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THE OASIS

Seasonal Journal of Southminster Presbyterian Church

Contemplating the 23rd Psalm

BY REV. MATT GEARKE

The cool days of fall are upon us and the ground is covered in color as the trees shed another year of leaves. Walking down the street this time of year reminds me of how the rhythms of nature mirror the rhythms of our lives: Birth - Life - Death - Rebirth. As Henri Nouwen once said, "The autumn leaves can dazzle us with their magnificent colors: deep red, purple, yellow, gold, bronze, in countless variations and combinations. Then, shortly after having shown their unspeakable beauty, they fall to the ground and die. Likewise, the autumn of life has the potential to be very colorful: wisdom, humor, care, patience, and joy may bloom splendidly just before we fall to the ground and die." This year the rhythms of life are more acute as winter draws closer and we continue to cope with COVID-19.

I have found during times of grief and difficulty that great comfort can be derived from God's Word. I often turn to Psalms like Psalm 23. There are no more comforting words than: "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want". Psalm 23 is a good reminder that God is the one and only constant in our lives. Whether we're lying in green pastures, moseying beside still waters, or walking through the darkest valley, God is always there. The assurance of God's presence is a sublime feeling during uncertain times like we're living in right now!

This fall I invite you to open yourself to God's presence by taking a walk. I'm not talking about a leisurely stroll but a prayer walk. Recently, we set-up a five prayer stations around the outside of Southminster, each with a passage and reflection from Psalm 23 to contemplate as you walk. As you walk look for the white poles that mark your path. Whether you come alone or come with another, all are welcome. The prayer walk is open 24 hours a day/7 days a week. Come, take a walk, and discover the goodness and mercy of God!

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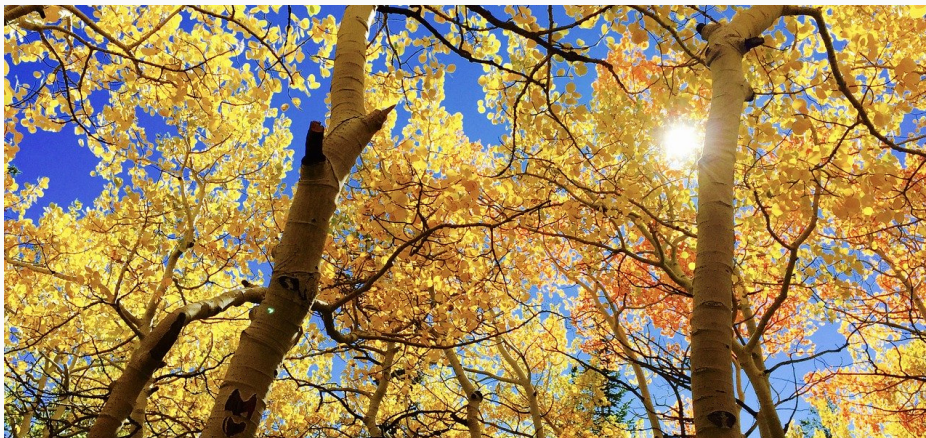
Contemplative Prayer ~ Thomas Merton

‘Whatever one may think of the value of communal celebration with all kinds of song and self-expression—and these certainly have their place—the kind of prayer we here speak of as properly “monastic” (though it may also fit into the life of any lay person who is attracted to it) is a prayer of silence, simplicity, contemplative and meditative unity, a deep personal integration in an attentive, watchful listening of “the heart.” The response such prayer calls forth is not usually one of jubilation or audible witness: it is a wordless and total surrender of the heart in silence. The inseparable unity of silence and monastic prayer was well described by a Syrian monk, Isaac of Niniveh:

Many are avidly seeking but they alone find who remain in continual silence. . . . Every man who delights in a multitude of words, even though he says admirable things, is empty within. If you love truth, be a lover of silence. Silence like the sunlight will illuminate you in God and will deliver you from the phantoms of ignorance. Silence will unite you to God himself. . . .

