

The Gift of God's Presence in the Wilderness

Will you please pray with me: Holy God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be faithful and pleasing unto you, for you are our rock and our salvation. Amen.

It was Thursday afternoon, and I needed a break. I had realized on Wednesday that I needed to throw out my sermon and much of the bulletin because the tone and theme that I had planned three weeks ago were now not going to work. So I had gotten up early to hurriedly make those changes and get them into Larry (so please don't blame him if there's anything off about the bulletin this week). I had also had several phone calls concerning our masking question so that, by early afternoon, my brain was feeling fuzzy and my emotions full.

My cat jumped onto my lap, as if to say, now is the time to tune out and rest. I wearily closed my computer with a sharp click and rubbed my eyes. But my caffeine filled mind was bouncing about in my head, so I glanced at the notifications on my phone and saw that the New York Times was recommending an opinion piece by Miranda Featherstone called, "I'm Tired of Judging Other People's Covid Choices." Had the Holy Spirit been messing with the New York Time's algorithm again or was this some sort of coincidence? I picked up my phone and started to read.

Miranda is a social worker, a mother of a preschooler, a daughter of an immune compromised father. She describes a trip to the zoo with her child, sister, and niece—the weirdness of being surrounded by strangers, of worrying whether they might be carrying something that she might carry back to her dad, the strange feeling of comfort they felt when they left the building they were in and it was just the four of them, outside in the open air. And she relates a story of talking with a woman she met there, as they all tried to figure out where they might buy a cup of tea. Both

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of them shared that they had lost their mothers recently, that they longed for them and missed them.

That made me stop and wonder how many of us are having conversations of loss with random strangers. I thought it was only me. Pastors tend to have something about them that encourages strangers to spontaneously share their grief and anxieties with them, so the fact that I have heard multiple stories of loss, grief and worry this year seemed normal.

But this isn't really normal, is it?

Our church has lost two people that I know of to Covid, but we couldn't hold funerals here because it wasn't safe. In addition to that, in the last two years, several other beloved members have died from other causes and many of us have lost others important to us. Some of those funerals haven't happened, others have been in that weird Zoom world of multiple pictures on a screen, one showing a coffin or a picture of the deceased. And we thank God that Zoom exists so that we can grieve together at all, but we desperately miss being able to hold one another in person. And other funerals have been held in non-church settings, our faces covered with masks, sometimes Covid safety measures prohibiting singing the hymns we know the deceased wanted sung, and without all of our beloved community present for safety reasons. No, this isn't normal.

In her article, Miranda goes on to talk about how easily angered she is about Covid policies, questions of masking or unmasking, distancing or not, in-person or on-line—about how frustrated and angry many of her clients, friends, and family are. I think we get that. And then she makes a point that went straight to my core—

“We feel abandoned...So many of us are broken, bruised, distrustful and longing for warmth. The satisfying bubble of righteous indignation—or even a simmer of anger—about what

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others have done or failed to do is easier to tap than the sharp pain of grief or the dull ache of sorrow and worry.”

And what she longs for, what she is hearing from her clients and from the strangers she meets at the zoo, is community—a sense that she is not alone in her loneliness and fear and grief. She says, “But, I, for one, want to stand on the tallest rock and squawk into the air: a cry of mourning for everything that we have lost. And I want the woman I met...to hear my cry, and I want her to join me.”

I am reminded of the words of our Psalmist, who said:

O God, you are my God, I seek you,
my soul thirsts for you;
my flesh faints for you,
as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.

I know that many of us can relate with Miranda. Underneath our hurt and anger is a terrible loss—a loss and a longing for what used to be, a pit of loss for those who have died, and something like a projected sense of loss for what we won't get back and for those who we are afraid to lose. In this, we are united.

And so I say to you, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come. Come physically or virtually, come in spirit, and find the presence of God, without money and without price. Come and share your grief with one another and with God. Take comfort in the scripture, in the songs, in the bread and the cup, in the story of Jesus' death which led to his resurrection, and will lead to yours. Come and see how God is speaking to you.

Let your soul cling to the Lord, for you are upheld by our God who squawks from the rooftops with us. We are not abandoned on this journey. Thanks be to God. Amen.