

The Rev. Dr. David K. McIntosh
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Given at St. Mark's Church, Bridgewater

Jeremiah 23: 1-6; Psalm 23; Ephesians 2:11-22 ; Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

“I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.” †

I've often pondered what these words from the 23rd Psalm mean... I've thought a lot this week about 'dwelling'— specifically about our dwelling place, the world in which we live and move— and about the things that are affecting it: climate change causing tremendous heat in our nation, with record droughts and water shortages... in contrast to the unrelenting floods in Europe... the political divide in our country, the resulting mistrust and worsening health crisis, caused by those shepherds alluded to by Jeremiah, “who destroy and scatter the sheep.” I've thought about the mishaps in my own life, and long for those days promised by the prophet, when I “shall not fear any longer or be dismayed.” What does this mean, “I shall dwell in the house of the Lord for ever”?

In our back yard, Dan & I have a lovely Magnolia tree, which we've enjoyed since moving to CT. It reminds me of our former yard in Florida and of the South, in general, ... and I love its large, fragrant annual blooms. That is, until last year, when early Spring temperatures dropped into the 20's and every single bloom turned a nasty shade of brown and wilted over. I was devastated. I had been so looking forward to the coming of its flowers, anticipating weeks of beautiful sights and smells, and the visits of the bees and hummingbirds. We were left with nothing but what appeared to be brown, rotting deathly remains... strangely ominous amid COVID. Of course, Dan, not missing a chance to joke about any occasion, began referring to it as “the Addam's Family Tree.” I believe the example of our Magnolia is reflective of all life on this fragile planet— one day appearing healthy and vibrant, while the next struggling to overcome some hardship or disappointment. So often, when we feel good and our lives seem just right, something happens, and we are thrown a curve ball. At least, I feel that's been the case for me.

I've experienced great joy in my dual vocations as your priest at St. Mark's and as a physician healing our community... these are fulfilling and fun! However, the stress of the past 16 months of pandemic and my recent health problems with disc disease and lumbar pain, have affected my ability to interact with others and live out my vocations as I'd like. There always seems to be some conflict, some added stress. And my back issues have affected my ability to play outdoors, to exercise and hike. With my deteriorating body has come a wounded and gloomy spirit. Sometimes I feel like that poor Magnolia tree, brown and drooping, useless and permanently damaged. And when I turned for comfort to the 23rd psalm we prayed today, I admit... I didn't feel a sense of calm or peace, for I've been experiencing the valley of darkness and plenty of fear!

I confess to feeling depressed this week, until Dan reminded me of our ‘Addam’s Family Magnolia.’ An interesting thing I had forgotten about that tree, which I had given up on and thought would never recover— this year, in the middle of some of the hottest weather we’ve ever had, it produced new blooms! Only one or two at first, but eventually there were numerous beautiful flowers. And now it stands majestic, and the birds fly to it, and the cat rests beneath it! One day it seemed a waste, a tragedy... the next, a thing of beauty. It’s Dan who referenced it as an allegory to my own personal hardship, and my physical and emotional sense of loss. Feeling encouraged, I read today’s Gospel and prayed about all those sick and hurting people, who yearned to be healed by Jesus and his followers. And I considered Jesus’ words to the hard-working apostles: “Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest awhile.”

Jesus knew that whether in good times or in bad, we must always take time to rest and recharge, because we never know what may be coming next... We never know whether we will be happily recalling a great day or blind-sided with a force beyond our control. Just like the Magnolia, at some point in our lives, all God’s creatures are asked to “come away and rest awhile.” And so, I will... over the next two weeks, you won’t see or hear from Dan and I, we’re going away on vacation to relax. And with this promise of time off in the near future, I’ve once again recognized the beauty of the 23rd Psalm... that beautiful imagery of the Lord as our Shepherd. The Good Shepherd who leads us on the right path, who restores our souls, who comforts us in time of trial, whose grace gives us so much in life, even though we may not deserve it, and who invites us to ‘dwell in the house of the Lord our whole lives.’

You see, I believe now that the story of our Magnolia tree is an example of what it means to ‘dwell in the house of the Lord’— To live on through hardships, trials, and tribulations, to enter those dark valleys and traumatic passages in life, yet still emerge as beautiful and beloved creatures of God. There is no doubt that such events can be painful, no doubt that in the process we are changed, no doubt that we are scarred, no doubt we will never be the same again. And despite this, even when it seems we surrounded by darkness, we can catch a glimpse of the astonishing light of our own being, the brightness within! In Christ, we are transformed, newly restored in body, mind, and spirit to dwell with God... after all, that’s the promise of the resurrection! And so, I pray for the grace to trust in our Shepherd’s goodness and mercy and strive to dwell in the house of the Lord forevermore.

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