More than all things love silence: it brings you a fruit that tongue cannot describe. In the beginning we have to force ourselves to be silent. But then there is born something that draws us to silence. May God give you an experience of this “something” that is born of silence. If only you practice this, untold light will dawn on you in consequence . . . after a while a certain sweetness is born in the heart of this exercise and the body is drawn almost by force to remain in silence.

Excerpt from Thomas Merton. *Contemplative Prayer* (Penguin Random House Publishing Company: 1971) 5.



Books on Prayer - Reading Suggestions

Joyce Rupp - "Prayer Seeds: A Gathering of Blessings, Reflections & Poems"
Thomas Merton - "Contemplative Prayer"
Cynthia Bourgeault - "The Heart of Centering Prayer"
Thomas Keating - "Open Heart, Open Mind"
Eugene Peterson - "The Psalms as Tools for Prayer"
Margaret Silf - "Compass Points: Meeting God Every Day at Every Turn"

Prayer is not
so much a way
to find God as
a way of
resting in
him...who loves
us, who is near
to us.

THOMAS MERTON





Prayer Planting

The arrival of Autumn awakens my urge to plant bulbs in my tiny backyard, which is bravely trying to exist on a layer of builders' rubble. I wonder if a few daffodil bulbs will survive in such hostile terrain. For a while, that is as far as my good intentions go. The bulbs sit in their bags, while I engage with the world in a variety of other ways. This is a bit like prayer can be, really. The good intentions are there, and even some degree of preparation. But when push comes to shove, almost anything, however trivial, can intervene and claim a higher place on my list of priorities.

Then, one morning, I am reading Anne Lamott's "Plan B" and come upon her comment that bulbs are prayer too. Bulbs! She must have been reading my mind. Maybe my bulbs, still hanging there in the bag, will open that creaky gate to prayer. With renewed enthusiasm I get out the trowel and the fork and get started on my unpromising backyard.

My first discovery, when I finally spread the bulbs out on the grass in preparation for burial, is that a few of them have started to go moldy. These, especially, remind me of issues in my life seem incapable of either dealing with appropriately myself, or, more sensibly, surrendering to God's hands. Instead, they just hang around, like a bad smell, becoming more putrid with each passing day. I pick up the offending bulbs, wipe the green sheen from their outer skins, and lay them with as much gentleness as I can into the hole I've dug for them. In my heart I try to lay to rest some of the life issues as well, trying to convince myself that I really do believe in resurrection and transformation.

The remaining bulbs follow. Down into the darkness. Will there be a resurrection? Will these little specks of incipient life actually blossom out of this unlikely soil? With every bulb, a little dream, a little hope is buried too. With a little anxiety. I cover them all with a layer of the compost of trust, and there they lie in God's hands. For now, there is nothing more I can do.

Margaret Silf, *Compass Points: Meeting God Every Day at Every Turn* (Loyola Press: 2009), 57-58.

