

## "Path and Refuge"

Rev. Peter Bynum

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<sup>1</sup>*The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.*

<sup>2</sup>*He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters;*

<sup>3</sup>*he restores my soul.*

*He leads me in right paths for his name's sake.*

<sup>4</sup>*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.*

<sup>5</sup>*You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.*

<sup>6</sup>*Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD my whole life long.*

(Psalm 23)

William Brown, one of my seminary professors who has written an influential book on the many poetic metaphors in the book of Psalms, says that there are two images that stand above all the others. He also says that these two images are connected... that each needs the other... and that, together, they provide the "theological shape" to the psalter as a whole. Not surprisingly, the psalm that is known most widely, and cherished most deeply, the psalm that we just heard, speaks through both of these metaphors.

The first one is the image of a place of **refuge**. When we read the 23<sup>rd</sup> psalm, we can feel the peace it describes. With the Lord as our shepherd, we are able to lie down in green pastures and draw from still waters. A table is set for us to ease our hunger, our cup overflows, and we can rest in safety and comfort, because we know we are protected by the rod and staff of the Good Shepherd. Our need for this kind of security is described in many psalms, like Psalm 46, which proclaims that "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble," and Psalm 18, which says that "The Lord is my rock, and my fortress, and my deliverer; my God, my strength, in whom I will trust... the horn of my salvation, and my high tower." As children of God we look to God to provide places of safety and refuge in a hostile and perilous world.

However, this powerful image is often paired with another, and that is the image of **pathway**. We cannot spend our entire lives at home, behind closed doors. A life well-lived, a life of faith, must be found and experienced out on the road. Looking again to the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, this is the implied but obvious vocation of all sheep who follow the shepherd. Where does he lead us? He leads us "in right paths for his name's sake." And as we walk those paths, we are not guaranteed to be safe. We will, at times, be in the presence of enemies. Out there on the road, we will, at times, be exposed to peril and vulnerability. But we will also be exposed to opportunity, to adventure, exploration, and discovery. To follow the Good Shepherd is to be led out and sent out in Christ's name, following as best we can the path that He has charted for us.<sup>1</sup>

And so we see how these two images combine to, as my professor says, give theological shape to all the psalms. And not just the psalms, but to our lives. This is the ying and yang of faith – going out

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<sup>1</sup> Deut. 5:33



on the path of life, and coming home to refuge. Walking the paths of life, we need time and space to rest. But rest and safety feeds us and prepares us to go right back out again.

This morning I want to share a story that I hope sheds some light on how this can work. We have to go back to 1976, when I was a second grader in Greensboro, NC. My parents were building a new house for our family, but the sale of our current home had to close before our new one was ready. We spent the interim, which was just about a week, in a lovely establishment called the Journey's End Motel. It was located on a bustling commercial thoroughfare known as Battleground Avenue, which I think is notable, given what we have already said about pathways being potentially dangerous places. It was the local route of US Highway 220, with lots of traffic to local businesses and also people just passing through. The Journey's End Motel was an old school motor lodge right out of the 1950's that catered to these travelers. All of the rooms opened out onto the parking lot.

It was pretty basic, but to a seven-year-old it was a grand adventure. The thing that really sealed the deal for me was that the TV in our room got about 20 channels. That seems quaint now, but to a second grader in the 70's, it was extravagant luxury.

A few days later it was explained to me that I would be taking a new bus home from school that day because our new house was ready. School administrators were great and guided me to the right bus. The bus stopped about half a block from our new house. I got off and ran to the kitchen door. But when I went inside, there was no one home. This was not the plan.

Interestingly, I do not remember feeling scared or panicked. To my 7-year-old brain, it was a mystery, a puzzle to be solved. And, based on the facts as I knew them, unassailable kid logic quickly led me to one ironclad conclusion (that my mother must still be back at the Journey's End Motel packing up the last of our stuff) and one equally obvious course of action (that I should immediately go and meet her there). So, I walked down our freshly poured concrete driveway and turned right. I walked about ten blocks to the end of our street. Taking another right turn down Cone Boulevard, I followed the sidewalk all the way up Battleground Avenue. At that intersection the sidewalk ended, because no one in their right mind would ever walk along Battleground Avenue. To stay out of the five lanes of traffic to my right, I hopped prickly bushes and traversed parking lots. All told, from my house to the motel, it was a journey of about 3 miles.

And I have no idea how long that walk took, because I was having the time of my life. In the language of the psalms, I was out on the pathway in all the best ways. It was a glorious, intoxicating adventure. About halfway down Cone Boulevard I even found a discarded bicycle flag lying next to the sidewalk -- you remember those orange, triangular flags that you could put on bicycles? I had always wanted one. And now I had one! To be honest, this one didn't actually have a flag on it... it had been ripped off... and one end of the flexible pole was cracked... but I didn't care. It was still awesome, and for the remainder of my journey through the wilderness I was like Moses, walking with my busted, orange staff, parting traffic at major intersections. The sun was shining, it was a beautiful day, and I was out on the path of life discovering the world. And I just knew my parents would be so proud of me, having solved the mystery and taken care of things all by myself.

