

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
Undeclared
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Psalm 23 (The Message); 2 Corinthians 4:7-12

It overwhelmed me. It knocked my feet out from under me and swept me under. The wave had come out of nowhere and I had lost all sense of which way was up or down. This wouldn't have been so bad, except I was holding our two-year old daughter in one of my arms and the undertow was ripping her out of my arms. In stark terror I struggled to hold on. Our family had gone down to the beach in Texas with our youth group to enjoy a few days of surf, sand and group building. Our daughter loved the waves and the water. She would get into the surf and giggle and run away. But most of all she loved having me hold her out in the surf and have me dip her in and out of the waves. On this particular day, the waves were strong but nothing out of the ordinary. I had spent many days of my youth at Texas' beaches without any issue. But then that wave came. I had never, and have never, experienced anything like it. It totally and completely overwhelmed me. As I felt Katie slipping from my grip I was terrified in a way I never had been before or have been since. It was a moment that is seared into my memory.

This morning I have to wonder how many of us are feeling the same way...overwhelmed. I know that I feel overwhelmed, as if my feet have been swept out from under me and I sense normal life slipping away. At first, this virus was something coming out of Wuhan China, a place few of us knew anything about. That news was like the gentle waves at Lake Michigan, just kind of lapping at your feet. You knew it was there but it was no big deal. It was easy enough to retreat to the shore and have no ill effects. Then the waves began to increase as we were told no more than 500 people can meet together, then no more than 100 people can meet together, then 50 then 10. Soon restaurants were closed. Then other businesses. Then we were told to shelter in place. The waves were growing in power and frequency. Local hospitals began to be overwhelmed and elective surgeries were postponed. The television and internet were filled with pleas from hospitals, doctors and nurses for masks and face shields. It was as if the wave had hit us and were at risk of being towed under, losing our footing and losing hope. If this is where you are my friends, you are not alone. In fact it places you in the company of almost every great hero of the Bible, including the two we are looking at this morning.

We begin with David, who most assume was the writer of the 23rd Psalm. David's life had begun rather inauspiciously. He was the younger son of a shepherding family in Bethlehem. He was brave enough to protect his family's sheep from wild animals. We are not exactly sure how he came to the attention of Israel's first king, Saul. One tradition claims that he came to the king's attention by using superior military technology to defeat the Philistine giant, Goliath. Another source tells us that David came to Saul's attention because he was a skilled musician who could comfort the king. Regardless of how he came to the king's attention he soon became Saul's most competent general. Unfortunately, people began to say things like, Saul has killed his thousands but David his tens of thousands. Saul became more and more jealous and after trying to kill David with a spear, decided that David had to go. David had to die. Fearing for his life, David fled the palace. He was overwhelmed. He was afraid. His feet had been knocked out from under him and the undertow was about to drown him as Saul and Saul's troops hunted him. So when David writes, "Even when the way goes through death valley" and "You serve me a six course dinner right in front of my enemies", he is not merely making a metaphor. He is speaking of those moments when he was overwhelmed with fear and doubt.

Paul was overwhelmed as well. I understand that we all carry with us differing views of Paul. Regardless of those views I think that one thing we need to give him credit for was his willingness to travel to new places, meet new people and tell them about the life transforming power of the love of God in Jesus Christ. One of those places was the city of Corinth. Paul had arrived there knowing no one. But through sheer determination he shared the Good News and created a significant community of Jesus followers. The church, even though it had its issues as all churches do, was one of his prides and joys. But then it turned on him. After he left there to move on to Ephesus, new leadership took over the church and made it clear that not only was Paul a loser, but that he was greedy and incompetent. To counteract these views, Paul journeyed back from Ephesus to Corinth, planning to reorient the church, only to be abused and driven out. He was overwhelmed. His feet had been cut out from under him and as soon as he returned to Ephesus he was imprisoned and wondered if he might be executed. So when he writes that he was afflicted, perplexed, persecuted and struck down, he is not making metaphor. He is speaking of the reality of his life. He is speaking about being physically, emotionally and spiritually overwhelmed. Yet somehow, Paul did not give up. Somehow David did not give in. Listen again.

“Even when the way goes through Death Valley, I’m not afraid when you walk by my side. Your trusty shepherd’s crook makes me feel secure” “You serve me a six-course dinner right in front of my enemies. You revive my drooping head; my cup brims with blessing.” “We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed.” They were overwhelmed but not defeated. They were discouraged but not defeated. They were fearful but not defeated. And they were not defeated because they realized that they were not alone. God was with them. David talks about God as his shepherd; the one who guides, leads and protects him. God is the one whose beauty and love chase after David every day of his life. Paul, understands that he is merely a clay jar, a frail human being, but that he carries within him extraordinary power that comes from God. That he carries within him the “death of Jesus” meaning the power and presence of God’s love, forgiveness and new life. These two men were not defeated because they understood and experienced the supernatural power of God, and in Paul’s case, of Jesus Christ within them, beside them before them and behind them.

Are you feeling overwhelmed? If so, that is fine. These are overwhelming times. Few if any of us have ever experienced anything like this. Yet at the same time, our task is to not let this crisis defeat us. We should not despair. We should not feel completely lost and alone or allow this crisis to destroy us. And we should not because we are not alone. We don’t go through these times by ourselves. God is present. God is our shepherd guiding us through these dark days. Even when we are home alone, we are not. God is helping us to catch our breath and walks by our side. Christ is present within us, filling us with power so that his own life might be shown in and through who we are; through who we are becoming. We are not alone because we have one another. We have a Jesus community that prays with and for all of us. We have a community that will do what we can to share the love and grace of Christ with one another.

Since most of you know that our daughter is soon to be thirty-three years old, it means I did not lose my grip on her in the overwhelming waves and turbulent current. I somehow managed to hold fast to her. This is the image I want you to hold on to for this week. I want you to close your eyes during the reflection time after my sermon and imagine the strong arms of God holding on to you; holding fast to you in this moment in which it is so easy to be overwhelmed. Allow those supernatural arms to embrace you and lift you out of the waters not only on this day but in all days ahead.