

GOD CAN BRING LIFE OUT OF DEATH – DEMENTIA

“The Lord is my shepherd ...” We’re getting lots of the 23rd psalm this morning. The psalm itself, a couple of hymns and anthems, and of course the readings about shepherds and sheep. I started my ordained ministry fifty-some years ago at three little mission churches in southern Idaho – sheep and shepherds were a common sight dotting the hillsides. But sheep and shepherds are not so evident in our neighborhood, are they. An occasional coyote maybe, but no sheep or shepherds.

But still the 23rd psalm is one of the most beloved of all psalms. It’s part of our culture -- like the Lord’s Prayer. I’ve said it in hospital rooms to dying patients, and often I can see their lips moving.

I particularly like that version of the 23rd Psalm that the choir did, by Bobby McFerrin. Bobby was a member of St. Aidan’s, the congregation I served here in San Francisco back in the 70s and early 80s, before his #1 hit, *Don’t Worry, Be Happy*.

Did you know that Bobby McFerrin thought seriously about becoming an Episcopal priest? until he realized – wisely -- that God had given him talents in other areas. Bobby grew up in the Episcopal Church, and even when he’d have a singing gig at the Great America Music Hall until 2 a.m. Saturday night he’d be there at St. Aidan’s Sunday morning at 8, usually with his son Taylor sitting on his shoulders.

A few years ago we heard Bobby do a concert in Oregon, and in an interview afterwards out in the lobby somebody asked him how he kept himself so fit, with so much energy. Bobby said the first thing he did every morning was spend a lot of time in prayer, giving his day to God. “Once my day is set with Jesus,” he said, “then I’m ready for the day.” And I thought, “Wow, what an amazing witness to that non-churched group of people there, hearing Bobby McFerrin witness about his life of prayer with Jesus.”

That’s just one of the many things the Resurrection of Jesus teaches us -- that Jesus is here with us every day in many different ways, and that each of us can be used by God to make a difference in the lives of others, often in unexpected ways. God can bring life out of death.

Those first early days after the Resurrection were certainly exciting, heady days for the apostles. They all devoted themselves to “the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.” (Familiar words from the Book of Acts that we say each time we renew our baptismal covenant.) They were in awe because of the many wonders and signs being done by those first believers -- God bringing new life out of death. They shared all their worldly goods and distributed to those in need. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

Resurrection and new life --- it takes many different forms today. A healing, from disease or addiction or anxiety or depression; forgiveness offered and received; a new relationship; a new job; a new outlook on life. Resurrection can and does take many forms. Jesus told us, “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”

Here’s a form of resurrection I’d never thought of before.

I read a fascinating article recently about dementia, written by Sam Wells, the vicar of St. Martin-in-the-Fields, in London. Today half the people in the world over 85 have some form of dementia, so it’s very common. Most of us I’m sure know someone who has it. Dementia is one of the most frightening diagnoses we can receive, for us and for our loved ones.

Wells says that our society’s judgment on dementia comes down to three words: deficit, decline and death. It’s all negative – a gradual losing of our faculties. A living death, with no stories of recovery. Facing up to dementia as the sufferer or as a member of the family is like a bereavement. I’ve presided at funerals for those who’ve spent the last chapter of their lives living with dementia, and for the family it’s as if they’ve faced two losses, two deaths. Often they’re confused about whether or not this second loss – death -- is a release, for the sufferer as well as for the family.

Wells says he has found helpful the Greek word *luo*, meaning “I loose.” It’s a word often used for those who are tying up oxen or releasing mules.

But it’s also used in the New Testament in the story of Lazarus being raised by Jesus from the dead, when Jesus says, “Unbind him (*luo*) and let him go.”

Luo appears in a number of places in the New Testament, and each of them paints a picture of resurrection. Resurrection is the reconciling of hostile parties, the healing of the sick, the forgiveness of sins. Resurrection is the new life God is giving this church with the upcoming election of its new rector. *Luo* starts off meaning loosing donkeys but ends up meaning a whole lot more.

Life is a series of letting go. When we grow up we let go of childish things. I remember as a parent looking at our babies sleeping so peacefully, and knowing that we knew everything about them – what they ate, pretty much what they thought, who they played with. As they got older our job as parents was to let go – slowly, sometimes painfully, but we had to let go. When they went off to school they had lives that were outside of ours, and we had to let go again. They grew more and more independent, and we parents more and more had to let go. And trust that they were going to something good.

When we go away to school or college we let go of our parents' presence with us every day. As adults we let go of jobs, of familiar places when we move, we let go of relationships – all with the hope that we'll find something new and better. When we get older we let go of some of the things we used to do – we can't climb as high a mountain or run as fast. When we retire we let go of that regular job with its regular routine and salary, and often we have to move into a different style of living. Again, letting go.

The suggestion is that *luo*, letting go, has a lot to teach us in the face of dementia. In the face of deficit, decline and death we try hard to cling on, not wanting to let go. But the lesson of *luo* is that maybe the path of resurrection lies in letting go, for us and for those we love. Resurrection can start at the moment of letting go.

Do any of you remember the Canadian film *Away From Her*? Julie Christie won a number of awards for her role in the film. The story centers on a couple whose marriage is tested when Christie's character begins to suffer from [Alzheimer's](#) and moves into a [nursing home](#), where she loses virtually all memory of her husband and begins to develop a close relationship with another nursing home resident. The husband gradually

and painfully realizes that he has to let go (*luo*) of his wife. He would rather see his wife happy with another man than miserable and alone.

Perhaps it's only when we let go of who and what our loved one was that we can begin to receive who they are now. Perhaps only when we find ways to enjoy who they are now can we reverse the deficit and the decline, because we stop assuming they're moving away from something good – us -- and start appreciating that they're moving into something new, the closer presence of God. God can bring new life out of death.

Dementia doesn't have to be a living death. It can be an invitation to see how someone can remain the same person yet take on new and different characteristics. In that sense dementia can be a preview of resurrection, in which we shall all be changed but still be recognizably ourselves. It's like the resurrection appearances of Jesus, who was different but still recognizable. Like resurrection, we can't experience dementia, either in ourselves or in others, unless we find ways to let go, to let loose, to be released and forgiven. God welcomes us into eternal life not by keeping a tight hold on us but by letting us go.

As the Prayer of St. Francis says so beautifully, "It is in dying that we are born to eternal life."

Resurrection comes in many different forms. We see it in Jesus' raising Lazarus from the dead, raising the son of the widow of Cain, and the raising of Tabitha by Peter. Maybe we can see resurrection even in the mystery of dementia. "Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil," because I know that God does bring life out of death.