



Everything has a rhythm, everything dances

*A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Sarah Hedgis
The Fourth Sunday of Easter ~ May 3, 2020*

Acts 2:42-47

They devoted themselves to the apostles' instructions and the communal life, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. A reverent fear overtook them all, for many wonders and signs were being performed by the apostles. Those who believed lived together, shared all things in common; they would sell their property and goods, sharing the proceeds with one another as each had need. They met in the Temple and they broke bread together in their homes every day. With joyful and sincere hearts they took their meals in common, praising God and winning the approval of all the people. Day by day, God added to their number those who were being saved.

Psalm 23

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| 1 The Holy One is my shepherd; *
I shall not be in want. | your rod and your staff, they comfort me. |
| 2 You make me lie down in green pastures *
and lead me beside still waters. | 5 You spread a table before me
in the presence of those who trouble me; *
you have anointed my head with oil,
and my cup is running over. |
| 3 You revive my soul *
and guide me along right pathways
for the sake of your Name. | 6 Surely your goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life, *
and I will dwell in the house of God for ever. |
| 4 Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I shall fear no evil; *
for you are with me; | |

1 Peter 2:19-25

For grace is given if you endure unjust punishment for your conscience in the name of God. What credit is there if you patiently endure harsh punishment as a result of your sin? But if you put up with suffering for doing what is right, this is acceptable in God's eyes. It was for this that you were called, since Christ suffered for you in just this way and left you an example. You must follow in the footsteps of Christ, who did no wrong, who spoke no deceit, who did not return insults when insulted, who, when made to suffer, did not counter with threats. Instead, Christ trusted the One who judges justly. It was Christ's own body that brought our sins to the cross, so that all of us, dead to sin, could live in accord with God's will. By Christ's wounds you are healed. At one time you were straying like sheep, but now you have returned to the Shepherd, the Guardian of your souls.

John 10:1-10

"The truth of the matter is, whoever doesn't enter the sheepfold through the gate but climbs in some other way is a thief and a robber. The one who enters through the gate is the shepherd of the sheep, the one for whom the keeper opens the gate. The sheep know the shepherd's voice; the shepherd calls them by name and leads them out. Even though Jesus used this metaphor with them, they didn't grasp what he was trying to tell them. He therefore said to them again: "The truth of the matter is, I am the sheep gate. All who came before me were thieves and marauders whom the sheep didn't heed. I am the gate. Whoever enters through me will be safe—you'll go in and out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and slaughter and destroy. I came that you might have life and have it to the full.

In Claire's recent letter about how we at St. Peter's are finding our new rhythms together, you may have noticed a quote by Maya Angelou: "Everything has rhythm, everything dances." I've been thinking about that quote a lot.

How do we dance, when we must stay six feet apart? Can we keep time, when time seems to be losing its meaning? Why do we have to learn the new steps, the new moves of this pandemic shuffle, a dance lesson none of us signed up for?

I wish these were not my questions. They sound hopeless. Even though this quote does give me hope - a small and quiet hope, but it is hope nonetheless: hope that everything has movement, has a way for us to live into it, even if we don't know it yet; hope that God can make a tune out of anything.

The truth is I feel both, hope and hopelessness. I have a similar reaction to our readings from Acts. I feel joy in the images of community, comfort in these familiar words included in our own baptismal covenant. But I also feel sad, thinking of these earliest believers getting to gather together, to break bread, to hug.

So some days I find myself feeling these contradictory feelings at the same time. Other days, I feel nothing - I am numb or just can't focus. It is confusing and frustrating.

In the book *On Grief and Grieving*, David Kessler and Elisabeth Kübler-Ross write, "We are not accustomed to the emotional upheaval that accompanies a loss. People experience a wide array of emotions after a loss, from not caring to being on edge to feeling angry or sad about everything. We can go from feeling okay to feeling devastated in a minute without warning. We can have mood swings that are hard for anyone around us to comprehend, because even we don't understand them."

I wonder if that resonates with you. I know it does for me. They go on:

"We're expected to go back to work immediately, keep moving, to get on with our lives. But it doesn't work that way. We need time to move through the pain of loss. We need to step into it, really to get to know it, in order to learn."

I promise not to take the dance metaphor too far, but what sticks out to me about Angelou's quote is how we learn to dance.

We learn a dance by feeling: experiencing how it takes shape in our bodies; noticing what feels hard and what comes naturally; slowing each step way down, giving it our attention, before ever trying to understand how it's a part of the whole.

