

“Rock-a-My Soul”

Psalm 23; Luke 16:19-31 ¹

This sermon is actually the first of our four “Black History Month” sermons, even though we’re not into February yet. Some of the plans we’d made for the Lenten season required me to start these four sermons today in order to get the other things in before Holy Week. While I was on vacation, some of those plans changed, but I haven’t had time to rethink everything since returning to work, and so we’re starting Black History Month today!

As was the case last year, these four sermons have been inspired by Timothy Botts’ book, *Bound for Glory: Celebrating the Gift of African American Spirituals through Expressive Calligraphy*, with reflections by Patricia Raybon (Tyndale, 2011). Today’s spiritual is “Rock-a-My-Soul in the Bosom of Abraham.”

As is often true with spirituals, we don’t seem to know who wrote this song, and it has a number of different sets of lyrics. The lyrics in Botts’ book go like this:

Rock-a-my soul in the bosom of Abraham,
Rock-a-my soul in the bosom of Abraham,
Rock-a-my soul in the bosom of Abraham,
Lord, rock-a-my soul.

My Lord is so high, you can’t get over Him;
So low, you can’t get under Him;
So wide, you can’t get around Him—
You must go in at the door! . . .

His love is so high, you can’t get over it;
So low, you can’t get under it;
So wide, you can’t get around it—
You must go in at the door!

The book presents each spiritual with original calligraphy by Botts, together with a short commentary or prayer by Patricia Raybon. Here’s the prayer she offers for “Rock-a-My-Soul”:

Hold me.
Tight so me and Mamma and
Stella Jo and Lester and
Grammy and Lil Sis and everybody
We can’t find anymore comes back home
To rest our wounded souls
In the crook of your warm arms
Where we’ll be safe again
Forever.
Together.
Cradled.

What images come to your mind as you hear these words? What do you think about when you hear “bosom of Abraham”? The phrase comes from the King James Version of Luke 16:22, where Jesus tells us in the *Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus* that “*the beggar died, and was carried by the angels into Abraham’s bosom.*”

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship of Columbia, Maryland on January 25, 2015.

The word translated “bosom” actually means something more like “lap” or “side,” which is how the verse is usually translated today. In the parable, the metaphor is derived from the first-century custom of reclining on couches while eating. When eating in this fashion, each guest leaned on his left elbow so as to leave his right arm for eating, and when two or more men lay on the same couch, the head of one man was near the chest of the man who lay behind, and he was therefore said “to lie in the bosom” of the other.² Although the phrase, “bosom of Abraham” occurs only in Luke 16:22, and only in the King James Version and versions closely related to it, the metaphor has found its way into fairly common use as popularized by this spiritual.

The *Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus* actually heads off in a rather different direction from that suggested by this metaphor, so this morning we’re not going to pursue the parable itself so much as the metaphor that inspired the spiritual. More particularly, we’re going off in the direction suggested by Patricia Raybon’s prayer:

Hold me.
Tight so me and Mamma and
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We can’t find anymore comes back home
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As I read this prayer, I hear a prayer for comfort, for presence, and for safety in the midst of a world where many things go very, very wrong. And when I think about such ideas, my heart goes quickly to what are perhaps the best-known verses in all the Bible. My heart heads toward the Twenty-Third Psalm.

I think Psalm 23 is so loved because nearly all who read it, whatever their age, culture, or circumstances, find here a range and depth of spiritual insight that both satisfies and possesses their souls. These verses are the fruit of a mature heart that, having passed through many troubles and having fought many battles, has found that intimate relationship with God that is the real goal of our faith.

The Twenty-Third Psalm has been called “the Nightingale of poems,” for, like the Nightingale that is the backdrop for today’s PowerPoint, it continues to sing in the darkness of life. The Nightingale is fairly plain in appearance, but it has a beautiful song and frequently sings in the darkness of night, when other birds have fallen silent. So it is with this short poem.

