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The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme

Texts: Mark 11: 1-11; Matthew 23: 37-39; Luke 9: 10-17

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“The Valley of the Shadow: A Sermon in the Time of Corona”

*“Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil. For thou art with me.”*

Hold onto those words for the next few minutes. They have everything to do with the events that we’ll be marking later in this week that we call Holy. And they have everything to do with all that we’re going through right now. It might be that you’ve been holding onto them already, but keep them close while I share a story that I’ve returned to often these past few weeks. I offer it by way of encouragement.

When I was in high school, I ran track. The mile and the two mile were my distances. I had nothing by way of speed, but I know how to endure discomfort, and so the longer races became my domain. Every so often, my coach would initiate a workout of 400 meter repeats, which is once around the track. He would have me and another teammate run it at something like 65 seconds, which is just a little faster than race pace. We would get to the end, and then we would have 100 meters to jog slowly as we recovered. Then we would do it again – 400 meters, 65 seconds. Then a short jog, and then again. And again. And again. At first, it was relatively easy, but after the fourth, or the fifth repetition, our lungs would start screaming. On top of that, what made the workout even more difficult was that we were never told how many of those repeats we were going to do. We could guess, but we didn’t know. And so those repetitions would stretch interminably, as we wondered how long we could keep it up.

I have a distinct memory of my coach nodding encouragement after each lap. He would show us the stopwatch proudly, so we could see that we had nailed it every time. “Keep it up,” he would say. “Just stay with it and do it again.” So we did. At one point, I was doubled over and gasping, and he said, with a glint of fire in his eye, “Steve, you can do this. You’ve got it in you. I know you do.” And I did. But I needed to hear it. After that, I hit another 400, and then another, until mercifully, it came to an end.

I’ve often thought about those afternoons on the track. I’ve thought about them as I’ve read more and more about endurance athletes across multiple sports, who somehow know how to dig deep when the going gets rough. I’ve thought about them in pastoral care situations, when illnesses or other kinds of trouble force people to endure far more than they ever thought they could handle. And I’ve thought about them these past several weeks, as we’ve lived into the reality of social distancing – first one week, then two, now three – a series of repetitions that stretch out before us indefinitely.

What I’d like to suggest is that perhaps each Sunday can feel a little like hitting that 400 meter mark. You crossed the line. It’s time to catch your breath. You, we, will have to do another lap before too long, but there’s a little time now to recover. Each lap brings its own burdens – predictions for how the virus may affect us, news from family and friends, worries about our jobs and the economy, keeping it together for the kids,

working too much or too little. We're each of us wondering, I know, how long this will last, and how many repetitions we'll be required to do.

What I hope is that these moments give you a chance to breathe, and to hear words that function in a way similar to those words spoken to me years ago. They come from Scripture. They come from all of us as ministers. They come, I hope, from something that transcends us all, something, someone, that says: "You can do this. You have it in you to keep going. You have what it takes." I want you to know that you can do it. We can do it. We have what it takes.

That's one message I wish to convey to you as we venture into Holy Week. The other themes I want to touch are loosely configured around the words I began with: yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me.

When Jesus rides into Jerusalem on a colt, we can wonder if those words were on his mind. None of his entourage suspects what's coming, but Jesus does. He rides into the valley of the shadow, knowing that those around him are also going to be visited by that same shadow, each of them in different ways. As I've thought about today, and what I wish to say to all of you, I've thought about some of the things that Jesus did during that final week, on his own walk through the valley of the shadow. Two incidents stand out, one of them small and often overlooked, and the other one quite large. Both are intended, I think, to assist his friends as they confront the valley of the shadow. My hope is that they might be helpful to us as well, as we undergo the valley of the shadow, each in our own way.