So let's try, together. As the Rev. Naomi Washington-Leapheart put it on a call with faith leaders earlier this week: let's acknowledge that no matter what makes us different, we are all having to accept the strangeness of this time; to live with the painful truth that distance is better than closeness right now; to cope with what it means to be in slow motion or even no motion - to stop completely; to shift our expectations.

If you're not sure how to get started, try finishing these phrases:

- Right now, I feel...
- I'm most concerned about...

I want to invite you to share your feelings in the comments section. Even if you don't want to share them; acknowledge them to yourself. Know that whatever you feel is okay, that it is okay to not be okay.

As you write, I'm going to share some feelings people named during our zoom coffee hour last week:

- I feel stuck, in suspension
- Bound by this
- Guilty
- Like something heavy is hanging over me
- I feel worried about the people who worry about me
- I feel like a slug at home
- I feel disappointment...and awe
- I feel this as one more loss, in a string of losses
- I feel helpless
- I feel envy, anger
- I feel like the world is passing me by
- I do not want to die from this
- I miss the feeling of learning
- I feel people's honest, loving presence here
- I feel thankful
- I feel deeply sad

There is no normal way to grieve. We will have to be patient with ourselves about what grief looks like - perhaps it is like nothing you've known before or maybe it is a familiar grief from former losses. It will be different for everyone.

Naming our feelings is how we manage them, because unnamed and unknown feelings do not go away. When we do not find ways to express them, we become consumed by these feelings: unable to empathize, driven by our fears, acting from our wounds, and avoiding all responsibility for how they affect our neighbors.

We likely have memories of this on the individual level, but this happens on a systemic level too. People of color are dying of COVID-19 at higher rates, being tested at lower rates. On top of the ways racism already existed in our society: One black woman talked about going grocery shopping with her 15 year-old. She said, "I remember thinking, there he is, my son: dark skinned, 5'11, wearing a mask and a hoodie in a grocery store. Oh God, please protect him." Doing what he was supposed to do to stay safe...also made him less safe, just because he is black.

From existential, internalized trauma all the way to ongoing everyday anxieties, these are all manifestations of centuries of unchecked feelings of hate, fear, and shame that feed white supremacy, making it so that white people's feelings matter more than others, that our unchecked feelings can rule and ruin the lives of our neighbors.

The promise of the gospel is that God is with us, even and especially, in the feelings we do not want to face nor know how to deal with. In our grieving and loss, our waiting and anger, in the places where we can only feel our way through - right there, is where Christ meets us.

But Jesus understands that this kind of faith is formed through experience. Sheep do not just automatically follow someone just because they're holding a staff, not out of a gate and definitely not into a dark valley.

The sheep in our gospel trust the shepherd, because they have already experienced the shepherd's care first-hand. This trust leads to intimacy and unity, to becoming one, like sheep who follow a shepherd, like dancers who can anticipate and respond to each other's moves. Just as we become one with those we most love and trust. We don't follow mindlessly, and things don't go perfectly. But we sense that they have our best interests at heart - and vice versa - and so we have faith in them, we feel better knowing they're with us in the valley, we try a new, more difficult dance, knowing they will be there to support us.

This kind of unity, intimacy, and good will, this kind of communion, is what God wants to have with all people, and the kind of communion we have with each other, as siblings in Christ and specifically as a congregation. In this moment, when we want to trust Christ will meet us in our grief, but are perhaps unsure or afraid, we draw from the experiences of faith we've had with each other. By creating space for us to feel, to grieve, we are Christ to one another.

In a culture where taking care of yourself and never wearing your heart on your sleeve affords the most power, for people of faith, the measure of this moment will be if and how we choose to feel. As local faith leader, The Rev. Dr. Kyle Brooks said, "Now is the time to be instruments of feeling."

This is our life right now: Six-feet apart, trying to keep time when time is losing its meaning, overwhelmed by the new steps and moves of a pandemic shuffle, a dance lesson in grief none of us signed up for.

This is the good news of the Gospel: God is with us, and calls us to be with God, in this deep-down-to-our-toes, loving, indwelling sense: "Abide in me," Jesus says, "as I abide in you." We only come to believe this by feeling it, by living it. That is Jesus' vision for abundant life. Promised to us, even now.

God's hand is extended to us, an invitation to follow, to trust, to dance once more. Our hand reaches out, guided by our heart. "Everything has a rhythm," God promises. "Everything dances," we hope. May it be so. Amen and Alleluia.