

There is a Shepherd

Psalm 23:1 (KJV)

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.

I remember a childhood incident when I experienced fear. I was about 9 years old. One day my grandpop took my sister and me fishing at the creek that ran through the back end of our farm in Bridgeport. After catching some sunnies and a catfish, we decided to go home. We had to walk through a meadow where our cows were grazing. Halfway to the gate, the bull spotted us and started for us. My sister and I ran and kept telling our grandpop to hurry, but we knew he could not run. We were sure grandpop would not be able to make it, but, amazingly, somehow he did get through the gate just in the nick of time. When the bull reached the gate, he was very angry and started to butt the gate and paw at the dirt. It was a very scary moment for us all.

Maybe my sister and I at that age were not aware that Someone was watching over us and surely had saved us from a disaster that could have caused a great sorrow for our family. Our grandpop was such an important part of our lives. We loved him and liked being a part of his life and doing things with him.

As I look back today, I know Who was watching and I know that the Lord had been with us all along that day. Back then my sister and I attended Sunday school faithfully, and we shared the story of that incident with our teacher. She helped us to understand that there is a Shepherd caring for us. We can face the fears of each day just knowing that the Lord is always with us.

Yes, the Lord is our Shepherd, and He went to the cross, suffered, bled, and died paying for our sins. If that isn't love, then I don't know the meaning of God's love. In return, we must not forget all He has done for us on that cross.

Love Found a Way

Love found a way to redeem my soul
Love found a way that could make me whole
Love sent my Lord to the cross of shame
Love found a way, O praise His holy name.

– The New Church Hymnal; Words by Avis M. Christiansen, music by Harry Leos

Dear Lord, thank you for always being there for us wherever we may roam, taking us through critical times, and loving us even when we may think you are not present. Help us all to constantly see that you will always be our Shepherd. In your precious name we ask it, Amen.

*Helen Dunk
Zion Community Church*

The Chicken Strike

Mark 8:36-37 (NIV)

What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?

When my daughters were young, and I was an economizing Mom at home, we would often have some type of chicken for dinner. I would grab up chicken on sale during weekly grocery store trips and look for creative ways to serve it to my family. We had chicken that was roasted, baked, in casseroles, soups, or salads.

After a while, the family started to complain about the frequency of chicken on the menu. I reminded them of how frugal I was and how healthy it was, but I still heard, “We’re tired of chicken for dinner.” Well, that just started to irritate me. How dare they complain about my chicken!

So, I initiated the Chicken Strike of 1990. I announced that we would no longer have chicken for dinner, ever. For a couple of weeks, our dinners were just fine. Chicken was replaced by more beef, fish, and pork. The word “chicken” was never spoken. My family pleasantly ate whatever I served.

But a month into the strike, I was getting very frustrated when I was planning dinner. I was spending more time searching for creative ways to prepare other meats. I was sad that I couldn’t have chicken for dinner. Dinner was an absolute chore. Most of all, I was getting bitter over dinner. The chicken strike didn’t really bother my family, but it was really bothering me. Needless to say, I eventually started including chicken dishes again, and nobody complained.

Being older and wiser, I’ve learned that my soul was not worth a chicken strike.

The Message says, “What good would it do to get everything you want and lose you, the real you? What could you ever trade your soul for?” (Mark 8:36-37). We can focus our lives on being “right” and being bitter or we can focus on Christ. Christian author and speaker Donna Partow talks about this kind of person as being like a porcupine. We have all the right points (spikes), but no one wants to be around us.

My lesson learned is that God wants us to glorify Him and not ourselves. We have our right to a chicken strike (or whatever your issue is), but we must choose to be like Christ.

Help us to live a life that shines for you. Our focus should be on exalting you and not ourselves. Your sacrifice on the cross is the ultimate act of selflessness.

Linda Sizemore
Evangelical United Methodist Church

Connecting to God

Psalm 19:1 (NLT)

The heavens proclaim the glory of God. The skies display his craftsmanship.

Psalm 19: 9-10 (NLT)

The laws of the LORD are true; each one is fair. They are more desirable than gold, even the finest gold. They are sweeter than honey, even honey dripping from the comb.

Read all of Psalm 19.

Have you ever felt like you weren't connected with God? Sometimes our lives are so full of stuff – not necessarily all bad stuff – that we lose sight of God. What do we do when we feel like this? Where do we turn?

David was someone who was truly connected to God. But just like us, David had his moments when he fell short of God's commands. However, David knew where to turn when he lost sight of God.

First, he would turn to nature, God's very own creation. David declared that the very "heavens proclaim the glory of God" (Psalm 19:1). You only need to open your eyes to see the magnificence of God's creation. From the crystalline snowflakes of winter, to the radiant flowers of summer, creation declares God's awesome power every day. If you have trouble finding God in your busy life, take a few moments to smell the roses, remembering it was God who created them for us to enjoy.

