

A View from the Valley, a sermon in response to Psalm 23, John 10:11-18, and 1 John 3:16-24, by Rev. Scot McCachren for Hilltop Church, Mendham, NJ, April 21, 2024 (B Easter 4).

I was in my early twenties – I think 23... Looking back on it, I think that’s a pretty interesting age to be. You’re **old** enough to be responsible for yourself, and to be finding your own way in the world... +++ Yet, you’re **young** enough that sometimes you can step back when the going gets rough to let someone else to step in and take care of things for you – like they did *just a few years ago*, when you were a teenager. Like those times when you’re reminded that the world is a scary place. +++ It’s also an age when you really start thinking for yourself and, sometimes, you have a chance to **re**-think, one-by-one, things that you’ve believed were **really true** ever since you were a child... >>> and often realize that many of them don’t even make sense. Like – it takes gum 7 years to digest in your stomach if you swallow it... or if you eat lots of carrots, you’ll be able to see better in the dark... or, maybe, that ostriches bury their heads in the sand when they’re scared (none of these are true –look it up). +++ It’s funny how things that you just accept as being true as a kid – you just keep on accepting as an adult – until you have a reason to step back and *think* about them from a different perspective. +++

I taught a diversity class once where we called this reopening the **filing cabinets** of your mind – filing cabinets that have become old and stale... and need some updating... **You** know, think of *your* office – or your home... you might have filing cabinets all along a wall somewhere – and every file in there is still just how it was the last time you took it out, read it, maybe added something to it, and put it back in the cabinet. You haven’t thought about it since then – you don’t need to since it’s neatly filed away – so you assume it will still make sense the next time you open it. +++ But how many times do you open a file, take a look, and realize +++ **NOPE!?!** +++ What was I thinking?... Or, Who paid **this** bill?... Or, Did I really used to think that???. +++ Files need to be gone through and reevaluated from time to time. In my class, we talked about pulling back out our mental files that are filled with prejudices we learned at an early age, without even realizing it – assumptions that people in **this** group are unreliable, or people in **that** group are dangerous,... ..or **those** people are sinful. +++ It’s very **enlightening**, and freeing, when we pull **those** files, – when we evaluate them for ourselves, with clear, adult, thinking – and then **update** them before filing them away again for later use. +++ It frees us from unfair preconceptions. – And it gives us a radically different way of thinking.

For me, a lot of that started coming together that day, when I was 23... A North Carolina boy, I was in my second year of graduate school in New Jersey. I had just met Linda a few months ago. One day, my dad called – he was a Theatre Arts professor and was planning a trip with a group of students to Washington, DC, to see a new production of Chekhov’s “The Cherry Orchard” at the Folger Theatre. My mom would be with him, too... Now, every minute of the trip had been carefully planned, including the usual Washington sightseeing and tours. Maybe Linda and I could come down and meet them there – spend the day – maybe see the show. Their very full schedule wouldn’t allow much time alone to catch up, but it should be fun. +++ So, when the day arrived, we climbed into my old Mustang and headed for DC... Now, that car was almost 20 years old and barely limping along. – I really shouldn’t even have been driving it. – +++ I should have known better... But off we went. +++ Now, I don’t remember *exactly* where we were when **it** happened... +++ We were about an hour and a half short of Washington when the car stopped working. – Forever... For the sake of time, I’ll cut to the chase – I learned that I had “thrown a rod” in my engine, which meant nothing to me except, I came to understand, that **the engine was ruined**. +++ So, who did I call for help? Yep – my dad – the one with every minute of that day scheduled with students all over Washington. – Meals planned. – A show to go to... But that’s what you **do** at that age, right?... When the going gets tough? You call for backup – preferably backup of the parental kind. +++ I didn’t know it yet – but this would be a day when I would open several of my old, outdate, mental files – give them a thorough review – (even realize they contradicted each other) – and update them accordingly.

