

*“For the mountains may depart
and the hills be removed,
but my steadfast love shall not depart from you”*

(Isaiah 54:10)

Sermon – May 22, 2016

Long Green Valley CoB



Last month I helped my son, Mitch, move to Colorado. The last portion of our trip traversed, for several hours the flat lands of western Kansas and eastern Colorado. We were still many miles away when the front range of the Rocky mountains started to appear. Unfortunately, rain squalls got in the way of our sight. We knew the mountains were there. We just couldn't see them. The rest of the day was spent unpacking. Before supper we had to make a run to the grocery store because, as our youth said, the store wasn't "going to chase after us." It wasn't until the next morning that the mountains appeared. Driving from his new home to where he was to work, this was the view. What a commute! I'm a tad envious.



This morning, a familiar psalm has been our guide, reminding us of how God is like a shepherd. It builds upon a child-like or, better put, a lamb-like trust in the ability of this shepherd to lead through dark valleys, providing safe places to eat and drink along the way, aiming toward the rich summer pasture in the mountains – a table spread with what sheep require, the first aid of anointing oil for wounds incurred, and protection from predators. Surely it all is filled with God's goodness and mercy.

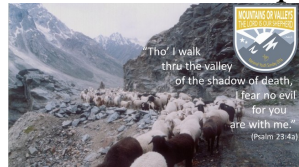
Behind all those wonderful words is an awareness of danger.



Life is not all spectacular views of mountain peaks,



or gorgeous glimpses of what lies below. This psalm speaks of walking



“through the valley of the shadow of death.”

Please note, these are not words only applicable to those nearing the end of their earthly existence. This psalm is about the whole journey of life, through valleys and mountains. All along the way, the shepherd’s sheep encounter difficulties that threaten our sense of well-being. Sometimes the mountains themselves may quake, and the hills fall into the valleys, literally or metaphorically.



The prophet Isaiah spoke to people who had experienced this firsthand. They knew hardship, what it was like to travel through dark valleys. Theirs was a forced journey, without a benevolent shepherd overseeing – at least as far as most could see. They beheld not the staff of a caregiver and protector, but the sword and spear of a conqueror, who led them where they didn’t want to go. You don’t have to be an Israelite exiled to Babylon to know what it’s like to be someplace you really don’t want to live.



You don’t have to be a Nigerian schoolgirl kidnapped and held captive for two years to experience being uprooted and in strange territory. We all go through troubling times



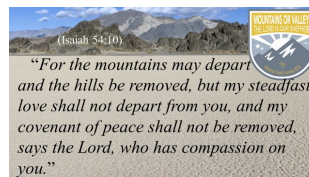
that lead us to wonder whether the Good Shepherd is on duty. Or even if that Shepherd is just a figment of our imagination.



Indeed, that was the case in Isaiah's day. God's people had their doubts about the goodness of God or, heaven forbid, whether the Master of the Universe had withdrawn or even ever existed. Isaiah's task as a prophet at this point in the journey was to encourage the sheep to keep walking, trusting in God's presence and guidance, to fear no evil even through the dark valley.

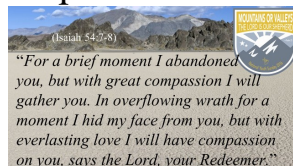


As I pondered what I might say on this National Youth Sunday, given the theme of "Mountains or Valleys: The Lord is our Shepherd," the following promise of Isaiah came to mind:



"For the mountains may depart and the hills be removed, but my steadfast love shall not depart from you, and my covenant of peace shall not be removed, says the Lord, who has compassion on you" (54:10). For the children of Israel stuck in a place they didn't want to be, these words were an encouragement to get up and move, to become un-stuck, to head out toward where a very real and present Shepherd was leading.

A few verses before this, Isaiah speaks for God saying,

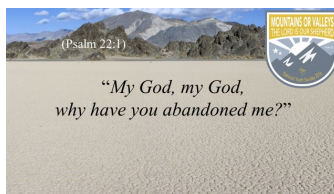


"For a brief moment I abandoned you, but with great compassion I will gather you. In overflowing wrath for a moment I hid my face from you, but with everlasting love I will have compassion on you, says the Lord, your Redeemer" (54:7-8). These are troubling words, even though there is comfort

found in them. What does it mean for God to abandon us? This “*overflowing wrath for a moment*” is difficult to grasp. At least it is for me. I distrust fire and brimstone preachers who too easily utter words of judgement without having hearts that are broken like Isaiah’s.