Second, David would turn to God's word. David called the Word of the Lord "more desirable than gold" and "sweeter than honey" (Psalm 19:10). Whenever David was trying to find God, he knew to turn to scripture.

Third, David prayed with heartfelt passion, as evidenced in the Psalms.

So when we are feeling disconnected from God, do we do the same? Are we disciplined in our study of scripture, regularly making time to read the Bible? God wants us to spend time reading His Word and speaking to Him through prayer. That will surely bring you closer to God.

If you find God in creation, and you spend time with God in scripture and prayer, what is your response? Have you accepted God into your heart, letting Him change you in the ways that only He can? Is God calling you to do something for Him? If we answer God's call, He can do miracles through us.

Father, please grant me the moments to see you in creation, study your holy Word, and talk to you through prayer. But most important, let these things change my heart so I will answer your call. Amen.

*Andrew Johns
Pitman United Methodist Church*

Lessons from a Mountain

John 20:24-31 (NIV)

Now Thomas (also known as Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord!” But he said to them, “Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe.” A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you!” Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.” Thomas said to him, “My Lord and my God!” Then Jesus told him, “Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.” Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

Hebrews 11:1 (NIV)

Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.

Last summer while on a tour of Denali National Park, I heard our tour guide suddenly say, “Over there is the great one, but you can’t see him because of the cloud cover.” He was referring to Mt. Denali, better known to most of us as Mt. McKinley, the highest peak in North America. They say only 30 percent of those who visit Alaska actually get to see Mt. McKinley because of cloud cover, so I was not surprised that we could not see it, but I believed our guide when he told me the mountain was there.

It suddenly occurred to me that God had a faith lesson He wanted me to learn from the mountain. The lesson was “The Great One” (The LORD, Most High) is always there even if I can’t see Him because of the clouds. In my life experiences, sometimes clouds – shattered dreams, broken relationships, tragic losses, illness – make it difficult to see God’s presence. But that doesn’t mean He isn’t there.

We are told in Hebrews 11 that faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. *Sure* and *certain* ... two words that describe faith. I can be sure and certain that what God has promised He will do. He has promised He will be with me always. I may not always see Him, but He has promised that He is present with me because He has given me His Holy Spirit. He is I AM, the Eternal Now. He is always in the present tense. And when He is present, “Peace is with me.” If I will believe and trust Him, and lean on Him, then I will see Him reveal the

manifestation of His presence and His character in my life no matter what my circumstances may be. My circumstances may not change, but I will not doubt even though I do not see.

The next day we moved on to Mt. McKinley Princess Lodge. The sun was shining bright, not a cloud in the sky, and as we rounded a bend, I once again heard our guide say, “Look over there, and you’ll get your first glimpse of the great one.” Words could not describe the beauty and majesty of the sight before me. It was then I understood the second lesson the mountain was teaching me: Keep believing because there will not always be clouds.

I can also be sure and certain that one day I WILL see The Great One—The LORD, Most High. I will see Him face to face in all of His beauty, His majesty, and His glory. And like Thomas when he saw Jesus, I will fall at His feet and cry out, “My Lord and my God.”

On that bright and cloudless morning when the dead in Christ shall rise,
And the glory of His resurrection share;
When His chosen ones shall gather to their home beyond the skies,
And the roll is called up yonder, I’ll be there.

— *When the Roll Is Called Up Yonder* by James M. Black

Lord, even for the times we can’t see you because of the clouds, we know you are there. Thank you for your continual presence and peace.

Linda Turk
Trinity United Methodist Church



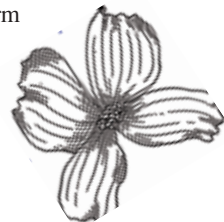
The Legend of the Dogwood

There is a legend that at the time of the Crucifixion the dogwood had been the size of the oak and other forest trees. So firm and strong was the tree that it was chosen as the timber for the cross.

To be used thus for such a cruel purpose greatly distressed the tree, and Jesus, nailed upon it, sensed this, and in his gentle pity for all sorrow and suffering said to it:

“Because of your regret and pity for my suffering, never again shall the dogwood tree grow large enough to be used as a cross. Henceforth it shall be slender and bent and twisted and its blossoms shall be in the form of a cross ... two long and two short petals. And in the center of the outer edge of each petal there will be nail prints, brown with rust and stained with red, and in the center of the flower will be a crown of thorns, and all who see it will remember.”

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life (John 3:16).



God is in Control

Matthew 26:39 (NIV)

Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, “My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will.”

