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff—they comfort me.”

You know that you don’t have to go to the mountains to find a dark valley. The shadows of the depths can show up on the flattest plains in the glare of the noonday sun. Parents holding onto the dragon’s tail of a child’s addiction. We watched the new Netflix special of comedian John Mulaney in which he shares candidly of his struggles with addiction. To emphasize his desperation for a fix, he shared that his concerned accountant, fearing Mulaney’s self-destruction, wouldn’t give him access to cash, thus only allowing him to purchase by credit. So, strung out and craving, Mulaney went to a Madison Avenue Rolex store, bought a \$12K watch, ran down to a pawn dealer in the diamond district, and sold it for \$6K, in order to have cash for his drug dealer. That’s bleak.

You know about dark valleys. You know about captivity. The oncologist says there are no more options to pursue. The foreclosure notice arrives, and the new job through which you hoped to claw your way back to solvency is downsized. The flood sweeps away your hopes along with your

house. There is an ache you feel at the breakfast room table, looking at the empty chair that will no longer bear the laughter, the quirky eating habits, or the day's highlights of your loved but lost. Illness, fear, loss, anxiety, loneliness, resentment — there are many forms of captivity, and you have no keys to the lock on your cell. You didn't choose this prison, and a jury would probably acquit you of responsibility, yet here you are and escape appears unfeasible. You know about dark valleys. You know about captivity.

“Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff—they comfort me.” Historically comforting words, but perhaps along with you, I want to ask, “How does that work exactly?”

Well, Peter, bless him, Lord, after a shaky start offers a word of strength and purpose and hope for those who walk dark valleys: “For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps. ‘He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.’ When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross,

so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. For you were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls.”

Borrowing an image from the prophet Isaiah’s suffering servant narrative, Peter connects it to the witness of the Jesus we seek to follow. Note that he doesn’t equate suffering with fault or guilt. Rather, he points to whatever dark valleys we enter, and reminds us of one who walked the valley before us and has returned to walk with us through that valley toward the light; a shepherd strengthening our wills to keep walking forward, guarding us against our worst impulses and latent resentments, leading us to the higher ground of mercy and peace. He did not return abuse. He did not threaten. He would not resort to his oppressor’s practices. He entrusted himself to the one who judges us most finally and loves us most fully.

It was this very witness that inspired two of history’s greatest movements through which truth did not bend in the face of evil: Gandhi’s Satyagraha movement of nonviolence in India and MLK’s principles of nonviolence in the Civil Rights movement. If you want to see the power and

witness of Christ standing beside those who walk dark valleys, cue up the YouTube clips of the lunch counter sit-ins in North Carolina and throughout the American south. That is power. That is unrivaled strength. That is the marriage of love and truth that leads from the darkness into the light.

Howard Thurman was a spiritually centered theologian whose writings and witness and teaching were a significant influence upon MLK and the organizers of the Movement. In his autobiography, he remembers the day in the late 1930s when he took his young daughters to Daytona Beach, where he had grown up. As they walked leisurely along the road leading to the Halifax River, they passed the playground of one of the white public schools. “As soon as Olive and Anne saw the swings, they jumped for joy. ‘Look Daddy, let’s go over and swing!’” Thurman said this was the inescapable moment of truth that every black parent in America must face soon or late. What do you say to your child in such a dehumanizing moment, where what is right and just is flagrantly ignored, but the rage of the victim is eclipsed by a father’s concern for his daughter’s safety?

“You can’t swing on those swings.”

“Why, Daddy?”

“When we get home and have some cold lemonade I will tell you.”

So, a little later, lemonade in hand, Anne pressed her father for an answer. How do you tell a little girl how she lives in a world where church-going people look upon her as less than, as unworthy of contact, as deficient? How do you keep her safe and yet, not crush her dreams? How do you give her a sense of her value in God’s eyes? Well, there’s a reason many saw Howard Thurman as a font of wisdom.

His answer to his daughter was this: “It is against the law for us to use those swings, even though it is a public school. Only white children can play there. But it takes the state legislature, the courts, the sheriffs and policemen, the white churches, the mayors, the banks and businesses, and the majority of white people in the state of Florida — it takes all these to keep two little black girls from swinging in those swings. **That** is how important you are! Never forget, the estimate of your own importance and self-worth can be judged by how much power people are willing to use to keep you in the place they have assigned to you. **You** are two very important little girls.” (Howard Thurman, *With Head and Heart*)

Injustice was real and to be resisted, but it was not going to define Thurman's little girls. For they had a shepherd who had walked the dark valleys before them and had returned to walk with them with a flashlight and a map. The dark valley of injustice could not keep them from finding their way.

The dark valleys may cast shadows upon you that threaten you, limit you, wound you, but you have a shepherd who has walked the way of darkness before you and has returned to walk with you and show you a way through. Amen.