In the life of the early church, the disciples had to deal with crucifixion of their Shepherd. From the cross came the remembered words of Jesus, “*My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?*”



echoing the words of the psalmist (22:1). The distance between Good Friday and Easter may have been a brief moment in the larger picture, but for the followers of Jesus it was like an eternity. Likewise our own feelings of abandonment. Where are you, God? The church came to see the cross in a different light.

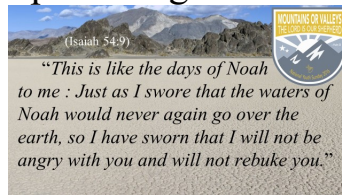


What once was the tool of an oppressive military government to keep people in place, became a symbol of God’s judgement and the pathway to freedom. But our forebearers in the faith did not arrive at this awareness easily. Like for the people of God in Isaiah’s day, it was not easy to get up and keep moving. It rarely is. Even when stones are rolled away.

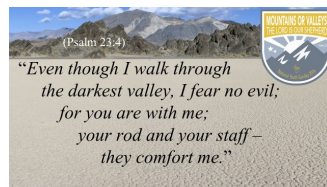


The verse immediately before the one I’ve chosen as our Word for this day, is one I wish more doom and gloom preachers would keep in mind as they blithely speak about how God is going to destroy the world because of its wickedness. This verse echoes the promise of God in Genesis, and

provided encouragement to God's exiled sheep in Isaiah's day. It likewise reminds us today that our Shepherd is good and worth trusting.

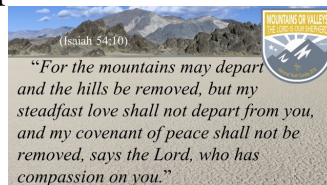


“This is like the days of Noah to me (says the Lord): Just as I swore that the waters of Noah would never again go over the earth, so I have sworn that I will not be angry with you and will not rebuke you” (54:9). Never again, God promised in the beginning.



“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” (Psalm 23:4). God's bow is in the sky and a sign.

Thus we come to this promise:

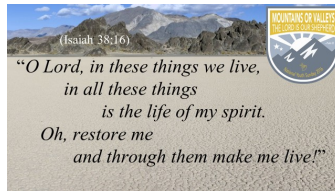


“For the mountains may depart and the hills be removed, but my steadfast love shall not depart from you, and my covenant of peace shall not be removed, says the Lord, who has compassion on you” (54:10). My remembrance of this verse goes back to my college days, singing in the concert choir my senior year.



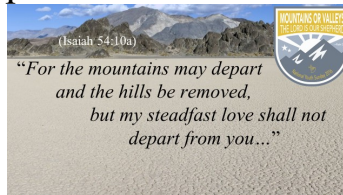
It's funny how things stick with you. When you practice something over and over, it doesn't just disappear – even after nearly forty years. It was “A Contemporary Cantata,” by Hank Beebe, in which the composer took three verses from the prophet Isaiah and put them into three musical settings.

The first was Isaiah 38:16 –

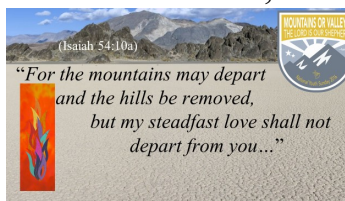


“O Lord, in these things we live, in all these things is the life of my spirit. Oh, restore me and through them make me live!” I can still hear the music and sing the words, even though it was 1978 when I first learned them. This, by the way, points out the value of etching God’s Word on your soul through remembering them over and over. One quick read doesn’t do it. Continual practicing does, running through it over and over, especially in the context of a community of singers and speakers. When dark valley days arrive, the word is there to be wrestled with, to be leaned upon, to be used as motivation to rise and walk by faith.

The second piece in that cantata from my college days was based on this passage from Isaiah chapter 54:



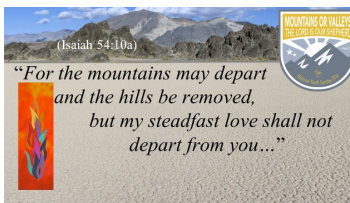
“For the mountains may depart and the hills be removed, but my steadfast love shall not depart from you...” (54:10a). It was actually a soprano solo, but even hearing it sung through all the practices and performances, this verse still resides in my heart. Why else, when I was pondering what I might preach this day, with “mountains or valleys” as a theme, did this verse pop into my awareness? Now, you might say that was the work of the Holy Spirit, and I would agree. Last week was Pentecost, after all.



