

“The Grace of Breathing”

Rev. David Gregory

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Pentecost 22



Readings

Psalm 23

reimagined in *The Message*

by Eugene Peterson

God, my shepherd!

I don't need a thing.

You have bedded me down in lush meadows,
you find me quiet pools to drink from.

True to your word,
you let me catch my breath
and send me in the right direction.

Even when the way goes through

Death Valley,

I'm not afraid

when you walk at my side.

Your trusty shepherd's crook
makes me feel secure.

You serve me a six-course dinner
right in front of my enemies.

You revive my drooping head;
my cup brims with blessing.

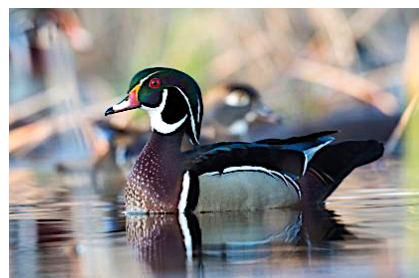
Your beauty and love chase after me
every day of my life.

I'm back home in the house of God
for the rest of my life.

The Peace of Wild Things

Wendell Berry

When despair for the world grows in me
and I wake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.
I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought of grief.
I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting with their light. For a time
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.



Today we gather with a simple invitation and that is to BREATHE. Take a moment Shut it all down.... Find a quiet place within yourself and just BREATHE. As I often say in our smaller group spiritual practices, we cannot change the past, and we cannot control the future. What we have is the space where all of life is lived, which is the present moment. When we invite you to “stay present,” what we’re really saying is to release all regrets from the past, all anxieties about the future, and just be here now. Breath is the key. Noticing the breath, staying with the breath, and finding your way back to it when your mind wanders, this is the key to many spiritual traditions and practices.

Western Christianity may have misplaced this key for several hundred years, but thankfully it has been found again. Contemplative practice has become a primary focus in our community, because it releases us from the constraints of theological systems, and enables us to enter the expansiveness of spiritual experience and awareness. It may seem foreign to some, but for me, practices like meditation, centering prayer, and breath work have become more than avenues of awakening. They are my life preserver in the stormy seas of shifting paradigms.

Recently we took a break from our work with the church and had some restful time away, traveling south to the desert before coming back and heading north for a long weekend on the Sonoma coast. While away, I spent more time focused on hummingbirds, sunsets, and ocean waves than listening to evening newscasts or reading the opinion pages. It’s not that I don’t care about what is going on in the world; I do care very much. But I’ve also come to the conclusion that I need to take some time to care for myself. It means pushing the pause button on my sympathetic nervous system. It means filtering out the noise for a little while. It means giving time and attention to breath, lying down in green pastures, and staring deeply into some quiet waters. These are the things that restore our souls. It is a life to which our shepherd calls us.

I doubt that there is any piece of the Hebrew or Christian scriptures more well-known, more captivating, or more memorized than Psalm 23. It is often called the shepherd’s psalm, and the simplicity of its imagery takes us to the restorative places that we long for. It is this recreative tone that drew me to it this week. The poetic quality of the text is without parallel, but I chose to share it today through the paraphrase of Eugene Peterson, and not because I do not love the words as expressed in the King James Bible. But I thought we could benefit from familiar thoughts expressed in a new and fresh way. The artfulness of antiquated language can be deeply evocative, but so can the vernacular. I would encourage you to spend time with both. This is a moment where we want to draw upon every spiritual resource at our disposal, and what could be more grounding than a divine shepherd who lovingly and compassionately refreshes our souls, who places us in the most life-giving of pastoral scenes, and brings us to a place of nourishment, security, and deep, deep rest? And while we are reaching for more of these resources, we do well to visit Wendell Berry’s poem *The Peace of Wild Things*, brought to my attention this week by our own Julie Taylor.

This poem is particularly helpful because it begins in the place where a lot of us dwell right now, this place of “fear of what my life and my children’s lives may be.” In his “despair for the world,” Berry comes to “lie down where the wood drake rests,” and into “the presence of still water.” In this experience, he finds the grace of the world that makes him free. I sense in these thoughts a new piece of scripture, as helpful and life-giving as anything I’ve seen or heard. It does not deny the presence of

negative emotions like despair, fear, and grief. Rather it gives them a place at the table, lest they come out sideways later on. And fully feeling these painful things, he steps into the beautiful world of wild things and in a very present moment receives their gifts of peace and beauty, which are the graces of the world.

Think of the word “grace” as a synonym for “gift,” and then think of a gift that you have received, one that was delightful, unexpected, and perfect for you. It might have been the perfect piece of clothing or artwork; it might have been some beautiful flowers shared for no particular reason. Or it could be a simple embrace from someone you love. There is no payment required, just the simple act of receiving. The grace of the world is just like that, waiting outside our doors in the beauty of the hillsides, waiting in the trusting eyes of a beloved pet, or in long-awaited raindrops that fall to a grateful earth.

We are living through a period of time which is without parallel in our remembrance. My words today are not meant as a simple distraction to help you forget what’s going on, and I do not devalue the troubling emotions that many of us feel. But I would love it if we could come to a recognition of all the gifts we have been given, and simply open them.

There are immeasurable graces in the universe, gifts that flow to us like refreshing streams, constantly flowing with no sign of scarcity or drought. Could we today enter them, drop our oars, and let them carry us to all of the blessings that exist downstream? Collectively, let us step into the generous place of the present moment, and breathe our way through to a brand new day.