First, the small incident. At one point after his arrival in the city, Jesus stands upon a hill, overlooking the city of Jerusalem. And he offers a lament: "Jerusalem, Jerusalem," he says. "If only you knew what makes for peace. How often have I longed to fold you under my wing, the way a mother hen gathers her young." It's an image that speaks to all that was about to unfold in that city, but it's also an image that speaks to our situation, and to every moment of crisis. Perhaps it's something like this: in the midst of whatever is coming, in the midst of whatever you – we – are going through, God is holding you.

That's what a close friend of mine began telling her congregation at the beginning of this crisis. God holds you. It moved me when I first read it, and it seems to me just the thing to tell all of you this week. Maybe in the midst of whatever the coming week might portend, to say nothing of the weeks after - whether betrayals or letdowns, fear or despair - God is holding you. Even if your world seems like it's falling apart, as it no doubt did for all the people caught up in the shadow of that first Holy Week, God is holding you through it all. The woman who lost her son. The friends who find themselves powerless to help the one they love. The ones who lose their way, and run to hide themselves. The ones who try to control things, and who make a mess for everyone around them. The ones caught up in a story that's not really their own, but forced to play a part all the same. The mendacious and the malicious. Even those buffoons, those so called leaders, playing to the crowds while washing their hands of any responsibility. God holds them all, each of them in their confusion, their fear, their uncertainty.

God holds them, the way that God holds each one of you as you walk through this dark valley. Is it that knowledge that makes for peace? Is it that knowledge that can help to calm the panic that sometimes rises when we can no longer control the events in our

lives? Is it that knowledge, that God holds each of us, that can help us not to lose our heads as we walk through the valley of the shadow, as we circle the track week after week? Whatever might or might not come, know that God is holding you. Though you walk through the valley of the shadow, you need not fear. For there's Someone with you, Someone who loves you.

The second event that I want to highlight among Jesus's activities before his arrest is the meal he shares with his friends. You know the story well. We all do. They break the bread. They share the wine. And Jesus offers some important instructions about what's about to happen. It's a reenactment of the Passover, just before the Hebrew people entered the wilderness. But I also think it's a reenactment of another famous story, something from earlier in Jesus's ministry that the disciples would have remembered. It's a last minute citation of the feeding of the five thousand. It's as if Jesus is saying: things are about to get hard. But I want you to remember some of the things we've been through together. I want you to remember some of the things we've shared. If you can do that, you'll get through everything that's about to go down. Remember what I showed you.

Do you remember what it was? The moment that an entire population, some five thousand people, and probably many more, found themselves in a deserted place, in the wilderness, without adequate resources to meet their needs. It's a parable for every moment when humans feel stranded, unmoored, and far from safety. When those needs became apparent, when it's clear that no one had made adequate preparations, a few people close to Jesus started to panic, urging Jesus to send the people on their way. It all amounts to yet another temptation in the wilderness. Jesus might, after all, have told the people to fend for themselves. He might have given way to his own panic, slipping away unnoticed. Or worse, he might have made a dire prediction to the crowd, telling them that they were going to go through some very hard things, without doing a whole lot to alleviate or reduce the needs before him. But that's not what he does.

What he does is to get organized. He has his disciples take stock of all the resources they have available to them, which upon first inventory don't seem to be much - a few loaves of bread, and a couple of fish. But it's enough to get started. Then he divides the crowd into smaller units, care groups if you will. Jesus blesses the bread, and he breaks it. And little by little, because of that blessing, something remarkable begins to happen. The resources begin to multiply. It probably doesn't happen all at once. I imagine there were people in the crowd who, realizing they had a little something to offer, kept what they had for themselves. I imagine there were small groups who hoarded their resources, their bread, believing there wouldn't be enough. But that isn't the response of most of the people there. I imagine that most of them realized the urgency of that wilderness moment, and reached deep inside their cloaks, their bags, their very souls, for something they could contribute. And it's enough. It's more than enough. There in the wilderness, they all discover together that they have what they need to get them through. I like how the Gospel of Luke puts it: after everyone had eaten, "what was left over was gathered up, twelve baskets of broken pieces."

