

Steve's Slant
October 2020

In 1939, the British government commissioned the publication of a poster, which (according to Wikipedia) “was intended to raise the morale of the British public, threatened with widely predicted mass air attacks on major cities.”

The poster read: KEEP CALM AND CARRY ON.

That sentiment captured the perfect combination of comfort and exhortation. It was meant to calm the people's fears and give them permission to carry on with normal life, even as it conveyed the implied promise that in the end, all will be well. Given that the people of Britain, London in particular, were about to be heavily bombed, it was exactly what the populous needed in order to keep their chins up and their upper lips stiff.

A few weeks ago, as our stewardship season began to come into view, we wondered whether we might find a passage from scripture that conveyed this same sentiment: a combination of comfort and exhortation, with an implied promise that, in the end, all will be well.

Granted, we are not in war-time but these are by no means normal times. Bombs are not falling all around us, but we cannot worship in our own sanctuary. Our hospitals are not filled with the wounded, but all around the country ICUs have at times been filled beyond capacity with patients infected with COVID-19--a trend that is ticking back up now that fall is here. Saddest of all, the number of Americans who have succumbed to this pandemic rivals the number of American soldiers lost in some of the United States' most violent conflicts.

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How do we do stewardship under such conditions? How do we offer words of comfort and exhortation, words of comfort and encouragement, when we can't gather in our sanctuary for worship? Is there a scripture that can do for us what that famous poster was meant to do for the people of Britain?

It turns out there is. It comes to us from what is surely the most beloved and durable psalm of all-time, a poem that has served to comfort and encourage millions of people, through some of the darkest episodes in history.

Taken as a whole, Psalm 23 is not as pithy as Keep Calm and Carry On but in six short verses it does an astonishing amount of work.

It assures people who may feel lost in an inhospitable wilderness that the Lord is their shepherd.

It promises people who feel like their wells have run dry that their cup will overflow again.

It lifts up a people who feel stranded in the valley of the shadow of death and sets them down in green pastures, flush with life and beauty.

It promises those of us who feel walled off from our sanctuary that we will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Earlier this week a friend of mine from seminary posted a message on her FaceBook page. It was by Aisha Ahmad, a professor of political science, who has first-hand experience working in war zones, refugee camps and other contexts of extended trauma and conflict.

She wrote to assure the general public that it's common under such conditions -- conditions not dissimilar in some ways to the ones we're living under now -- to hit a wall after six months.

She documented that the experience of having one's normal life so completely disrupted, of having to re-learn how to do so many things, things we ordinarily don't think twice about -- how to shop for groceries, how to go to the doctor, how to visit family and friends, how to go out to eat, how to attend or lead a committee meeting, how to gather for worship -- that having to re-learn all these things, and laying this work on top of a deep layer of grief and isolation -- almost invariably leaves one feeling empty, spent, exhausted.

Which brings us back to Psalm 23. To those people, which is to say, to people just like us, this marvelous psalm also promises that God will restore our soul.

On Sunday, October 11, we will launch this year's stewardship campaign, and that will be our specific theme: God restores our soul. (Or, for those of you who, like me, can't get the King James Version out of your head, and don't particularly want to: *He restoreth my soul.*)

Over the course of the five Sundays of our stewardship season, we will explore what this enduringly beautiful psalm has to say to us. We will explore its words of comfort and exhortation.

And we will find hope in its implied promise that, in the end, all will be well.