

SERMON: "O SAY, CAN YOU SEE ..."
TEXTS: OLD TESTAMENT PSALM 23
NEW TESTAMENT MATTHEW 22:34-40

July 4, 2021

Dr. Dave Kivett

INTRODUCTION

You like combo platters, right? A number of good things together
We've been preaching on our elders' and deacons' favorite bible verses
Johnny paired them together, two, sometimes three at a time

Today we have Psalm 23. Art Cox had Psalm 22 last week and Psalm 23 this week
He shared two favorites. I get it. I have plenty of favorite verses too

We also have Matthew 22:37 from Cindy Klatt. It's from when Jesus is asked about
the greatest commandment and he gives a two-part answer about loving God
and neighbor. This verse is the first of those, "**You shall love the Lord your God
with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.**"

That is a good paring of Old and New Testament verses
But I want to try a larger combo platter. On this Fourth of July Sunday,
I want to add three very meaningful songs, including the national anthem
and try to fit it all together around the anthem's first words "O say, can you see?"
talking about what we can see ... when and where we can we see God

I'm proposing a road trip from Baltimore to Chicago to Pike's Peak
in Colorado to Jacksonville, Florida ... with lots of stops along the way
including green pastures, still waters and deep, dark, dangerous valleys

We begin in the darkness. I know we don't see well in the dark
but please, please hear this, God is there with us in the darkness
I pray, as I talk, you will reflect on how you have seen or felt God
in the light and especially in and through the darkness

We begin in the darkness ... in September of 1814. The nation is at war.
The War of 1812 lasted more than that one year. The British Navy,
the world's most formidable war machine, is attacking Baltimore
They attack from a distance because of wreckage in the harbor

Francis Scott Key and a friend are aboard a British ship negotiating
the release of a prisoner. They were successful but had to stay aboard
the ship during the siege. The barrage was intense for 24 straight hours
They could see Fort McHenry only by "the rockets red glare"
They had very real concerns the Fort and the city would not stand

IN THE DARK

Even with the rocket's red glare, it was a dark night ... But in the morning
Well you know, the flag was still there ... that torn, battle worn star spangled banner.
If you get a chance to visit the Smithsonian in Washington DC, go see that exhibit.
I found it fascinating, especially the missing star, and moving.

Despite and through the dark of the night. That certainly is the theme of the poem
turned national anthem. As much as that theme – through and after the darkness,
there is light is part of our anthem. Bigger than that ... it is the tune of faith

We know from a faith that dares call the day the world's greatest teacher
was executed, that Friday, Good Friday. We know God is not only there
in the darkness, God works through it ... gets us through it
Isn't that the part of Psalm 23 that finds its way to the depths of our being?

All the other imagery does too. But to hear those words about God
being with us in the depth and darkness and danger of the valleys
That is what we most need to hear – as individuals, as families, as communities

**Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff
they comfort me.**

Can you picture those valleys, that darkness ... not some hypothetical
but the places you've been, the dark nights you've known
In and through and looking back on those time
maybe you thought of these verses, maybe said them aloud to yourself

Don't you think these words came to mind after a tornado in Parkersburg
a flood in New Orleans, a shooting in a Charleston church,
a building collapse in Florida? I've read this psalm at many funerals
but it is not just for the church or funeral home
It is for the darkness ... and a reminder that God is there ... at work

God is there in the darkness ... and the light

On this road trip of sermon, we move on to a trip from Chicago to Colorado
The year is 1893, Katharine Lee Bates, inspired by the trip, wrote the song my mom
often said should be the national anthem. J'Kalein sang it as our opening hymn.
We usually refer to it as "America, the Beautiful"

The imagery of the song sticks with us – amber waves of grain,
purple mountains majesty, fruited plains, shining seas.
You've heard me use those turns of phrase more than you've heard me
talk about my dog or even where I went to college

OUT THE WINDOW

My mom's elevated view of the song fit her worldview, how she saw the world.
Ann Kivett, Annie to her grandchildren, was big on looking out the window
She was not a fan of looking at a screen. "Look out the window, see the world."
She said that often and many times followed it up with "You know, we wouldn't
have 'America the Beautiful' if that woman wasn't looking out the window."

As we consider this beloved psalm, I want to honor Annie's advice
Please slow down as you think through the imagery of the psalm
What do those green pastures and still waters look like?
How about those paths of righteousness?

Take a little time now and picture those places
I'm not going to run through images on the screen, thought about doing that
I think it is better to let your mind wander.
I'll mention a few of my own images to help you wander.

Green pastures

The rolling hills and farms, mainly dairy farms of the Shenandoah Valley
of Virginia where I lived and learned for a year as a student minister
all those 'green pastures' framed by mountains to the east and west
The cornfields of Iowa laid out so geometrically correct (esp. with GPS)
straight lines interrupted by the curves of green spaces where the water runs

Still waters

The shallow waters of the Chattahoochee less than a mile from where I grew up
The deep, wide Pamlico in Eastern North Carolina where my mom grew up
The folks round there call it "The Riva"

And here ... the back patio of my home, under our three season room
where I often sit with Beth. We like to watch the sunset in the west.
And the storms coming our way. We don't have a downspout for the gutter
Not in that spot. We have a rain chain. It is a series of metal cups that catch
and then drain the rain down into a planter we have filled with rock.
Those waters are quite still when the rain chain freezes in the winter

Paths of righteousness

These aren't really landscapes as much. Some yes, like camps, Montreat.
These images are more portraits – youth leaders, coaches, mentors,
Parents and grandparents and the things they said over and over again
like "Look out the window, see the world. You know, we wouldn't
have 'America the Beautiful' if that woman wasn't looking out the window."

THROUGH THE DARK

Continuing the road trip we move on to Jacksonville, Florida

We come to another anthem. You just heard it ... "Lift Every Voice and Sing"
It was written as a poem to celebrate the birthday of Abraham Lincoln in 1900
The man who wrote it, James Weldon Johnson, was the principal
of Stanton High School then a segregated school, now a magnet school

Children would recite the poem every year to celebrate Lincoln's birthday

His brother, John, set the poem to music, kids began to sing it on other occasions,
adults too. The song began to be used more and more. It spoke from and spoke to
the black American experience especially at that time in our history

The Reconstruction following the Civil War was basically deconstructed
by political deals, by the rise of the KKK, by the writing of Jim Crow laws
and by the violence of lynching that was rarely ever met with justice.

The song speaks honestly to the struggle ... and to overcoming the struggle

*We have come over a way that with tears has been watered,
We have come, treading our path through the blood of the slaughtered;
Out from the gloomy past, till now we stand at last
Where the white gleam of our bright star is cast.*

The NAACP was formed around that same time. In 1909.

About half the founders of the nation's oldest civil rights organization were white
The first black man to lead the NAACP would be James Weldon Johnson,
the man who wrote this song. In 1919 the NAACP named this song,
his song "the Negro National Anthem"

The NAACP had an anthem but the nation, the USA, did not. Not for 12 more years.

In 1931, the "Star Spangled Banner" was, by an act of Congress, after
some arguing about the origin of the tune and competition from my mom's
first choice, officially named as our national anthem.

I mention this song, this anthem, because I think it pairs well with the psalm

As much as we may like still waters and green pastures,
the Shepherd is going to lead us through some valleys
It is important to see that. In those dark places, it is the Shepherd who leads us
who is still very much present with us – with a very handy rod and staff

The psalm speaks to us so deeply because it takes us on that road trip

It starts with images that set us at ease – green pastures, still waters
It then leads us through the valley of the shadow of death
It leads us to a table with (in the presence of = with) our enemies
It leads to us anointed with oil, our cup running over
It leads, with goodness and mercy, to the house of the Lord

SUMMARY

The psalm leads us through and to!
It speaks to how God leads us through and to

Let me once again reference my mom's advice about looking out the window
It is nice to do that on sunny days with nice scenery
It is critical to do so when the clouds roll in and the scene is scary
during a long night with the rockets red glare,
over the years and generations, over the way with tears watered

I'm asking you now (and every chance I can get) to look out the window,
to look around, to look right in front of you and right around the corner
to look anew at the places and people you see
and to look in new places too

O say, can you see?
Can you see God at work in, God at work through, God at work to?

Now I know some of you may be thinking
Why hasn't he mentioned the New Testament lesson from Matthew?
I haven't heard him talking about loving God with everything we got
With all our heart, with all our soul, with all your mind

I can hear the chants now
"We want an even longer sermon. We want an even longer sermon"
I hear you. I'd refer those chanting to everything I've said already
about seeing where God is at work.

I sure seems to me that one really good way to love God with all our heart,
with all our soul, with all of our mind is to look out the window
and see all the ways God's love for us is made known to us
in and through and to.