You probably know that Psalm 23 has three sections. Verses 1-3 have to do with “green pastures” and “still waters.” Verse 4 speaks of the “valley of the shadow of death.” And verses 5-6 tell of “a table in the presence of my enemies.” We’ll look at each section in turn.

The Green Pastures. *The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name’s sake.*

² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bosom_of_Abraham

Each of us probably has an image of God particularly our own – an image that helps us to see and understand God best. Yet when we meet the shepherd on some high moor, sleepless, farsighted, weather-beaten, leaning on his staff, and looking out over his scattered sheep with every one of them on his heart, it's not hard to see why the Jews gave the title "Shepherd" to their king, and why Jesus called Himself the Good Shepherd (John 10:11).

Our Good Shepherd is characterized by constant vigilance, fearless courage, and patient love. As we yield to this Shepherd, more and more we find Him to be our Home. And yet, even as we find ourselves more and more at home in Christ, we also find ourselves from time to time in places we do not wish to be

The Dark Valley. *Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.*

I think you will agree that it is verse 4 that has "made" this Psalm, because verse 4 is true to life as we know it. The fact is that, however we may try to soften the expression, we all know what this Valley is.

This Valley yawns before even the youngest life. Each of us, without exception, must eventually cross it, and the darkest part of it must be crossed without earthly help. Nobody else can do it for us. Each of us awaits the summons that is uniquely our own.

Yet, despite this knowledge, for those of us who are in Christ, we also know that our lives have a good ending in store. We know that Death recognizes its Sovereign and retreats before His approach. We may not have earthly help in the Dark Valley, but we do not walk there alone.

Thomas Merton's "Prayer of Desolation" has gotten me through many dark valleys, and it makes this same point. The prayer goes like this:

My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it. Therefore I will trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.³

This same idea is expressed in Matt Redman's worship song, "Blessed Be Your Name." Some of you know it:

Blessed be Your Name in the land that is plentiful
Where Your streams of abundance flow, **Blessed be Your Name.**

And blessed be Your Name when I'm found in the desert place,
Though I walk through the wilderness, **Blessed be Your Name.**

*Every blessing You pour out I'll turn back to praise,
And when the Darkness closes in, Lord, still I will say
Blessed be the Name of the Lord, blessed be Your Name.
Blessed be the Name of the Lord, blessed be Your glorious Name!*

³ Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999), p. 79.

Blessed be Your Name when the sun's shining down on me,
When the world's all as it should be, **Blessed be Your Name.**

And **blessed be Your Name** on the road marked with suffering,
Though there's pain in the offering, **Blessed be Your Name.**

You give and take away, You give and take away;
My heart will choose to say, Lord, **Blessed be Your Name.**

Let me give you one more metaphor for Psalm 23:4. Dr. Gardner Taylor, known as "The Dean of American Preaching," was pastor of the Concord Baptist Church of Christ in Brooklyn for more than 40 years, and he helped Dr. King found the Progressive National Baptist Convention during the days of the Civil Rights Movement. A native of Louisiana, Dr. Taylor was still a young preacher when he spoke at a small, rural black church near his home back during the Great Depression.

Electricity was just coming to that part of the country, and the church where he was preaching that night had just one light bulb hanging down from the ceiling to light up the whole sanctuary. Dr. Taylor was preaching away, when in the middle of his sermon, the electricity went out. The building fell into darkness, and Dr. Taylor was unsure what to do. As he hesitated, one of the elderly deacons sitting in the back of the church cried out, 'Preach on, preacher! We can still see Jesus in the dark!'

Verse 4 reminds us that sometimes the only time we can really see Jesus is when life gets very, very dark. And the Good News of the Gospel is that, whether we can see Jesus in the dark or not, Jesus can see us in the dark, and He walks between us and the Edge.⁴

In the Presence of My Enemies. *Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.*

Fred and Cheryl went to Haiti in 1985 to pick up a little girl they had adopted. Addie was five-years-old. Her parents had been killed in a traffic accident that left her an orphan. As she walked across the tarmac to board the plane, little Addie reached up and slipped her hands into the hands of her new parents. Fred and Cheryl treasured this "birth" moment, as Addie's innocent, fearless trust seemed almost as miraculous as the times when their two sons had been born more than a decade earlier.

