Fourth Sunday of Easter 2019 All Saints Church

May 12, 2019 Year C

Acts 9:36-43 Revelation 7:9-17

Psalm 23 John 10:22-30

The Lord is our shepherd; we shall not want. Amen

It’s great to be back from Jordan.

Thank you for all your prayers and support- I had an amazing journey into the crossroads of so many cultures, religions, sacred practices, and languages. I was overwhelmed with sights and smells of the region, that spread across centuries of time and space….

The land where a people identified as Homo Erectus sharpened their tools of flint, or where Neanderthals competed with the then emerging Homo Sapiens, (the new kid on the block), and lost. A place where first communities were created during the Neolithic times, a people no longer limited to be only hunters and gatherers. New town settlements circled around the miraculous grains of wheat and barley and the art of sculpture and pottery. And then, of course, to be where Moses viewed the Promise Land, where King David fought to unite his monarchy, where Jesus was baptized, where early Christians hid from Roman persecutions, where Bedouins protected the sojourners… so much life.

One of the most vivid images that has been seared into my memory is that of the desert. It’s everywhere- dark coarse sand, sharp rocks, unrelenting vistas, with its emptiness and vastness, and always penetrating in its desolation and harsh winds. So much life against a background of so much barrenness.

When Cahaley, my daughter, and I were driving to Petra, to see the 1st century Nabataean ruins, we had to drive through 3 hours of stark desert on the one road that cut through the country, the King’s Highway. I was clueless how solitary we would be on this highway, in her little compact Honda…. with a few dents here and there, one windshield wiper missing, a loose gas cap, bird droppings on the passenger window… Hmmm.

“Cahaley, when was the last time you had the car’s oil changed, or the water levels checked, or the tire pressure looked at? Like, what’s your maintenance routine on this car?”

“Yeah, right mom.”

“I guess, we’re in the hands of fate; something maybe I should have thought about before we left.” We both laughed.

(Though mind you, cell coverage is better in the Jordanian desert than in Peterborough).

In the midst of all this vastness, I did think of the 23rd Psalm. No kidding.

Little did I know it would be in the Lectionary this week: “The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures; he leadeth me beside the still waters.”

Anything green, you can just feel yourself pulled in its direction. You hunger for it; you need it; you feel reassured and safe; it’s like a salve. I think that’s why so many of the restaurants in Jordan, if they are able, are centered in expansive garden terraces with large trees, flowing gardens, hanging plants. They become a respite, a sanctuary, and a place of solace. And when you reserve your table, it’s given to you for the night- assumed by all, for you to stay, to eat and drink, and to smoke and plays cards, and to laugh. No rush. Linger the night away. Rest, be at peace. Take your time. Be, just be, with each other.

I haven’t thought of the 23rd Psalm written with the backdrop of the desert looming, but it makes so much more sense. Green pastures mean water, safety, beauty, a gift of the gods, a gift from this one Lord who provides. An oasis of place, of need, of soul.

And still waters mean that there are Bedouins nearby with their sheep….. Sheep won’t drink out of rushing streams, only from still waters. So, we not only have an oasis, but it’s settled, with people who will welcome you with dates and sweet cold milk and shelter.

No wonder your soul is restored….. And your prayer, in thanksgiving for this gift of life, is to ask of the Lord, “lead me to the paths of your righteousness for your Name’s sake.” I am yours, for you are mine, as you are providing me with rest and peace. I am so grateful.

And even in these valleys of the shadow of death, which are everywhere, “I fear no evil, for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me.”

We are protected. In the harsh scarcity of green and mirth, there’s more than just desert; there is abundance, miraculous and mysterious. Goodness and mercy are pursuing you. Grace exceeds. Love of God is dwelling not only in the land but within your very soul.

“Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies.” We saw these tables all throughout the land, called dolmens, created 6,000 years ago during the Ancient Bronze age.

Two large upright stones, about 5 feet tall, each one, capped by a bridging stone. Archeologists are puzzled. How in the world did these huge bridging stones get winched into place? They prove that there was early social cohesion, but that’s about all they know. Dolmen means “stone table” used as gift, as burial grounds, as shelter, as markers.

I saw many Bedouin boys resting under their shade while talking on their cell phones.

Yes, we will dwell under shelter, in the house of the Lord forever.

God, and only God, provides this kind of safety.

One of the most common greetings in Jordan is “Ahlan wa sahlan.” It’s said whenever you meet someone. “Ahlan” means family. You are family. And “wa sahlan” means I will give you help. I will support you, give you peace and grace, and good wishes as you continue on your travels. May your way be made with ease, by the grace of God, Inshall’ah. Let me wash your feet, give you water, and help you find rest. Against the harshness of the desert, let me provide you safety.

I had a profound experience of “ahlan wa sahlan” in all places: on the flight home from Amman to the States.

I was flying Air Jordanian, and most of the folks on the plane were Jordanians. Chaos everywhere. People speaking with their hands, loudly, with passion and some fear. As we were preparing for take-off, there were lots of changing of seats. People needing to be near their kids, their kin, and because you can’t really reserve a seat before-hand, kind of, but not really, so everything is in confusion.

People are anxious and the stewardesses are doing their best. I said to one, “If it will help, I can go anywhere. I don’t care. Move me where you need me to go.”

“Oh my god, you are a God-send. And so, I was moved. And the family who benefitted from me giving up my seat, kept thanking me. “Alhamdullilah.” Praise be to Allah.

As we were listening to the directions of what to do in case of disaster, and rolling out onto the runway, with seat belts being fastened, the woman next to me dressed as many Jordanian women are…. Probably in her 60’s, fully covered, plastic sandals with socks, with many layers of clothing.

She said her prayers for safe journey, and then she brought out some food. I wasn’t paying much attention, as I was concentrating on my Suduko puzzle, until she split in half a small cucumber…. A favorite of mine, and handed it to me, “ahlan wa sahlan.”

“Shukran,” I said. Thank you. It was delicious. So crunchy. So perfect. Just what I needed. And then she split her tangerine, and gave me half, and then she split very carefully her napkin in half, and shared it with me, and then she took one of those delicious desserts, with pistachios, rose water, clarified butter, and broke off a piece for me.

There was no self-consciousness about how freely she was giving to me. I was family, her kin, part of her tribe, sitting in her aisle. I was a part of her life. She didn’t ask. Didn’t say a word. She just gave. She couldn’t think of eating without sharing her meal with me.

Later during the flight, I received a meat patty and another orange. And more sweets.

As the plane landed, she said her prayers in thanksgiving for safety. I said to her “Ahlan wa sahlan, and Ramadan Mubarak.

She took my face into her hands; kissed both my cheeks, and we laughed.

Alsafar alamin. Travel safe. Her hand went to heart, and mine as well, and we parted.

A chance encounter, strangers, and yet we had become family through grace and hospitality. I will always remember her. You are my family; may your way be made with ease.

I think this is what being human is all about, to care for each other, and sometimes we have to travel ½ way across the world to remember that it’s that simple.

Against the harsh desert, amidst the scarcity, the fear, the valleys of the shadow of death, the cold absurdity of life, the psalmist reminds us of our abundance, “The Lord is our Shepherd; we shall not want.”

Or as Julian of Norwich, whose life we celebrated this week, said, “All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.”

Draw back, and let it be. Trust that goodness and mercy shall follow you all the days of your life, and that you will dwell in the house of the Lord forever. AMEN.