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My dad came – 90 minutes each way. He met us at the garage I had walked to – where the car had been towed. +++ So, Linda and I had an hour and a half to sit – and wait. +++ It gave me plenty of time to open the file called “How People React When Their Trip Is Ruined.” It was not a pleasant record to review. I began envisioning just how angry and disappointed my dad was going to be – maybe how he’d remind me just how screwed up the

whole group's schedule was now, thanks to me. +++ I was pretty miserable – and pretty apprehensive. +++ +++
+++ Finally, he arrived – alone in a big white 16-passenger van. +++ The first thing he said... was... “Are you
OK? I'm sorry it took me so long to get here.” +++ +++ My dad was there at the garage with us for a while, and
ended up selling the car to them instead of buying a new engine for it. +++ As we climbed into the van to finish
our trip to Washington, I apologized for ruining their trip, and I to this day I've remembered his response:
“Ruining our trip??? What are you talking about? We've been looking forward to seeing ya'll more than
anything else on the trip. – I just excited to be *with* you now. Your mother can't wait to see you, too...
Everything else is just stuff, and it will work out one way or the other – stuff always does.” +++

Looking back now, with the advantage of hindsight, I realize that I opened the wrong mental files during those
90 minutes. Instead of “How People React When Their Trip Is Ruined,” and generic “How Parents Handle
Things” files, I should have opened “Things I Know About My Dad,” – because those files held *very* different
information. He's not really someone that even *gets* angry much. And I *should* have **known** what to expect after
living with him for so many years. +++ I think instead of paying attention to the firsthand evidence I had about
 that... particular... person , I relied on my filing cabinets – which were filled with **assumptions and**
misinformation... about impatience and lack of understanding... about generic parents and generic children...
about priorities... and about how people react when they get really, *really*... **really** inconvenienced. +++ +++ I
expected judgment that day – but instead, I was greeted with love – with kindness – and protection. +++ It didn't
even matter – the car problem, the 3 hours of driving, the altered plans – *none* of it mattered. It was like it hadn't
even happened. +++ +++ And so, as I've said, I opened a number of files that day – to evaluate my assumptions
– make some notes – update the record – and store the revised version. (Including a thin but growing file called
“How To Be a Dad,” though I was 7 years away from becoming one. +++ ... +++ That day gave me a brand new
perspective... I realized that, **yes** – we **are often** – if not *always* – right in the middle of our troubles – we **always**
face adversity. +++ **But we don't have to live in adversity. – Adversity is not our home.** +++ >>> **When we**
have love..., love is our home.<<< – Love is a **cushion** around everything else – and it really **can** be the starting
point for our reaction to... everything – Being loved protects us from fear – it's a hedge against despair. So,
yes, sometimes we'll fall – sometimes we'll suffer – sometimes we'll grieve – but our experience of life does not
have to be **ABOUT SUFFERING**. – It's just *part* of a much larger story – a story that's **really about** the gift...,
the possibilities..., the blessings... of LOVE. +++ ... ||| +++ When there are two ways to go... Love Wins.
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I think the psalmist is inviting us to have exactly this kind of revelation in the beloved 23rd Psalm... Inviting us
to pull out all our files on God, – to examine them, – and to revise them as necessary before filing them away
again. +++ Just like I was sitting there nervously waiting for my dad to show up at the garage – I think many of
our outdated, unexamined, files – tell us that our God is primarily a god of judgment – a god of punishment – a
god more concerned with counting our sins and holding them against us than with soothing our fears with...
generous grace... and unrelenting forgiveness. +++ I mean – that's the **popular** image, isn't it? That's the God
we learn about everyday on our news, from people who *seem* to know what they are talking about. – And, it's
the God that's driving people away from the church in droves: +++ a God that condemns **these** people because of
where they worship, +++ a God that turns away from those people because of who they love, +++ a God that
blesses some people because of which nation they were born in, +++ a God who **loses patience** with restless
Seekers, not yet able to *say* exactly what they believe. +++ +++ It's no wonder we collectively spend so much
time in fear of how God will react – about how mad or disappointed God is going to be with us – about how
we're going to hell if we aren't “good.” +++ That's the data about our Lord that's written and reinforced in
 mental files across our nation and our world; data that even many churchgoers have yet to examine and update.
– It's **misinformation** that too often goes unchallenged in the public sphere. +++ **But..., the Psalmist celebrates,**
whatever your expectation, whatever you've heard, when you invite the Lord into your life ..., what
happens???? +++ +++ +++ Instead of **judgment**, what do we hear? ... “Are you OK? ... I'm so happy to see
you; it just makes my day.” +++ The Good Shepherd brings us to... Green pastures... Still waters... Restored
souls.