That evening, back home in Arizona, Fred and Cheryl sat down to their first supper together with their new daughter. There was a platter of pork chops and a bowl of mashed potatoes on the table. After the first serving, their two teenage sons kept refilling their plates, and soon the pork chops had disappeared and the potatoes were gone. Addie had never seen so much food on one table in her whole life, and her eyes grew big as she watched how quickly her new brothers caused it all to disappear.

As the food disappeared, Fred and Cheryl noticed that Addie grew very quiet, and they realized that something was wrong. Cheryl guessed that it had to do with the disappearing food. She suspected that because Addie had grown up hungry most of the time, as the food disappeared from the table, Addie could be worried that it might be a long time before there was anything else to eat.

⁴ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gardner_C._Taylor; Timothy George told this story in his sermon, "Unseen Footprints," Preaching Today Audio, issue 290.

Cheryl took Addie’s hand and led her to the bread drawer and pulled it out, showing her a back-up of three loaves. She took her to the refrigerator and showed her bottles of milk and orange juice, fresh vegetables, jars of jelly and jam and peanut butter, a carton of eggs, and a package of bacon. She took her to the pantry and showed her the bins of potatoes, onions, and squash, together with shelf after shelf of canned goods.

Cheryl opened the freezer and showed Addie three or four chickens, a few packages of fish, and two cartons of ice cream. She reassured Addie that there was plenty of food in the house, and that no matter how much her new brothers ate and no matter how fast they ate it, there was more where that came from. She would never go hungry again.⁵

That was thirty years ago. About three years ago, a Muslim man described how he came to commit his life to following Isa al Masih—Jesus the Messiah—and it also had to do with food. Here’s how he told the story:

“One night the only food my wife and I had was a small portion of macaroni. My wife prepared it very nicely. Then one of her friends knocked on the door. I told myself, *The macaroni is not sufficient for even the two of us, so how will it be enough for three of us?* But because we have no other custom, we opened the door, and she came in to eat with us.

“While we were eating, the macaroni started to multiply; it became full in the bowl. I suspected that something was wrong with my eyes, so I started rubbing them. I thought maybe my wife hid some macaroni under the small table, so I checked, but there was nothing. My wife and I looked at each other, but because the guest was there we said nothing.

“Afterward I lay down on the bed, and as I slept, Isa came to me and asked me, ‘*Do you know who multiplied the macaroni?*’ I said, ‘I don’t know.’ He said, ‘*I am Isa al Masih [Jesus, the Messiah]. If you follow me, not only the macaroni but your life will be multiplied.*’”⁶

And that’s still the promise today, my friend. Choosing to follow Jesus doesn’t exempt us from traveling the Dark Valleys of life. But choosing to follow Jesus does mean that we will never, ever, walk through those valleys alone. Choosing to follow Jesus means that He will keep His promise to provide quiet, restful waters, Presence in our Darkness, and food in the presence of our enemies.

His love is so high, you can’t get over it;
So low, you can’t get under it;
So wide, you can’t get around it—
You must go in at the door!

As an old Scotsman put it when thinking of the Twenty-Third Psalm, “The Lord is my shepherd, aye, and more than that, he has two fine collie dogs, Goodness and Mercy. With Him before and them behind, even poor sinners like you and me can hope to win home at last.”

My friends, God is for us. Who can be against us?

God is housekeeper. There will be bread enough.

God reigns. We are glory-bound!

⁵ Eugene Peterson, *Practice Resurrection* (Eerdmans, 2010), pp. 159-160.

⁶ Gene Daniels, “Worshipping Jesus in the Mosque,” *Christianity Today* (January-February 2013).