My wife, Kim, passed away this June. I recently found a sheet of notepaper on which she had written some thoughts about “God Sightings.” We had gone through a difficult series of events, and Kim wrote to share how her faith stood up through this “valley of the shadow.”

How could I see God working in my life through (this difficulty)? Easy. First was the knowledge that this church family was praying for me. Second was the knowledge that God had a plan for my life; I just didn't know what it was. Someone asked me if I was angry with God. I surprised them when I said, “No.” They said, “It's all right to be angry at God.” My response is, “I'm not angry because God is in control and has a plan for my life. His answer this time is ‘No.’”

God is in control. I don't know why Kim died. God knew the time and date and He took her home. Did it have to be this way? Could this “cup have been taken from us”? I don't know. But I share the faith that Kim expressed: I know that God constantly takes bad things and turns them into good (think Romans 8:28). He has a plan, even if we don't understand it.

I also know that He answers prayers and uses His Church (the Body of Christ) to comfort those who are going through “the valley.” Things may not turn out the way we want, but prayer connects us with God and opens us up to His will. We all prayed that Kim's life be spared, but she was taken anyway.

On the top of that sheet she also wrote:

... sunset I had ever or have ever seen in my life. The colors were so vibrant. That sunset told me that God was present, even as I was walking through the valley of the shadow of death. What a comfort; what a peace to know God!

Faith is never misplaced. Our “vibrant” and infinitely loving God is in control!

Lord, you understand my confusion. But I just reach out my hand to you without demanding answers. I offer you my brokenness and strife, and I fully trust you to make something beautiful of my life.

*Larry Bakely (& Kim Bakely)
Pitman United Methodist Church*

How Many Nails Does It Take to Build a Bridge?

Luke 22:42 (NIV)

Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done.

How simple it is to go to the hardware store and buy a box of factory-made nails. In the past, nails were handmade, making each one unique. How many nails do you think it would take to build a wooden railroad trestle over a gorge? The trestle is strong enough to take the train from one side to the other. Or a covered bridge ... how many nails would it take?

There is a bridge we all have access to that uses only three nails. That's right, three, and it is the bridge from Earth to heaven. Jesus was hung on the cross using only three nails, but by doing so, He made a way for us to be saved. Two thousand years ago, long before any of us were born, He loved us and *willingly* suffered and died for us! He allowed the lashings, the humiliation, the torture, the nails. As fully human, He felt the pain – pain that He took for us.

Could you do that for someone else – if you loved the person deeply? Jesus prayed in the garden, “Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done” (Luke 22:42).

The “cup” He referred to was the terrible agony He knew He would have to endure. He knew how horrible death by crucifixion would be. He would experience total separation from God in order to die for the sins of the world. But He wanted to do His Father’s will.

He willingly took the nails for me ... He willingly took the nails for you.

Father, help us always to remember the sacrifice you made in sending your Son to us. Help us never forget those nails Jesus took to save us. Amen.

Judy Frett

Trinity United Methodist Church

Good Friday

Why is the day on which Jesus was unjustly tried, sentenced, and cruelly crucified called *Good Friday*? At one time the day was known as *Holy Friday*, and still earlier, it may have been called *God’s Friday*. It may be called Good Friday because Christ, through His death, showed mankind the greatest good in a way that men could never forget. Whatever the day is called, the good for which Jesus lived and died seems very real to everyone on that day.

Believe and See the Glory of God!

John 11:40 (NIV)

Jesus said, “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?”

The miracle of Lazarus rising happened that they might believe! It was one of the final straws before the crucifixion. Lazarus, Martha, and Mary were close friends with Jesus. The sisters had anxiously sent for Jesus, for their brother lay gravely ill! Incredibly, Jesus failed to come – and now Lazarus was dead, sealed in a tomb for four days! They had seen Jesus do many miracles. *Why ... why ... why had He not come?*

Have we ever felt that God did not come in time? When have we felt the silence of God? This dear family could see only with their eyes. Would we be any different?

There is deep drama here about who Martha believed was doing the miracle work. Who is the miracle maker? According to John 11:25, Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?”

“I am the resurrection and the life!” Jesus said it. But did she believe it?

Then Jesus reminded her of words He had told her before (John 11:40): “Did I not tell you that if you BELIEVED you would SEE the glory of God?”

Do we believe in miracles? Do we see only what our eyes can see?

Miracles always point to the glory of God, not us. Things are not always what we perceive. As we look toward Calvary’s cross, let us believe and SEE the glory of God!

Father, help me believe as Jesus said, that I might see the glory of God. Open the eyes of my heart to see! In Jesus’ name, Amen.

Barbara Moist

Trinity United Methodist Church



Miracles are not always visible to the naked eye.
But those who live by faith can see them clearly.

Jesus Calling by Sarah Young