Baskets of broken pieces. That phrase is referring to the bread, but I believe it's also referring to the pieces of themselves that everyone had contributed in order to make it out of the wilderness. The fragments, the shards, the scraps, the things that tend to get overlooked or go unnoticed - they all were offered up. A crust of bread here, but also a

memory and a kind word from somewhere else. A slice of fish here, but also a story of how some people got out of another tight situation. A swig of wine or water here, but also gestures of friendship, of support, of emotional connection. In the broken and discarded pieces of themselves, the fragments and scraps of their own existence, the people discover not only that they have what they need – they discover themselves.

That's what I imagine Jesus is gesturing toward when he arranges for that final meal with his friends. Here's something of what I think he's telling them: we're walking through the valley of the shadow. Whether you know it or not, you're always walking through the valley of the shadow. But don't be afraid. God holds you. But that's not all. There will be times when you think you don't have what you need to get you through. You might panic inside. You might feel scared. But if you can, remember what we experienced together in the wilderness. Remember how a simple blessing unlocked the secret of all those broken pieces, and how those pieces kept everyone together, kept everyone filled, kept everyone going from moment to moment. Those broken pieces are hidden at first, but when you dig a little, they'll be there. Things you may have overlooked before, but things you can use to get you through the valley of the shadow. Your resilience. Your care. Your ingenuity. Your skills. Your resources. Your generosity. Your encouragement. Take all those broken pieces and use them, each and every one. Do it in remembrance of me. Do it in remembrance of all we've been through together. Can you do that? Above all, I think Jesus is saying in that final meal, "I believe in you. Though you walk through the valley of the shadow, don't be afraid. There's a table, and it's been set for you. There's a cup for you, and it is overflowing. I believe in you."

Those words are meant for you too. That moment, that final meal calling forth that earlier wilderness moment, is meant for you, and for everyone laboring in the wilderness today. Those words, those stories, are meant to help you, to help everyone to understand that if we can keep our heads, if we can get ourselves organized, if we can reach deep into the broken pieces of our lives and just share a little bit, we'll be able to get through this wilderness moment intact. If we can but trust those stories, those words, which stand at the very core of our faith, we'll be enabled to walk through the valley of the shadow with the understanding that there is a table spread before us, and a cup overflowing with goodness waiting for us. But we'll have to reach for those broken pieces together to find it. I believe we can.

But I would also be remiss if I didn't point out something else. Because this isn't simply a story for individual lives, or for churches here and there scattered throughout the land. This is a story for our nation. It's a story for the entire world right now. We have what we need to take care of everyone. So ok, we can't make the virus magically disappear, and we can't eliminate the suffering that it's bringing. But we have what we need to alleviate a whole lot of that suffering, and to make sure that it doesn't disproportionately affect the most vulnerable among us. And we have what we need to prevent still greater outbreaks in the future, if we can but stop the hoarding. I'm not talking about toilet paper or bread now. I'm talking about the hoarding of health care. I'm talking about the hoarding of places where affordable housing can be built. I'm talking about the hoarding of educational resources. I'm talking about the hoarding of wealth. I'm talking about the hoarding that's gone on for far too long among privileged groups here in the United States, but also all around the world. This is a moment in

which we're enabled to take stock of what we have, to get organized, and to realize that we've depended for too long upon stories, upon ideologies, and upon people, who tell us that there isn't enough, and to get what's yours. There is another way. I believe that walking through the valley of the shadow, we're given the opportunity to understand that, and to act accordingly. We're given the opportunity to see that there is an overflowing cup, and that it's meant for everyone.

For now, though, our task is simply to walk together through this week called Holy. Our task is to get around the track for another lap. We began with words from the psalmist. Say them with me now: "yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil. For thou art with me."

You can do this. We can do this. We have the things we need. All the little broken pieces shall be enough to get us through. All the love that we share in this time of corona. Amen.