But I would also add that God’s Spirit delights in and makes use of what already resides in the hearts and minds of God’s people.



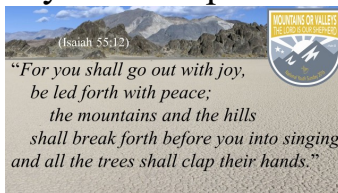
When Peter stood and spoke his first sermon on Pentecost, do you think it all just popped up in his brain out of thin air? He had spent many hours as a child learning Torah, and took his turn reading in synagogue. Add to that three years on the road with Jesus as his teacher in a community of learners. The words were there already, my friends. It just took some wind and fire of the Spirit to bring them to birth.



You might say that this verse from Isaiah, spoken first to exiles in Babylon, became real to the church in the days following Pentecost. Jesus may have physically left to be with the Father, absent to his followers, but God's steadfast love had not departed. The Holy Spirit was present and active, helping the Shepherd's sheep to get up and move on.

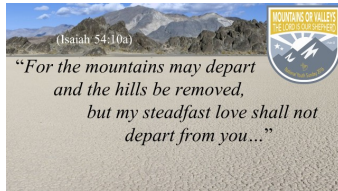


There was a third verse from Isaiah woven into that cantata I learned, practiced, and sang many times in my college concert choir. In fact, this very verse became my own theme verse. The day I was ordained to the ministry, the next to last verse of the very next chapter in Isaiah was front and center,

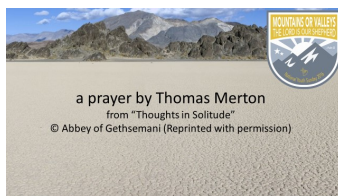


words already engraved on my heart through this song: *“For you shall go out with joy, be led forth with peace; the mountains and the hills shall break forth before you into singing and all the trees shall clap their hands”* (55:12). (I told you, it's still there 38 years later!) I even went on to put the whole chapter into my own song, which I have sung here several times.

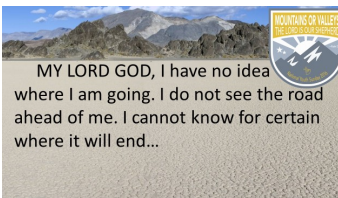
That verse, like the other verses committed to memory, are not just for the highpoints – mountain tops like ordination or graduation. They come to life most deeply in the dark valley times when the ability to trust in the Good Shepherd is truly learned.



“For the mountains may depart and the hills be removed, but my steadfast love shall not depart from you...” (54:10a). As I’ve shared before, I walked through one of my darker valleys six years ago. It took more than I had in me to get through. The Good Shepherd, the Holy Spirit, and God’s people (you), awakened the Word within and the power beyond that helped me rise and walk by faith. That struggle was a blessing, I can say now, though at the time I could not.



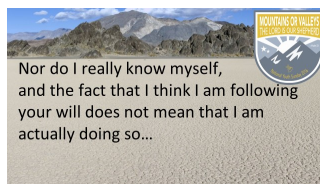
I found the prayer of a modern mystic to be of great benefit through it all. To bring this message to a close, would you join me in praying it, words to speak in unison to the One whose steadfast does not depart, who we can trust all along the way.



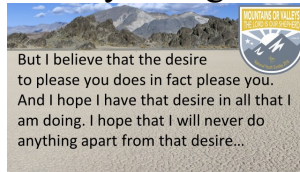
Let’s unite our hearts, minds and voices:

Thomas Merton, “Thoughts in Solitude”
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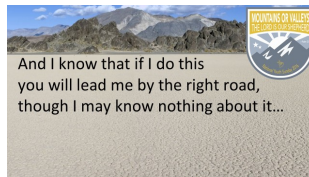
MY LORD GOD, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end...



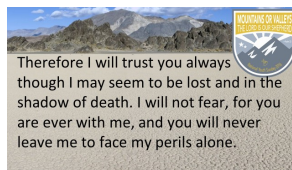
Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so...



But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire...



And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it...



Therefore I will trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone...



Amen!