The Smallest Details

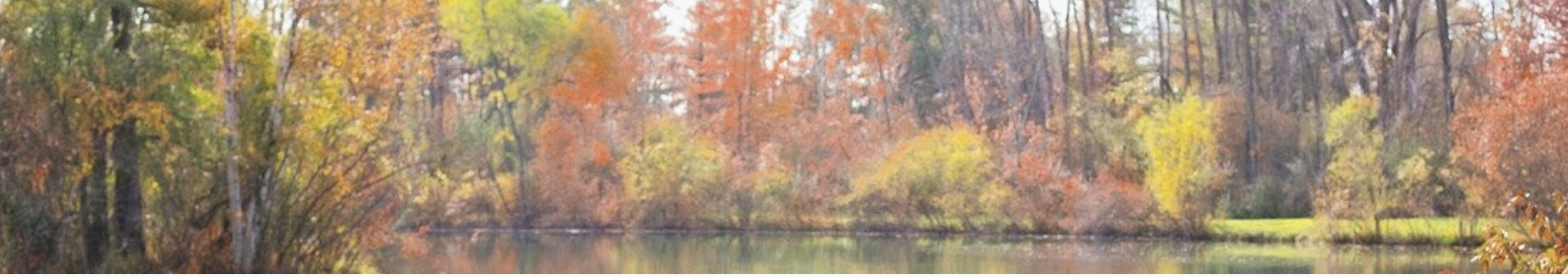
BY SUE THOMSON

In every scene that we behold,
there are small, beautiful details
that we so often miss.
God's details are so breath-taking
and so carefully thought out.
There is something special in
everything,
and everyone.

We just need to take the time
to stop
and look!

Thank you God
for opening our eyes,
for continuously stretching us
beyond our comfort,
and for helping us to see
the beauty that is Yours.
The smallest details
within a leaf,
a flower,
a sunset,
and most importantly
in another person.

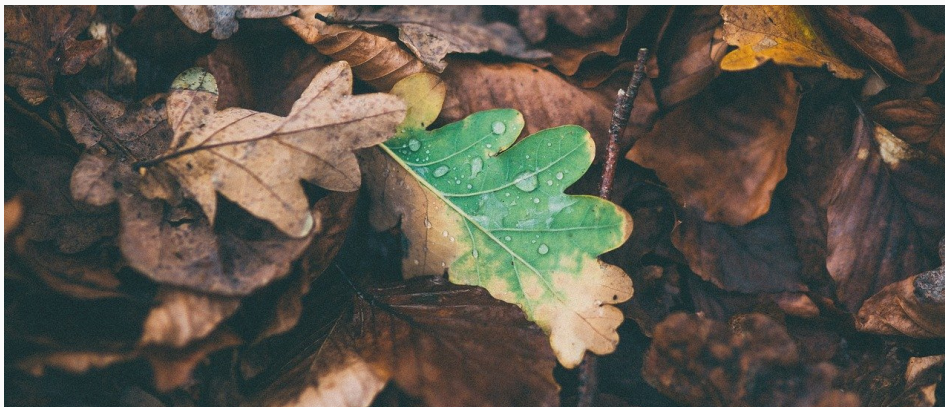




Connecting with God Through Prayer

BY REV. LIZ NICKERSON

These words from Joshua 1:9 give me hope and confidence at this time. Joshua had the daunting task of leading the Israelites across the Jordan river and into the promised land following the death of Moses. They faced many challenges but from this book we learn that God is as faithful and present with us as God was with the Israelites. Indeed, we are living through the pandemic and this is an issue of Biblical proportions. How often have we read about floods, fires, famines, plagues and wars in the Bible? If you are like me you probably found those a bit hard to relate to. Did this really happen, you may have asked yourself? Now, the people of the world are grappling with a war against COVID19.



So what can we learn from the Bible to equip us for this time? Plenty!

We need to do what the people of God have always done in times of strife, we need to turn to God more closely than ever. We need to pray more, to sit in silence and listen for God in our heart, to keep a journal and develop spiritual practices that help us feel God's presence. To be honest, I have never been a person who liked to write in a journal. A member at Southminster suggested I start keeping one to write about this time in our history so I could learn from it and look back on it once we are through all of this. So, I have begun writing in my journal after reading a devotion each morning, and the Bible passages associated with the devotion and listening for what God is saying to me through them. Each day I continue to be shocked that I get clear insight into my life! God's wisdom and direction really comes to me through these practices. So, if you are not spending one on one time each day in prayer with God, please start! Reach out to me or Pastor Matt if you need some guidance, or attend the Zoom class on contemplative prayer on Thursday nights at 7:00 pm. Email diane@spcah.org for the link. "the Lord says, I will instruct you. I will teach you the way that you should go. I will advise you as my eyes watch over you!" Psalm 32:8. Amen.

Joshua 1:9

**Be strong and
courageous. Do
not be afraid;
do not be
discouraged, for
the Lord your God
will be with you
wherever you go.**