And yes – from time to time we **do** walk through the “the shadow of the valley of death.” +++ **But our shepherd’s protection is far greater than that valley.** +++ In fact – I want to take a moment to look at that one short sentence to see something that’s happening in the original Hebrew language that we can’t see in English. +++ First of all – not only do we walk in the valley, but we do so **all** the time. The verb for “walk”, *é-lākh*, is written here in what’s called the **qal** form – which is an imperfect verb form. What does that mean? It means it’s an **ongoing uncompleted action**. So, it’s not “on those *occasions* when I walk in the valley” or “*if I happen* to be walking.” No – I **AM** walking in the darkest valley. And I’m doing it *all the time*. +++ But... it’s the same with “fear,” *éē-rah*, “I fear no evil, *all the time*... So, my walking in the darkest valley **and** my response to it are ongoing – the shepherd does not prevent it – **it’s a real part of life**. Sounds right so far. +++ BUT – let’s see what else happens... “For you are **with** me; your rod and your staff – they **comfort** me...” these are *also* imperfect. So, my shepherd is *always* comforting me as I am *always* in the valley... **But**... – *and please bear with me here, this bit of technicality is really Good News* – the imperfect of the verb for “comfort”, *ya-na-chámu*, is constructed in a form called **piel** form instead of **qal**. +++ What does that mean? +++ In Hebrew, these forms give a sense of intensity. So, for example, depending on the form, the same verb could mean, “to kill,” “to murder,” or “to massacre.” +++ Qal is less intense... Piel is the most intense. +++ Now, this may just seem like grammatical wordplay to us – but in Hebrew it’s an obvious difference that the reader would absolutely notice: **The Good Shepherd’s presence and comfort are much more powerful than walking in the dark valley, or fear.** +++ So, yes – our lives on earth *always* **IN** the valley – we *always* face the shadow of death – we *always* face grief – we *always* face evil – we *always* face fear. +++ But we don’t **live** in the valley – **it is not our home** – because our shepherd comforts us with... **irresistible... DIVINE..., ETERNAL comfort...**, **and** leads us beside still waters..., **and** restores our souls... +++ So, thanks to the Lord, our Shepherd, our **VIEW FROM THE VALLEY** is not caste down into the depths of the shadows, – down into despair... Our view... – even in the darkest times – is UP – up into our loving shepherd’s face – up from the valley to the mountain tops... – up to the clouds... – up into the face of heaven. +++

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In the Gospel of John, we learn today that Jesus Christ **IS** the Good Shepherd – a shepherd who knows and loves his sheep – and who lays his life down for them... **FOR US**. +++ And not **just** for us who know him and follow him *now*. Other sheep will answer his call as well – sheep who don’t yet know the sound of his voice – so there will be one flock, and one shepherd. +++ Christ has come to save us ALL, – not just a select few. – Christ has come to save the **world!!** +++ +++ And, as Christ Followers, it’s **our** job to get that message to a world that doesn’t know – or is forgetting – the lush extravagance of the Good Shepherd’s care; to invite the unchurched, and the **de**churched, invite them to reopen their mental files on Jesus Christ and make a note: Love Wins.

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So, how do we respond to **that call**? – What should **we DO** now that we are comforted, and fed, and saved by Christ, the Good Shepherd? ... We get that answer in our reading from 1 John: We *know* love because of the love Christ showed when he “laid down his life for us – **and so we ought to lay down our lives for one another.**” +++ 1 John is a call for us to help those in need – and not just with words but with action. To provide food and shelter... companionship... and comfort. +++ It’s a call to break apart old habits for the sake of a **vigorous hospitality** so welcoming that it reawakens a yearning for God. 1 John calls us to “have boldness before God” as we serve, love, and break bread with our neighbors. +++ +++ As we are **sheep** in the **Lord’s** flock – so we are called to be **shepherds**. +++ +++ >>> My siblings in Christ, here in this Easter Season, let us remind a thirsty world that, in Christ, our cups run *over* with joy – they bubble up and over the top – knowing that in his crucifixion – in his resurrection – in his eternal love and grace – our Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ, delivers us from the Darkest Valley – forever.

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In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen