

Banquet in the Wilderness: A Sunday Reflection on May 3rd by Rev. Dr. Alan Lai

The month of May is Asian Heritage Month. I have made a short documentary recapturing some of the key moments of Chinese coming to Canada. See it in a bigger screen if you can. This is the last educational video I will do for a while. The gospel text this Sunday is John 10:1-10, where Jesus says he is the gate for the sheep. But my reflection focuses on the other text for this day, Psalm 23. So many alternatives!

We always long for peace, we never like war. But war is raged on earth every day. The battlefield isn't always in faraway lands; instead, they occur in our minds, in our homes, in our communities, in workplaces, or in our relationships with one another. Although we don't like war, war is often used as a metaphor to describe life: Life is like a war zone. That is cruel!

Some battles were raged by others; some by me. Sometimes, we return home triumphant; sometimes, badly hurt. We often have no idea why we have the courage to face the battle. For everyone who have braved the storm to face such challenges may have thought they got everything they needed. Well, only to find out the stuff they brought were severely inadequate. Why am I here?

In order to face life's unexpected storms, we learn how to protect ourselves, even taking courses. We acquire external skills on how to build mighty fortresses to keep ourselves on the winning side. Sometimes, it helps; sometimes, it fails. Then we learn more sophisticated tricks, vowing it will not happen again.

That is the subtext for Psalm 23. Traditionally, this Psalm is said to be written by King David. Recent scholarship points out the best thing to say: By an unknown author. I will not for a moment consider the author weak and incapable; quite the contrary, that person has done all that she/he can to avoid hardship. It is an awakening moment. The author discovers the moment of truth: not that we are able, but that the Holy One is capable. What gives the author hope is not what she/he can do, but what the Holy One will do.

No wonder Jewish people love to read Psalm 23 during funerals! Often, we don't perceive Psalm 23rd as a funeral text. But I understand why it becomes popular in that way because it is when we realize our arsenals have been exhausted and there is nothing more we can do, that we discover God is there with and for me. This beautiful psalm comforts us, and at the same time reminds us of our values in Creator's eyes. I must add, Psalm 23rd isn't a funeral psalm, rather it is a psalm of trust and hope.

“Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff—they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.”

The New Revised Standard Version says, “You prepare a table before me.” But the Chinese Union version says, “You prepare a banquet.” I love this translation!

This psalm records a life-changing revelation in a dark valley. “Dark valley,” can be a literal place but most likely a metaphor for the danger of death is imminent. These two simple lines are full of paradox. It shows how the author experienced life and began to see things differently. Such experience made no sense to us who were not there. The valley of dead isn't a place for a banquet, it is usually associated with fear, anxiety, loneliness, worries, and death. But it is in there the author encountered hope; and yes, banquet.

How strange it is that the peace of God can be experienced in the darkness valley. The two shouldn't be put together; they don't belong in the same sentence. I find it mind boggling as I begin to appreciate what the author is trying to say: Embrace paradox.

Paradox, two contradicting ideas cannot co-exist. We rush to resolve it. That is why modern life is tiring! The mess must be cleaned up. For the love of logic, our logic, something needs to be done so that life returns to the kind of normalcy we expect it to be. Let dark valleys continue to be dark and lifeless; let beautiful places continue to be clean and gorgeous. Peace and chaos – pick one. The author of Psalm 23rd says: welcome to the paradox. God is ready to meet us in any corner of our experiences, including a dark valley where a banquet is waiting.

When one encounters danger, one asks questions such as the meaning of life. In the depth of our hearts we have a corner that always feeds fear and anxiety. We ask: Do I have enough? Have I

done enough? Is it worth doing what we do? We struggle and feel restless because we want to know we have stockpiled enough stuff for the challenge. Psalm 23rd comes in as a teacher telling us: when such a time comes, and we finally realize we aren't the masters of the universe; be comforted and know that the Lord of heaven and earth is our shepherd, caregiver, and friend. Folks, at the end of the day, whatever we have done, great and small, is never 'enough.' But it is never the defining factor. God loves us never on the premise that we have done enough. Got it?