Of course, when I got to the Journey's End Motel, I found that the door to our room was locked. When I knocked, there was no answer. Lesser minds may have concluded that the whole "mom-is-at-the-hotel" hypothesis had been disproven, but I concluded that she had just left to take another load over to the new house. Surely, she would be back soon. Best to wait here... in this location... with the cable television. So I walked across the parking lot to the motel office. I could barely reach the little bell, but I gave it a ring. After a while, a clerk came out and peered down over the counter, wondering what it the world this kid could possibly want.

"May I please have a key to Room 104?"

He paused, shrugged, pulled the key off of the board, and handed it to me. Didn't bat an eye. Didn't look at a register. I guess he figured that I must be legit, because why in the world would a 7-year-old be asking for a key? So I walked back across the parking lot, let myself in to Room 104, flipped on a "Felix the Cat" cartoon, and settled in to wait for my parents to arrive. I was tasting freedom and adventure like never before. Life out on the road was amazing!

Meanwhile... my parents were on a much darker and more terrifying path. They were in the dark valley, the valley of the shadow of death. They were praying for refuge, for a fortress in the storm. Like me, they had been trying to solve a mystery. As it turned out, there had been some confusion about the bus schedule. I had arrived earlier than expected, so when I got home mom was just a few doors down talking to a new neighbor. They knew that I had gotten on the correct bus, and the driver confirmed that I had gotten off at the right stop. But no one had any idea where I was.

So, while I was hopping bushes along the edge of Battleground Avenue, my parents were phoning in a missing child alert. While I was watching cartoons in the Journey's End Motel, my mom was sitting in a police cruiser, listening as officers on the radio described the little red jacket I had worn to school that morning.

In the middle of my third episode of Felix the Cat, the green rotary phone in the motel room rang. When I answered it, there was a stunned silence on the other end of the line. Then a woman's voice asked incredulously "**Peter?** *Is that you?*" When I said yes, her instructions were quick and urgent: "Stay right there!" The phone on the other end slammed down.

About a minute later, I heard wailing sirens coming down Battleground Avenue. I got to the window just in time to see several police cars squeal into the parking lot with lights flashing and sirens at full volume. And I thought to myself, "This is the coolest day there has ever been!" And then I recognized my dad's blue Volkswagen turning in. Somehow the inkling had come to him that, as crazy as it might sound, his son might just have walked all the way back to the Journey's End.

Today seemed like a good day to tell this story, because today we are taking time to remember what it means to live in the garden of God's creation. On the one hand, that garden is a place that beckons us, invites us, even requires us to go out. As the old saying goes, "a ship is safe in a harbor, but that is not what ships are built for." Human beings are meant to go out and live: to work, to play, to make discoveries, to form friendships, and to find love, and meaning, and purpose. We are built to be out on the road, designed to crave adventure, meant to follow our own true paths.

But we are also creatures who get weary and need rest from our labors. When dangers rear their ugly head, we need places where we feel safe. When I was older my mother shared with me that one her clearest memories from that day was sitting in the squad car and hearing the news come over the radio that the little boy who had been lost was now found. As the relief washed over her, the officer driving the car somberly admitted that, most of the time, stories like this one did not end well. In fact, this was the first time he had ever heard one that had a happy ending.

This is the nature of our existence: joy and sadness... pleasure and pain... adventure and peril. Whether we are out on the path or seeking safety in God's refuge, this is the theological shape of our lives in God's world.

Which brings us, on this Earth Care Sunday, to our new Native Plant & Pollinator Garden. It too is shaped by these complementary metaphors. When you see the garden a few minutes from now, you will observe that it is organized around a path. This garden is made to be walked, because as children of God we too are built to walk. This garden is one of the ways we are trying to be out in the world, working to do our part to tend and keep the garden of God's creation. Understanding that the delicate ecological balance of our world is under assault from bad governmental policies and wasteful practices... recognizing that bees, butterflies, and other pollinators are declining in ways

that threaten the cycle of life that God has created... our new garden is a way for us to answer God's command that we take care of the natural home we have been given. As advocates and gardeners, this is a way for us to be out there in the best ways, walking the path of faithful service.

At the same time, that garden is a place to be reminded of God's loving care. In its peace, we find respite from the world. In its beauty, we are inspired to pray. In the pattern of plants living, blooming, falling down and rising up again, we connect with God's plan for every living thing. On the path, in need of refuge, this is and always be the theological shape of our lives of faith, until our journeys end. ***Amen.***